

## Claiming Grounded Theory for Practice-based Dissertation Research A Think Piece

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In *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Glaser and Strauss (1967) asserted, “One property of an applied grounded theory must be clearly understood: The theory can be developed only by professionally trained sociologists. . .” (p. 249). Within a few years, however, Glaser had (1978) amended this position, stating:

We have advised, guided and consulted on dissertations in political science, social welfare, education, health education, educational sociology, public health, psychology, business administration, nursing, city and regional planning, and anthropology. Although there is some interweaving, *most of these students have submitted essentially social science dissertations* [italics added] and written papers speaking to the issues in their own field. (p. 158)

Two decades later, Strauss and Corbin (1998) echo this ecumenical view, stating:

As a methodology and a set of methods, our approach to research is used by persons in practitioner fields such as education, nursing, business, and social work, as well as by psychologists, architects, communications specialists, and social anthropologists. (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 9)

The adaptability of grounded theory to a variety of fields has made it enormously popular, yet may also have obscured an important point, hinted at by the point we emphasized above in the quotation from Glaser. Charmaz (1994) brings our concern more clearly into focus:

Grounded theorists code for processes that are fundamental in ongoing social life. These processes may be at organizational or social psychological levels, depending on the researcher's training and interests. (p. 112)

We contend that it is important to consider the difference between doing social science research and dissertation research in a “practitioner field” like education, evaluation, or counseling. Not trained as sociologists, we are neither prepared nor inclined to look for fundamental processes of social life at an organizational or social psychological level. When we enter into the coding process, we are not looking for “sociological constructs” as Glaser (1978) suggests or for a conditional matrix as advised by Strauss and Corbin (1998). It would, we believe, be presumptuous to cast ourselves as “social scientists” and imagine ourselves contributing in some meaningful way to the discourses of sociology. Rather, we claim the stance of practitioner-researchers intent on generating substantive grounded theories that come out of the ground of our respective practices and are useful for enacting those practices.

Schon (1983), in his now landmark book, *The Reflective Practitioner, How Professionals Think in Action*, contrasts a rational-technical view of practice with a reflective view. He argues that practitioners rarely encounter neatly framed problems to which they can apply predetermined solutions. Rather,

practitioners more typically operate in the swampy lowlands of messy ambiguity, formulating courses of action as they engage in on-the-spot reflection. Garman (1994), in discussing the nature of supervisory practice in education, challenges the individualistic nature of Schon's notion of reflection and argues for a practice grounded in discourse.

From this perspective, practice is relational and enacted through discursive exchanges among participants within a shared context. Extending Van Manen's (1991) notion of the "pedagogical moment" to the idea of discursive practice, we use the concept of "discursive moments" to describe exchanges of heightened meaning when we, as practitioners, are called upon to respond to others within the complexities of a given context. The question then becomes, "What informs our responses within the heat of a 'discursive moment'?"

In discussing the dilemma of linking educational theory to teacher practice, Korthagen and Kessels (1999) use the concept of "gestalts" to describe ". . . the dynamic and holistic unity of needs, feelings, values, meanings and behavioral inclinations triggered by an immediate situation" (p. 9). These gestalts, forged through a life time of experiences and relationships, constitute a constellation of "tacit knowledge" (Polanyi, 1967) through which we filter information, make meaning of a situation, and formulate our response. Korthagen and Kessels suggest that this process of perception, interpretation and response occurs instantaneously and unconsciously. They further suggest that reflection is one way of slowing down the process so that teachers can begin to understand the implications of their gestalts within their practice.

Because we see practice as relational and discursive, a key issue in understanding our own gestalts is understanding the stance we take toward others. In a wonderfully insightful article on "understanding understanding," Schwandt (1999) offers an explanation of the relational nature of understanding. Drawing upon the work of Gadamer, Schwandt contrasts three different stances for interpreting "self in relation to other." In the first stance, which Schwandt associates with the social sciences, ". . . we treat the Other as an object in a free and uninvolved way, much as we would any other object in our experiential field." This stance assumes that, through research, it is possible to ". . . discover the typical behavior of the Other and to make predictions about others on the basis of experience. We thereby form what we call knowledge of human nature" (p. 458). In the second stance, Other is not treated as an object, but still ". . . the interpreter claims to know the Other from the Other's point of view, and even to understand the Other better than she understands herself" (p. 458). In each of these interpretations of self and other, the practitioner operates from a stance that Tananis (2000) characterizes as "insulated expert." The insulated expert stands apart from the situation and presumes her interpretation of it is "correct" and her response to it is the most cogent. How others might view the situation is of secondary importance to the privileged, theoretical "knowledge of human nature" claimed by the insulated expert.

It is Schwandt's description of a third relational stance, however, that is most germane to our notion of discursive practice. He explains:

. . . understanding requires an openness to experience, a willingness to engage in a dialogue with that which *challenges our self-understanding* [italics added]. To be in a dialogue requires that we listen to the Other and simultaneously risk confusion and uncertainty both about ourselves and about the other person we seek to understand. (Schwandt, 1999, p. 458)

Thus, in claiming grounded theory as a mode of inquiry within our "practitioner fields," we do not embrace an objectivist axiology, ontology or epistemology in which we strive to identify "typical behaviors" and warrant those behaviors as generalized "knowledge of human nature." Rather, working

within an interpretive axiology, ontology and epistemology,<sup>1</sup> we probe contextual nuances as interpreted by ourselves in concert with others. Our purpose in the inquiry is not to prove that our interpretations are right or true, and thereby, provide the basis for prescriptive interventions. Rather, through discursive exchanges within the inquiry process we come to challenge our own self-understandings by bringing our tacit knowledge to light, recognizing our taken-for-granted assumptions, and examining our preconceptions (and perhaps misconceptions). In the process, we strive to understand and portray the range of meanings that we and others might bring to our discursive exchanges, thereby expanding our capacity to respond wisely within “discursive moments” of practice.

If such knowledge remains idiosyncratic and individual, it might be interesting and personally useful, but hardly theoretic. To move toward the theoretic, it is necessary, but not sufficient to respect the idiosyncratic situation. It is also necessary, but not sufficient to honor the individual meanings we and others make of such situations. To theorize, however, we must be able to bring a conceptual perspective to the situational and the individual experience. Piantanida and Garman (1999) suggest that interpretive researchers consider three forms of reflection. Recollective reflection provides a careful, descriptive account of the situational. Introspective reflection provides insight into the meanings one is making of the situation. Conceptual reflection connects individual meanings to broader discourses. And therein lies the power of grounded theory. Concepts, as Glaser and Strauss (1967) remind us, are the building blocks of theory. The procedures of grounded theory provide interpretive researchers with a disciplined process, not simply for generating concepts, but more importantly for coming to see possible and plausible relationships among them. It is the researcher’s portrayal of these conceptual relationships that constitute a grounded theory. Within an interpretive epistemology, such grounded theories are understood to be heuristic, not predictive, in nature.

Because the interpretive researcher makes no claim for direct correspondence between a proposed theory and the ground that gave rise to it, a theory is warranted neither by procedural orthodoxy nor precise execution of technique (e.g., strict adherence to “rules” for coding and analyzing data). Rather, an interpretive grounded theory is warranted by:

- the verisimilitude and coherence with which the researcher portrays the “ground” which the theory is meant to explain;
- the vitality of the concepts used to draw attention to important aspects of the ground; and
- the persuasiveness with which the researcher lays out her lines of reasoning about the relationships among the concepts.

In part, the persuasiveness of the researcher's argument lies in its utility for guiding practice. From an interpretive perspective, "utility" is not defined by functional strategies or predetermined outcomes. Rather, the utility of an interpretive grounded theory lies in the insights it can provide into self and other within discursive moments of practice.

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<sup>1</sup>For a more extensive discussion of interpretive logics for grounded theory, contact the authors for their full paper, “Generating Grounded Theory of/for Educational Practice: The Journey of Three Epistemorphs.”

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