Discovering experience-based theory building: Offshoot of Classical and Pragmatic Grounded Theory

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ABSTRACT

This is a methodological article that documented my theory building process. Inspired by the recommendations of Glaser, I fashioned my own methodology in creating my own theory. It is an observance of: (1) autonomy; (2) originality; and (3) contribution. The process is an amalgamation of: (1) Classical Grounded Theory; (2) Pragmatic Grounded Theory; and (3) Practitioner-based theory building. The method is coined as Experience-Based theory building. To facilitate abstraction and get away with plain description, it exploited autosampling technique initially and theoretical sampling dominantly. This approach is highly retroductive, a synergy of: (1) induction; (2) deduction; and (3) abduction.

I. INTRODUCTION

Glaser (2006) claimed that doctoral students are expected to create their own theory and methodology in doing their dissertation. Autonomy, originality, and contribution are the three key elements he emphasized (Glaser, 2006). The Doctor of Philosophy (Phd) candidate must be autonomous in their quest for knowledge. Their pursuit for innovative and novel: (1) procedures, and (2) information; are highly personal. The product of their autonomy and originality are their contributions. I personally believe these contributions may not be expedient at present, but have enormous utility in the future. With this challenge, I was able to discover a theory-building technique amalgamating: (1) classical GT (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 2006); (2) pragmatic GT (Charmaz, 2006); and (3) practitioner-based theory building (Nielsen, 2010). This paper documented the discovery of experience-based theory building.

The method I have fashioned guises similar to practice or practitioner’s theory building (Nielsen, 2010). It is the induction of a theory based on experiences (Bendassolli, 2013). What makes my own methodology novel is that it is initially based on my own personal experience and corroborated with the experiences of others. Unlike those discussed by Nielsen (2010) and Bendassolli (2013), they are induced from the informants who were practitioners or those who had experienced the phenomenon.

The data analysis utilized trailed concepts from both classical and pragmatic GT. Methodological decisions were based on my philosophical stances in the conduct of this particular exploration. The method was shaped based on: (a) how I see the reality of the phenomenon; and (b) what I think is the best approach to arrive in conceptualization.

Keywords: experience-based, grounded theory, research
II. CONDITIONS

The following are the conditions to the experience-based GT:
1. Data are initially induced from the researcher’s experiences;
2. The inquiry embarked atheoretical;
3. The researcher’s experiences must be a cluster of conceptually similar events:
   3.1. Single incident experience shall be treated as contaminant when it cannot be confirmed with other means;
4. Researcher’s personal experiences must be confirmed with the experiences of others:
   4.1. Confirmed experiences must be taken as data saturation, and
   4.2. Experiences of others that are deviant from the researcher’s experiences must be recognized as alternative realities:
      4.2.1. It must be confirmed until data saturation arrives; otherwise it is treated as a contaminant;
5. Incidences are sampled and not persons:
   5.1. Incidences are taken from any or a combination of the following:
      5.1.1. Interviews,
      5.1.2. Observations,
      5.1.3. Existing databases, or
      5.1.4. Literature.

III. PHILOSOPHICAL STANCE

This method was initially naturalistic (Thales as cited by Roper, 2010). I integrated interpretivism (Boas, 1887a,b,c) and constructivism (Dewey, 1938). I believed that my experiences should be studied in context (Botan & Kreps, 1999). I examined the object of inquiry without any presumptions or expectations. Although I never commenced in a tabula rasa state (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 2006), I attempted to bracket out personal biases and neutrally scrutinized the context (Ray, 1985). It marked objectivity in qualitative inquiry amidst its subjective or relative nature. The following are philosophical guides for novice researchers who will adapt my methods in their inquiry:

Using the interpretative approach, one cannot get away from personal viewpoints. However, this procedure must only occur in the analytic process. Researchers must be careful not to exploit personal interpretations before data collection. The interpretative analysis should be done simultaneously with data collection. It is essential since it provides a conceptual agenda that is useful to substantiate the data. It is the unique feature of the naturalistic inquiry since it does not interpret data based on a predetermined framework. Conceptualizations are induced and grounded from the data.

Data analysis, apart from the researcher’s personal interpretation, may look into the data as personally constructed by the informant. Although the researcher’s interpretation is constructivist in nature, other sources of data, aside from the researcher’s experiences, must be interpreted from their own lenses and must be presented side-by-side with the researcher’s personal interpretation. The researchers are reminded that there is no single truth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Creswell & Planno Clark, 2011). Truth is relative. It is constructed by each actor with different perspectives. It must be scrutinized carefully to document the multiplicity of realities that make theorizing more substantial. In other words, truth or reality, whether it is objective or subjective, must be treated equally. In GT, there is no such divide. Conceptualizations are the same regardless of sources and procedures.

The interpretative conceptualizations of the researcher are based on data. Though conceptual induction of data is technically relative in nature, it must be honestly done and empirically deduced with another incident. It is its positivistic and objective nature. Therefore, this particular GT process involved two paradigms: (a) initially naturalistic; and (b) as a confirming point, positivistic.

IV. PROCESS OF INVESTIGATION

I trailed a retroductive research process (Wallace, 1971). The involved processes were induction, deduction and abduction that were amalgamated to produce a substantive theory. I was convinced by the recommendations of Foot, Warnick and Schneider (2005) wherein identified concepts or constructs were derived between
thoughts and confirmation that links both inductive and deductive approaches in theory building. Each route nourished the progression of conceptualization. It is a mechanism that allowed the triangulation of concepts (Downward & Mearman, 2006). Although, abduction was not mentioned in the GT literatures my readings support that it be part of retroduction. Technically, it is considered as a specialized form of induction.

**Induction.** Initially, data were induced from my personal experiences that allowed the identification of concepts or initial codes. Polit and Beck (2012) defined it as a process of making inference based on observations or experiences that are paired with critical analysis. This analytic process provided purposive culling of relevant data. The researcher then integrates the data to formulate a theory that aids in explaining the phenomenon (Polit & Beck, 2010).

**Deduction.** Conceptualizations induced from personal experiences are deductively verified. The induced data serve as a theoretical framework or an *a priori* that are verified by another incident or case. Polit and Beck (2012) defined the process of deduction as a mechanism for descending hypotheses. Relationship of concepts in a theory can never be verified unswervingly. Through deduction, tentative hypotheses induced from data are confirmed through theoretically sampled incidents. It is to confirm authenticity. It provides a clearer and thicker theoretical substantiation. The researcher just needs to be aware of the difference between conceptualization and description. The focus of GT is theorizing and not describing. It is further discussed later in the text.

**Theoretical Sampling.** Theory-based culling embroils the miscellany of incidents based on *a priori* conceptualization that is being qualitatively scrutinized (Polit & Beck, 2008). According to Charmaz (2006), theoretical sampling means looking for relevant data to progress an emerging theory. It aims to intricately polish the: (a) group of concepts; and (b) relationship of categories. Incident culling culminates when no new concepts emerge. This procedure keeps the researcher away from unfocused analysis.

I must make it clear that initial sampling in the study was not theoretical sampling. I must remind the reader that the initial utilized sampling in this GT was autosampling that I personally coined and defined as “purposively culling personal experiences of the researcher himself that is substantial to the domain of inquiry.” Charmaz (2006) made clear that GT must start with an initial sampling (most of the time purposive in nature). She further explained that initial sampling in GT is where one starts, and theoretical sampling directs the GTist where to go. Therefore, it is correct to claim that initial sampling is an inductive approach while theoretical sampling is a deductive approach. Charmaz added that its logic began with the data. Tentative thoughts are induced and probed through empirical and deductive reasoning. It means that one must move back and forth with data (Hood, 1983). Moving back and forth is a retroductive approach.

Theoretical sampling as an emergent approach (Charmaz, 2006): (1) confirms the intuitions about categories; (2) saturates the properties of a category; (3) differentiates categories; (4) elucidates interaction between categories; and (5) recognizes process variation. It is emergent because one cannot determine what to sample not until new conceptualization based on induced analysis requires it.

**Conceptualization vs. Description.** One is no longer doing GT if description is focused and conceptualization is put aside (Glaser, 2005). The researcher must avoid describing details of the incidence and must put emphasis on the determination of the involved processes through conceptualization. It means that: (a) concepts are identified; and (b) relationship of concepts with each other is determined. Consequently, researchers must situate their thoughts in its general form and not in a specific fashion (Padua, 2013). Specific discussion happens when researchers are engrossed in describing a phenomenon, failing to conceptualize. Conceptualization only happens when analyzers process the information in its general form.

**Conceptualization vs. Accuracy.** In GT, concepts do not change when facts change. Glaser and Strauss (1967, 2006) emphasized that GT aimed to discover a theory. Therefore, it is germane to generate general categories, their properties and the general relationship with each other. The substantiation from which conceptualizations
occurred exemplifies the concept. GT is not concerned with accuracy. The evidence needs not be precise. Regardless of exactitude, these concepts are undoubtedly significant conceptual abstraction. Researchers verify by qualifying the enormous conceptualization beyond relative accuracy.

Glaser (2007) pronounced that the product of GT is transcending abstraction and not accurate description. The researcher must not be disturbed whether the data is accurate reality or truth. It can be relative. Accuracy is not a GT concern. However, it is the researcher’s responsibility to do constant comparative analysis honestly. It dictates the researcher not to guide analysis on how he or she wants to see things but on how it was induced from data.

Abduction. There were times when I did not know where to go to. With this experience, I decided to gather information without knowing what to do with them. By abducting data without a priori, my conceptualization extended by: (1) objectively making sense from nothing (Habermas, 1978); and (2) introducing new ideas (Meyer & Lunnay, 2013). Abductive extrapolation allowed me to see all conceivable hypothetical explanations. I empirically scrutinized them via deductive approach and hunted for the most reasonable explanation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2006). Again, this process allowed me to move back and forth with data (Hood, 1983). This approach intensified my theorizing process.

All is Data

Glaser pronounced “all is data.” It means that everything that is derived from the investigatory scene is data regardless of the source (Glaser, 2007). Sources may include: (a) interviews; (b) observations; or (c) documents. One must recognize that taken information from these sources are not the actual data themselves. The actual GT data were discovered from conceptualization through constant comparison that generates categories and its properties. These are either: (a) baseline; (b) properline; (c) vague; (d) interpreted; or (e) conceptual. With this dictum, there is no such thing as: (a) bias; (b) objective or subjective; or (c) interpreted or misinterpreted. It is anything the researcher is formulating for transcending abstraction regardless of the process.

In my study, I started with the data from myself. I purposively culled my experiences relevant to the domain of inquiry. My experiences were documented through reflection notes. Theoretically sampled incidences were derived through: (1) interviews of people with similar experiences; (2) interviews of people who had witnessed my experiences; and (3) documented incidence of people experiencing similar experiences (literature). The first two were neither audio-recorded nor transcribed in verbatim. They were only field noted. Glaser (2004) recommends field noting over verbatim transcriptions.

Although Glaser (1978) cautioned the researcher to avoid reading the literature before the theoretical framework is stabilized, he also mentioned that GTist may flex this prescription depending on the need of the inquiry. I cautiously made sure that the codes were not initially derived from the literature. Literatures were only theoretically sampled to: (1) confirm my personal experiences; and (2) sanction theoretical fit.

Constant Comparative Analysis

A process called constant comparison was dawdled to conceptually progress and cultivate germane categories. Categories induced from the data were constantly compared with the new data for commonalities and variations. Data gathering proceeded by concentrating on evolving conceptualizations. I compared concepts emerging from the data with comparable concepts from another data source, existing theory or literature to gauge which segments have promising fit with the generated theory (Polit & Beck, 2012; Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2006; Glaser, 2001).

Specific to my study, I constantly compared each incidence culled from my experiences. Each comparative process identified universal and diverse conceptualizations. I confirmed my personal experiences with theoretically sampled incidences from: (1) other researcher’s experiences via interviews and recollection of actual observations; and (2) existing literature exposing analogous occurrences. These incidences were constantly compared from each other.

Transcription, Formulation of Concepts and
Categories, Initial Coding, and Memoing

Initially, I was transcribing my personal experience. The transcripts were subjected to initial coding wherein concepts were identified. I must emphasize that the transcriptions were not verbatim write-up of interviews. These are field notes and reflection notes of (Glaser, 2004): (1) the recall of my experiences; (2) the reflection of interviews; and (3) field notes from observations. Glaser suggested that the use of tape-recorded data is not necessary since it is a waste of time. Field notes are preferred since they are already a product of the analytic process.

I further coded some of the incidences I theoretically sampled. I noticed that I was not doing GT since I failed to do conceptualization. I was focused to the descriptive part which is not the intention of GT. Although coding transcripts is necessary to formulate initial codes, I was trapped by the QDA (Qualitative Data Analysis) process and failed to trail the GT process. My dilemma is further discussed later in the text. I opened the literature and found my answer to my quandary. Glaser (2005) noted that GTist must not focus on the prescription of QDA (utilized by ethnographers and phenomenologists) but directed towards conceptualization. After doing QDA with (5) incidences that I theoretically sampled, I shifted to memo writing that trailed me to the actual conceptualization and prevented me from concentrating on descriptions. According to Charmaz (2006), memo writing points unwaveringly to theoretical sampling. It is a tactical, explicit and methodical process that anticipates to intricately contextualize and identify my theoretical categories. This sampling technique is contingent to the identified categories. The identified categories are the result of writing the memos. Although identification of specific concepts is dependent from coding the transcripts, one must transcend the process to theorizing. Furthermore, theoretical sampling may not go back to coding transcripts like doing QDA - although this can be done in appropriate cases. This fundamental GT approach assisted me to demarcate and advance the properties of my categories including the width of its variations.

Writing memos allowed me to identify the completeness or incompleteness of my categories. Gaps were then analyzed and aided with theoretical sampling technique. This engagement prodded me to foresee the direction of looking for more data that plugged the gap and saturated the categories. Take note that what we want to saturate are categories and not specific concepts. It is another feature of GT that is distinctive from other QDA processes.

Writing memos, therefore, aided my analytic process. It guided me to start writing the theory and stop doing endless and unnecessary QDA techniques. The memos emerged from grounded comparative analysis of cumulative data. Incompleteness signaled the gap that prompted further data collection. This time, I trailed the collection of relevant data and not the unnecessary ones. It then expedited me increasingly to write more abstract and conceptual memos.

You notice that the process I trailed is not linear. It is a cyclical process of: (1) data collection; (2) coding; and (3) writing memos (analyzing). Sampling stopped when the constructs were chockfull. Robustness was reached when relationship between categories was clear. It is effective memo writing that I invigorated to reflect on and designate patterns in the data, interactions among categories, and nascent conceptualizations.

Openness

Dey (1999) suggested that there is a big difference between an open mind and an empty head. Openness is ascertained by Glaser (1978, 1992) to get away from the deduction based from a priori (theoretical frameworks) and put affinity to induction. We only need to bracket out what we previously know. Remaining open is trying to understand what we can learn while coding and where it can take us (Charmaz, 2006). It may or may not be congruent to what we already know.

Glaser (1978, 1998) constantly reminds GTist to remain open to theoretical possibilities. The analytic process concentrates in interrogating what the data represents. It must be put in mind in the initial step of the analytic process. With this question in mind, it allowed me to pursue the most essential response that fits the domain of inquiry. In the process of analysis, I ascertained specific meanings and actions that proposed theoretical relationship to convincing conceptualizations that
were not revealed in the existing compilation of culled incidences. With an open mind, it allowed me to search for theoretical possibilities. It then called for more theoretical sampling that further refined conceptualization towards robustness.

I was directed to remain open to all possible theoretical directions in the earlier stages of the analytic process. When categories were clear, more focused theoretical sampling occurred. Remaining open does not necessarily mean remaining open all the time. It only suggests remaining open when categories (or a specific category) are still unclear. A more focused approach proceeded when theoretical integration begun.

**My Mistake with QDA**

My mistake started with my use of qualitative data analysis software HyperResearch version 2.8.3. Fairly, it did help me in the initial part of my data analysis: open coding. It was then acceptable when I was still doing my initial purposive sampling. I was autosampling my personal experiences and constantly compared my personal incidence to incidence. I induced initial codes and partially identified categories with its properties. With the interest of induction, I continued the procedure with other cases (not incidence; experiences of others through interview and from those documented in the literature). I noticed that I was doing something similar to phenomenology and ethnography. I was not doing GT. I was not conceptualizing but rather describing.

My dilemma in doing data analysis using QDA brought me to reading the article of Glaser (2004) titled Remodeling Grounded Theory. There, I realized that I was trapped with the QDA approach which leads me to: (1) description rather than conceptualization; and (2) qualitative data analysis block.

First we need to revisit the concepts of QDA. GT is focused on accuracy, truth, trustworthiness or objectivity of data. Stringent procedures are prescribed in enhancing these issues. With my worry to develop accurate codes from data to get rid of subjectivity issues, quarantined me to the QDA trap. Unluckily, these are not the concern of GT.

The trap of QDA eroded me from the goal of conceptualizing a theory and brought me to the descriptive baggage. My realization of not producing conceptual theory of illuminating the essential communal patterns that are functional to the domain of inquiry marked me to realign my methods to the GT process.

With my realization, I started to analyze my theoretically sampled codes with memo writing. It is in the memo writing procedure that allowed me to (1) document my reflection; (2) describe the patterns induced from data; (3) identify relationships between categories; and (4) generate conceptualizations (Polit & Beck, 2012). It was when I shifted to this approach that I started to feel that I am doing GT. It was never a linear approach. In fact, the emergent process was a continuous and a cyclical amalgamation of: (a) data collection; (b) coding; and (c) conceptual analysis (Glaser, 2004). These were constantly documented with my memos.

**GT Data Analysis**

**Substantive vs. Theoretical Codes.**

Glaserian data analysis was used to formulate conceptualizations: data into patterns. The elements of the domain of inquiry were abstracted through substantive codes and theoretical codes (Polit & Beck, 2012). Theoretical codes provided awareness on the relationship of each substantive code. Substantive codes were processed in two stages (Polit & Beck, 2012; Charmaz, 2006): (1) open; and (2) selective or focused.

Open coding was the first stage of my constant comparative analysis. Openness mandated to detain the grounded concepts from the data. Incidences were scrutinized for similarities and differences. It allowed me to identify categories and its properties (Glaser, 1978). In this stage, I inaugurated: (1) line-by-line; (2) paragraph; and (3) document coding. It covered the Level I codes. When initial codes were developed, theoretical sampling took place. I then started to write memos to condense Level I codes. The condensed codes enclosed the Level II codes. When categories and properties were identified, Level III coding was done. Level III codes are theoretical constructs. Level I codes are basic concepts while Level III codes are more abstract ones. As cited by Polit and Beck (2012), these constructs add scope beyond local meanings (Glaser, 1978) in generating the
theory. This process allowed the identification of constructs. Open coding culminated after ascertaining the core category. Glaser identified nine criteria in determining the core category. It must: (1) be central to many or all categories; (2) saturate from data frequently; (3) take some time to saturate compared to the other categories; (4) have a significant relationship with other categories; (5) be clear; seizing insinuations for formal applications; (6) have substantial carry-through; (7) be completely variable; (8) be a dimension of the domain of inquiry; and (9) be a theoretical code.

The next stage was selective or focused coding. This stage involved multiple levels of abstraction. I only coded those data that were relevant to the core category. It then led me to theoretical coding. This stage allowed interlacing the fragmented pieces of data back together. The codes allowed theoretical capture (Glaser, 2005). It delivered superior explanatory power that heightened meaningful abstraction of the relationships between categories.

Data Analysis, Memos and Fit. During coding and analysis, I documented my ideas about the data, categories, and conceptual scheme emerging from the memos. The actual memos preserved the substantive application. GT does not necessitate the discovery of novel categories. It means we do not ignore those previously identified by literature. The mission is to progress an emergent fit between the data and category that might work. Pre-existing categories were not simply borrowed but earned its way to the theory.

GT is concerned with generating categories and hypotheses rather than testing them. The product is usually a theoretical model that endeavors to explain most of the involved processes in the domain of inquiry (Glaser, 2001). Although GTists are warned in referring to the available literature before a theoretical framework is stabilized, this process is also emergent and flexible in nature (Glaser, 1978) depending on the need of the domain of inquiry.

V. CONCLUSION

I shall claim that this research is neither a dogmatic classical or constructivist GT nor a practitioner theory building methodology. It is safe to say that this is a novel research methodology based on existing procedures and modified to suit the need of my inquiry - a synergy of three methods with personal inputs based on my personal philosophical stances.

What you want to know dictates what you do. Although recommendations are available, tailored-fit procedures allow better discovery. Forcing recommendations or dogmatic procedures compromise the analytic process and is a misuse of the forced methodology. Investigators must realize that doing research need not follow strict doctrines prescribed or suggested by research methodologists. One must think and do things outside the box. Novel innovations and discoveries were derived from new methodologies. Scholars need not replicate what had been done before. It is noteworthy however, to recognize them as helpful guides on how to commence and proceed with their scholarship. Along the way, researchers can always deviate from what is normatively accepted. For me, that is true scholarship. We should not think the same way, otherwise, we end up searching and researching similar things.

I am sure that other scholars will scrutinize and critique this methodology. That is why they are there. It is their role. It is in disagreements where scholars came into being. The arena where exchanges of ideas and stances that transported debate and divide allowed the progression of disciplines rapidly. It takes revolutionary steps to challenge the status quo. It needs another Albert Einstein to create unacceptable discoveries for utility after decades from its discovery.

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