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consideration

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# The Relationship between an Emerging Grounded Theory and the Existing Literature: Four phases for consideration

Vivian B. Martin, Ph.D.

The relationship between grounded theory researchers and the existing literature has become a red herring that even confuses some grounded theorists who have completed a study. Antoinette McCallin's essay does a commendable job outlining the realities of the research terrain that make proceeding without some exposure to the literature unlikely and ill-advised in most situations. When embarking on my dissertation, I needed to know enough about the literature, both substantive and methodological, to argue for the use of classic grounded theory as opposed to many other choices within my field; yet my study benefited from the necessary tensions between the emerging grounded theory and the existing literature. In this brief essay I propose that the relationship between the existing literature and a developing grounded theory project goes through four discernible phases: *noncommittal*, *comparative*, *integrative*, and, if the analyst can push, a *transcendent* phase in which the theory is not simply one of a number of theories of a kind within the discipline's literature. I explain the phases to make more explicit the under-recognized subversive potential of grounded theory to push past disciplinary boundaries by broadening the 'relevant' literature. Barney Glaser has often admonished grounded theory researchers to put off the literature to avoid wasting time and energy with literature that may prove irrelevant. I have not found such literature to be irrelevant as much as limited, and in some cases restricted by what a particular discipline defines as the appropriate literature. Therefore, the question of *what literature* offers possibilities for literature review and comparisons that would allow for richer knowledge

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generation. I return to this matter toward the end of the essay.

### **Four Phases of Relating**

Although many experienced grounded theorists explain the read-or-not-to-read quandary in grounded theory methodology as one of pacing, thinking of the initial phase as “noncommittal” helps focus on the principle Glaser wants to convey: a distancing from the pre-defined problems and concerns. Since some knowledge of the literature is presumed – one could not write or defend a dissertation proposal or grant application otherwise – a researcher needs to take explicit steps to refrain from committing to questions and concepts privileged in the literature. Writing memos of one’s preconceptions to make them more explicit, something Glaser recommends in his troubleshooting seminars, is one way. And I would humbly argue that viewing the necessary initial relationship as noncommittal would help novice researchers come up with other strategies that allow for them to graze the literature or know enough to fulfill certain requirements while making a conscious shift of mind to maintain openness to the field. Although I was familiar with the literature on news consumption in my field, I was aware of enough of the limitations to remain noncommittal. But when certain patterns from the literature started to show up in the field, albeit sometimes with a twist, I knew it was time to move back into the literature to start making the kind of comparisons that allowed me to get more selective with concepts. As part of selective coding, I applied some of my concepts to the existing literature, including some large surveys and industry reports.

The integrative phase was a little trickier, perhaps reflecting the tensions between discovery of theory and the need to fulfill requirements within the discipline. The short explanation of what happened to me in this phase, at least initially, is that my pacing went awry when I let the literature get away from me. I was reading some literature but not all pertinent material in my area, and I had to do some scurrying toward the end of dissertation writing when

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I realized that I had been so exultant in the process of discovery that I had left some literature untouched. I did burrow a place in the literature for my work alongside others I encountered during the comparative phase, and my dissertation, *Getting the news from the news: a grounded theory of purposive attending*, got accolades; but I missed some things in my effort to distance myself from the literature. These limitations became more apparent as I started preparing material for publication in my field. Reviewers are generally positive, but, to give an example, I just went through literature from the 1940s to satisfy a reviewer's complaint that the project should be in communication with these works. Some of these critiques undermine aspects of my work and are about power elites holding on to their position, I realize however, I am finding that my work has been strengthened by some of this extended integration phase, which leads me to the fourth phase, which I confess is less grounded than the other three because I have yet to fully realize it. Nevertheless, the integration phase, which seems to have gone through a few cycles, has brought me to the point of arguing for a sociology of news consumption that utilizes my theory of purposive attending as a way to bring together disparate traditions that have addressed news consumption. So perhaps, there is a transcendent phase, which I hope would be indicated by adoption and citation of my work by colleagues in my field.

Transcendence brings up the matter I suggested at the beginning of this essay, the subversive power of grounded theory to leap disciplinary boundaries. The question of whether one should read the literature before starting a project suggests the existence of a pre-packaged body of literature. And in many ways there is: disciplines define the appropriate problems and literature for study. Nevertheless, as Glaser argues, the field suggests other literature. Most times, however, researchers are not really free to go to the other fields where their questions may also be under study, and even if they are so inclined, the learning curve that awaits a health researcher or information systems person in need of a crash course in

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psychology or sociology can be discouraging. Certainly, interdisciplinary research is becoming more accepted, and some areas of study are inherently interdisciplinary. Nevertheless, there is a tendency for scholars in general to not boldly go where nobody in their discipline has gone before. Such a disinclination is particularly pertinent to discussions about the use of grounded theory to create formal theory. The formal theory implications of, say, *untenable accountability*, to use a concept that Trisha Fritz, an Arizona State University doctoral candidate and Grounded Theory Troubleshooting seminar attendee, began utilizing for her study of school principals forced to implement the No Child Left Behind Act in poverty-stricken school districts, are apparent; but the inclination, and data collection and analysis across different areas of interest that would be needed to develop a formal theory to transcend the substantive area will likely keep such a theory from development. Yet grounded theory holds out the possibility of helping researchers cross disciplinary walls; and a better understanding of the necessary tensions between developing and existing literature can help researchers develop more potent theories.

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