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Thoughts on the Literature Review and GT

Alvita Nathaniel, DSN

Thinking about epistemic questions always reminds me of Socrates' cave allegory. In Plato's most famous book, *The Republic*, Socrates talks to a young follower named Glaucon. I would like to include here a short excerpt of their conversation and discuss how this relates to my thoughts about preceding a classic GT study with a thorough literature review.

[Socrates] Imagine human beings living in a underground, cave like dwelling, with an entrance a long way up, which is both open to the light and as wide as the cave itself. They've been there since childhood, fixed in the same place, with their necks and legs fettered, able to see only in front of them, because their bonds prevent them from turning their heads around. Light is provided by a fire burning far above and behind them. Also behind them, but on higher ground, there is a path stretching between them and the fire. Imagine that along this path a low wall has been built, like the screen in front of puppeteers above which they show their puppets

[Glaucon] I'm imagining it.

[Socrates] Then also imagine that there are people along the wall, carrying all kinds of artifacts that project above it—statues of people and other animals, made out of stone, wood, and every material. And, as you'd expect, some of the carriers are talking, and some are silent.

[Glaucon] It's a strange image you're describing, and strange prisoners.

[Socrates] They're like us. Do you suppose, first of all, that these prisoners see anything of themselves

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and one another besides the shadows that the fire casts on the wall in front of them?

[Glaucon] How could they, if they have to keep their heads motionless throughout life?

[Socrates] What about the things being carried along the wall? Isn't the same true of them?

[Glaucon] Of course.

[Socrates] And if they could talk to one another, don't you think they'd suppose that the names they used applied to the things they see passing before them?

[Glaucon] They'd have to.

[Socrates] And what if their prison also had an echo from the wall facing them? Don't you think they'd believe that the shadows passing in front of them were talking whenever one of the carriers passing along the wall was doing so?

[Glaucon] I certainly do.

[Socrates] Then the prisoners would in every way believe that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of those artifacts.

[Glaucon] They must surely believe that.

[Socrates] Consider, then, what being released.... What do you think he'd say, if we told him that what he'd seen before was inconsequential.... ...if we pointed to each of the things passing by, asking what each of them is, and compelled him to answer, don't you think he'd be at a loss and that he'd believe that the [shadows] he saw earlier were truer than the [objects] he was now being shown? (Plato, trans. 1997)

There is more to the story, of course. Light at the opening of the cave represents knowledge. The people chained at the bottom of the cave are situated as far from knowledge as they could possibly be. As they sit there, they begin to interpret meaningless clues and to attach

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meaning to them. Given enough time, they will surely develop theories and then, if released, go off somewhere to teach and write about them—or so I imagine. The other people in the cave are climbing to the opening, moving toward true knowledge. Coming out of the cave, or even moving toward the opening, these people can see what is real—not a flickering shadow obscured by smoke, but the object as it really exists. This suggests that anyone who seeks true knowledge must move toward the light where phenomena are clearly visible.

How can we relate this ancient allegory to a discussion about literature review and grounded theory? I believe it relates in two ways. First, one can gain knowledge about particulars only if they are clearly seen and honestly portrayed. Glaser (1978) wrote that the goal of grounded theory “is to generate a theory that accounts for a pattern of behavior which is relevant and problematic for those involved” (p. 93). From this *grounded* source, (i.e., those involved) we gather evidence that can be best trusted. This inductive method perhaps confuses many PhD dissertation committees who are more comfortable with deduction. Second, untrustworthy data and flawed interpretation hinder understanding of the phenomenon. Thus, the investigator should not contaminate grounded theory with non-grounded data, deductive conclusions, or mediated beliefs of others. Extant literature holds the potential to mislead the grounded theorist since even extremely respected leaders in any discipline can be extremely mistaken. Glaser (1978) makes this point clearly. Grounded theory should not be corrupted by received ideas, preconceptions or logical elaboration. Valid grounded theory emerges from systematic data gathering and rigorous analysis.

This is not to suggest that it is possible for any person to begin the grounded theory process as a *tabula rasa*. Original research and theory building are reserved for those at the pinnacle of their fields. Years of study and practical experience create an investigator/analyst with a breadth and depth of discipline-specific knowledge. I suggest that along with this understanding comes a measure of curiosity

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and motivation to fill in the gaps, to understand what is heretofore unknown. At this place, this gap in what is known, inquiry begins. We must understand that these gaps are only visible to one who has a sweeping perspective of the larger body of knowledge. Therefore, the person doing GT necessarily possesses a broad and general knowledge of the literature when the process begins—having spent time and effort climbing out of the cave, toward the light, so to speak.

I offer one word of caution related to the literature. Knowledge of the literature imparts a discipline-specific language. When the investigator begins to formulate a research proposal, he or she should step back and make an objective non-partisan examination of the concepts and words used in the research proposal and those that may be used in qualitative interviews. Professional language is replete with jargon, loaded words, easily misunderstood words, or words that have different meanings to different people. Thus, even a general overview of the literature can influence the data if words derived from it are not used carefully. For example, when I interviewed participants for my theory of moral reckoning in nursing, I purposely avoided using the term *moral*. A very astute member of my dissertation committee brought the problem to my attention. Would participants think of moral in terms of *moral vs. immoral*, religious doctrine, or professional ethics? I did not know. So, in the interviews, I used the term *troubling*, a vague term that has little discipline-specific meaning. Use of the word *troubling* elicited exactly the type of information that I needed without confusing the issue with an Ambiguous, easily misunderstood term (Nathaniel, 2004).

What is the best use of extant literature? Glaser suggests that once the analysis is well underway, the grounded theorist may use the literature to support and illustrate the emerging theory. Thus, if the emerging theory is similar to extant literature, the two independently generated works support and strengthen each other. Since GT is modifiable, i.e. composed of a set of tentative hypotheses, a discussion of the dissimilarities is productive

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in that it can serve to be self-correcting. This is very similar to what philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce suggested about use of the *scientific method*. Peirce proposed that the scientific method (including GT) moves humankind toward the *final opinion* (Houser & Kloesel, 1992). Thus, each work adds to or corrects those before it leading us closer to knowledge that is true and correct.

The grounded theorist can also use the literature to complete the theory, especially if extant grounded theory is available. Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest that sometimes in the final write up, grounded theorists discover gaps in the theory. If the information sources are no longer available or if time or funding restraints makes it unreasonable to resume field work and if the extant literature can reliably be used to fill in the gaps, using the literature is a good solution.

Finally, the grounded theorist can use the emerging theory to refute established, deductive, preconceived theory. Glaser, himself, taught me this lesson. I struggled to reconcile a non-grounded theory that seemed incongruent with my emerging theory. Glaser suggested that my fledgling theory, because it was grounded in the data and based upon information obtained from people for whom the problem was “relevant and problematic,” easily refuted the extant theory, which was based upon nothing more than unsubstantiated logic—smoke on the cave wall.

What should the PhD candidate do if the dissertation chair, committee, or examiners request a thorough literature review prior to data gathering? In a practical sense, the candidate seeks to obtain the degree and thus needs to satisfy the requirements of the examiners. This problem occurs very frequently and may be unavoidable since literature review is often part of the pre-dissertation course work. If required, the PhD candidate should complete a thorough literature review with an objective perspective. It may take a period of time, perhaps a few months, before the student theorist is able to disassociate his or her mindset from established ideas and concepts. However, this is a necessary step since ideas in the

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literature may otherwise derail the emerging theory. The grounded theorist allows the theory to emerge from the data, rather than support or refute established ideas. As this occurs, the theory may turn in unexpected directions, rendering the initial literature review irrelevant. If this happens, the student remains open to the emerging theory. After the theory develops, the student should perform a more pertinent literature review, thus completing the circle.

In conclusion, the grounded theorist should avoid a thorough literature review before beginning the GT process in order to avoid contamination from mediated beliefs, preconceptions, distorted values, and false premises. The grounded theorist should use the literature to support, corroborate, and illustrate the emerging theory. Once the grounded theorist understands the emerging theory, the extant literature is a wonderful place to go for substantiation and for examples to weave into the emerging theory. As the theory fully emerges, it becomes a powerful instrument which can clarify, synthesize, and organize prior grounded theories and refute flawed theories, thus moving closer to a clear understanding of the phenomenon.

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