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A Review Essay

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The Grounded Theory Review (2006), vol.5, nos.2/3

The Postmodern Turn: Shall Classic Grounded Theory Take That Detour? A Review Essay

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Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn, Adele E. Clarke, 2005, Sage Publications. 408 pp., paperback/hardcover

Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis, Kathy Charmaz, 2006, Sage Publications. 224 pp., paperback/hardcover

Adherents to classic grounded theory have gotten used to spotting the pretenders working under the grounded theory banner. Some of these faux-GT researchers have worked in a fog, misunderstanding fundamentals of the method; these are the studies that leave us shaking our heads and wondering about the doctoral committee and peer reviewers who did not bother to find out more about the method they were evaluating. More infuriating are the authors who are claiming to improve on grounded theory, to reground it, to quote one notable British author who, lack of hands-on grounded theory experience aside, manages a book-length critique of the method. Two recent books in the "remaking grounded theory" genre are from sociologists with some years of grounded theory projects behind them. Adele E. Clarke, author of *Situational Analysis*, was a student and colleague of Anselm L. Strauss at the University of California -San Francisco. Kathy Charmaz, author of *Constructing Grounded Theory*, is among the few grounded theorists who studied with Barney G. Glaser and Strauss at UCSF.

Although the pedigree of both authors gives more traditional readers comfort that these are not just people wielding the term grounded theory and conflating it with any old interview study, the vision for grounded theory offered in these two books are a challenge to more

The Grounded Theory Review (2006), vol.5, nos.2/3

orthodox notions. Both authors treat a sacrosanct element of classic grounded theory, the core category or concept, as unnecessary or, worse, a barrier to understanding the phenomenon under study. Both accuse classic grounded theory of a lack of reflexivity about the research process, insensitivity to difference and variation, and oversimplification in its quest to create an integrative theory. The overall indictment is that grounded theory is out of step with the ways of thinking and talking about research brought about by postmodernism and other changes in scholarship through the 80s and 90s. Clarke's stated goal is to "push grounded theory more fully around the postmodern turn" (p. xxi), a shift in the social sciences and humanities that has focused on the fragmentation, tentativeness, and complexities of social life and the need to adopt different methods and ways of gaining entry to these fragments, not to bring about wholeness—that is not possible within the postmodern frame—but to at least begin articulating the possibilities and their connections. If this sounds vague and possibly contradictory, such is the nature of postmodernism. The goal of both authors is to make grounded theory more responsive to it. Toward this end, Clarke proposes changes that pretty much create a new method. Charmaz, though better informed about how the different variants of grounded theory converge and diverge and how they have co-existed, nonetheless endorses a sometimes impressionistic, interpretative approach which, I suspect, grounded theorists who are seeking to utilize grounded theory to bring about understanding and change in practical disciplines would find less desirable and accountable. The daily worlds of nursing, management, information systems, and other fields, I would argue, very much privilege an "objective" reality where phenomena are defined and measured. In posing the question in the title of this review essay, I am asking whether classic grounded theory can and should avoid the postmodern turn, which would be a detour off its main path, which has yet to be fully explored. I am aware that, if one were to extend the metaphor, one might have to conclude that in some instances detours are unavoidable, though the driver does not have to accept the

The Grounded Theory Review (2006), vol.5, nos.2/3

new route completely. I come back to this matter in the conclusion of this essay after discussing the main points of the books.

A System of Maps

In Situational Analysis, it is immediately clear within the first few pages that Clarke may need some updating herself: hers is a very simplistic understanding of classic grounded theory. She conflates grounded theory with the "basic social process," proclaiming the need for grounded theory to recognize multiple processes. Having written a dissertation focused on a core with interpenetrating subcores, or social processes, and knowing Glaser has written and spoken of such possibilities, Clarke's suggestion of the need for grounded theorists to grow beyond the basic social process was quite confusing. Moreover, she does not seem to understand that grounded theorists use many theoretical codes other than the basic social process, or that the social worlds/ frame she is using for her work are theoretical codes that can force data. While I concede that many inexperienced grounded theorists speak and write as if the basic social process is the sole code, these and other misunderstandings say more about the limitations of some researchers than it does the method. By conflating the two, Clarke proceeds to fix what is not broken.

Clarke, in fact, pretty much ignores classic grounded theory or misstates aspects of it. In speaking of "grounded theory/symbolic interaction as a theory/ methods package," Clarke uproots grounded theory from Glaser and his training in the quantitative analysis and qualitative math analytical techniques developed by Paul Lazarsfeld. My guess is Clarke, who credits grounded theory based in symbolic interaction as being in some ways "always already" ahead of the postmodern turn, would respond that leaving out the Columbia University roots of grounded theory makes sense for her because she is a symbolic interactionist who has practiced grounded theory in accordance with Strauss's vision, and to some degree the vision promulgated by Strauss in concert with Juliet Corbin.

The Grounded Theory Review (2006), vol.5, nos.2/3

While it is true that the traces of pragmatism in grounded theory and the preference for getting into the field where the action is taking place are very much of the Chicago School and symbolic interaction perspective, stripping the analytic techniques and their Columbia University history from grounded theory would effectively put grounded theory back to the state qualitative research (including most work in symbolic interaction) was in during the sixties, when social scientists criticized much qualitative research as being a soup of anecdotal evidence. It is really the analytic techniques out of Columbia, through Glaser, that gave qualitative researchers tools for systematic analysis. The Discovery of Grounded Theory argued that qualitative research could be rigorous, scientific if you will. Ironically, it is these positivist leanings, which helped inject greater rigor that postmodernists now denounce.

What Clarke proposes is a method that would focus on the situation in all its complexities, explicit, implicit, and speculative. Clarke's claims "Situational Analysis" is a way to get at the nonhuman aspects of a given situation, whether it be actual objects like technology or the discourse surrounding a particular issues. She uses work she has done in medical sociology, especially the debate over the RU480 pill, to demonstrate the method. Clarke's conceptualization of the situation as the analytical unit is inspired and guided by Strauss's concept of social worlds/arenas, a potent theoretical code; but, of course, like any theoretical one, it would shape the eventual research project before the researcher even enters the field. In addition to symbolic interaction-grounded theory and Strauss's social worlds/arenas, Clarke invokes Foucault as an important influence in the discursive shift that is shaping social research. Foucault's concepts of "discourse" and "disciplining" as creating and sustaining practices over time have been critical to understanding the power/.knowledge relationships in areas ranging from the disciplining of professions to identities. Such processes are enacted over and over through discourses that social researchers examine systematically. Clarke seeks to link Foucault's theorizing of power with Strauss's work on

The Grounded Theory Review (2006), vol.5, nos.2/3

action to embolden symbolic interaction and grounded theory to better address situatedness, reflexivity, difference and variation, complexity, and be better to handle the main forms of discourses, among it narrative, visual, and historical.

Extending the metaphor of social worlds and arenas, Clarke proposes mapping strategies for the data. Her first map is a situation map on which the researcher would lay out "the elements of the situation and examining relations among them" (p. 86). Such a map would include issues, people, places, discourses, and any number of other factors drawn from the data and the researcher's understanding. She provides an example of a map examining nurses' work under managed care for which factors include elements as diverse as home health aides, discourses about patient satisfaction, and drugs. The second map would be a social worlds/arenas map of "collective communities, relations, and sites of actions" (p. 86). This map would include individual and group actors, the dynamics within these worlds and in relation to others. The third map, a positional map lays out "positions articulated and not articulated in discourses" (p. 86). One initial impression of the maps might be that they are an example of codifying a strategy that many people do naturally. I am a diagrammer; I make maps and doodle alongside my memo-writing. What Clarke proposes is a more elaborate version of this. Such an approach might be helpful to people who need permission to get "messy," which is what Clarke encourages, but I am not convinced people need a mapping system. The approach is reminiscent of Strauss and Corbin's intricate axial coding system, which so many novice and experienced researchers have found unworkable.

An area where I had hoped Clarke, as someone who has worked grounded theory studies, might provide some technique is in the treatment of discourse. Discourses, narrative, visual, and historical, she tells us, are critical for examination, as they give insight into how certain practices have come into existence and maintain their power. I am a proponent of this view and find some levels of discourse

The Grounded Theory Review (2006), vol.5, nos.2/3

analysis important in my studies of media, politics, and culture. Yet grounded theory and discourse analysis in its strictest sense have different goals. The latter is more concerned with technical attention to detail. Not only are specific words important; an analyst might want to pay attention to repeated patterns of syntax, for instance. Further, there are analytical protocols for photos and other visual materials. When taking up the issue of these materials, including historical documents, there are many questions about how we might reconcile classic grounded theory's rejection of "worrisome accuracy" with various discourse methods' desire for greater or full coverage of data. For some studies, I think it is enough to bring my theoretical sensitivity of ethnomethodology and other perspectives dealing with how people give accounts and explanations; in other words, do a discourse-informed analysis of my data, but not a discourse analysis project. Yet Ian Dey's infamous criticism of grounded theory's "smash and grab" approach to data needs some examination to better reconcile a general view among discourse and other qualitative researchers that certain datasets, a collection of photos or historical documents, for instance, need to be treated systematically and more completely than grounded theory's guidelines of "saturation" would concede. What Clarke could have done for me and other readers curious about how discourse might be better integrated into our work systematically was explicate the challenges and her solutions. Although four of her seven chapters are dedicated to aspects of discourse, her treatment of the subject is ultimately weak. I finished the book with a sense of much-ado-about-something, but not grounded theory.

The Constructivist Grounded Theorist

Charmaz's *Constructing Grounded Theory* provides the more compact, how-to, and the book is very much about grounded theory, albeit with a slant toward Charmaz's "constructivist" view. Unlike Clarke's often-circuitous discussion and further need to explain herself in an Epilogue titled "FAQ and Conversations" elucidating the rationale for her mapping system, Charmaz's approach is

The Grounded Theory Review (2006), vol.5, nos.2/3

straightforward and clear, even as she takes up the substantial and subtle differences between 'constructivist' and 'objectivist' grounded theory. Charmaz's book is both an introductory text and reference for all the varieties of grounded theorists. She lays out the history (neither influence gets shortchanged here), then moves on to chapters on gathering data, coding, memo-writing, theoretical sorting, and writing, providing some discussion of differing grounded theory approaches. The writing chapter may be of special interest to people who have done their grounded theory dissertation and are now thinking of presenting the work for publications. Charmaz takes on the issue of "the disputed literature review" (p. 165), raising many of the same points contributors to this do in their discussion about grounded theory's relationship to extant literature. Charmaz goes even further with practical advice about how to integrate new grounded theories with existing literature as part of a broader discussion about writing a theoretical framework and doing it with style. She advises that the theory gets sharper with each iteration, but she also notes the importance of keeping the core argument in sight. Yet, as Charmaz instructs, it is not enough simply to present an argument by cutting and pasting memos together; the bar for writing in scholarly publications, particularly qualitative research, has raised in the last couple of decades.

Most edifying and challenging to classic grounded theorists probably will be Charmaz's discussion on the differences between "constructivist" and "objectivist" grounded theory. Constructivist grounded theory, according to Charmaz, is more sensitized by interpretive traditions and interpretive theorizing, which she writes, "assumes emergent, multiple realities, indeterminacy; facts and values as linked; truth as provisional; and social life as processual" (p. 126). Objectivist grounded theory is more oriented to positivist traditions and positive theory, which "seeks causes, favors deterministic explanations, and emphasize generality and universality" (p. 126). Contrasting constructivist grounded theory and objectivist grounded theory, Charmaz writes that constructivists view

The Grounded Theory Review (2006), vol.5, nos.2/3

“data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data,” while objectivists attend to “data as real in and of themselves and” while ignoring the processes through which the data are produced (p. 130-131). “An objectivist grounded theorists assumes that data represent objective facts about a knowable world” (p. 131). Charmaz writes that while the constructivist examines the how and why behind participants’ constructions of “meanings and actions in specific situations” (p. 130) as well as the situations and relationships in which the participants are embedded, the objectivist “erases the social context from which data emerge, the influence of the researcher, and often the interactions between grounded theorists and their research participants” (p. 131). To build her arguments, Charmaz spends some time addressing Glaser’s views, as expressed in his writing, as classic grounded theory is the most objectivist of the grounded theory variants, in her view. (Worth noting is that Charmaz has some arguments to counter Michael Burawoy and Derek Layder, high-profile critics of grounded theory.) Charmaz also concedes that the issue of constructivist versus objectivist is often one of emphasis; some people may be more of one in some studies than they are in others.

The section of the book that best captures what Charmaz is getting at when she attempts to contrast versions of grounded theory is a discussion of theory versus theorizing. Grounded theorists, she observes, often debate what stands as theory. To a classic grounded theorist, theory is an integrated series of concepts integrated by a core concept. For other grounded theorists, one overarching concept will do. Although she is in agreement with the need for conceptualization, judicious use of theoretical coding, and grounded theory as a full-service methodology, she is more supportive of more diffuse grounded theory, a product that need not have a core category. What Charmaz admits she ultimately prefers is theorizing, an engagement with data that is open to making connections and looking under data for latent possibilities, as well as imagined what might not be

The Grounded Theory Review (2006), vol.5, nos.2/3

evident. "Part of the interpretive task is being alert to possibilities for moving the analysis beyond the definitive evidence you currently have" (p. 148).

The Detour versus the Road Less Taken

I know how some readers will react to this statement from Charmaz, which brings to mind an experience my officemate had with a student who was assigned a response paper on some readings. When the colleague pointed out it was clear the student had not done the reading, the student retorted, "I was theorizing." To the unschooled, theorizing can seem like an anything-goes proposition. Theorizing, however, is a learned practice that can help researchers develop theoretical sensitivity. As Charmaz writes, "When you theorize, you reach down to fundamentals, up to abstractions, and probe into experience" (p. 135). I am all for such a workout. One good grounded concept can do a lot of work and provide fodder for several publications. But here's where classic grounded theorists are left with the question: shall we take the postmodern turn?

I am in agreement with some of Clarke's and Charmaz's criticisms about unreflexive and oversimplified grounded theories. The difference between my view and theirs is I am not certain a lack of reflexivity and other limitations are inherent in classic grounded theory; rather, I think weaknesses in these works, from the tiny topics and data sets to the restricted analysis, are the limitations of the grounded theorists. More people from the practical professions who find their way to grounded theory would do well to learn more about qualitative methodologies and get more familiar with social and cultural theory trends. Yet that remedy does not address the broader and more immediate question of grounded theory and the postmodern turn.

While there is no precise data on it, some of us who have attended the Grounded Theory Institute's troubleshooting seminars have started to think there might be a discernible difference between who uses classic grounded theory or objectivist grounded theory and those

The Grounded Theory Review (2006), vol.5, nos.2/3

who opt for more postmodern or other au courant variants. The seminars are heavily attended by people from the practical professions, nursing, social work, information management, for example, often practitioners working on doctoral degrees so they can teach and inform practice in their fields. Glaser puts it more bluntly in *Doing Grounded Theory* (1998, p.4):

... grounded theory has made little inroads into those academic fields where the analytic interests of academics, not the subjects, are the only relevant interests in the field. Academic interests are typically quite benign; that is, they are of no consequence that can be considered crucial to anybody's fate.

In contrast, Glaser writes, fields dealing with "high impact dependent variables, variables that deal with learning, pain and profit" (p. 4) were more interested in methodologies that allow response to critical and constantly changing circumstances. For people working grounded theory in health studies, business, and other fields, and to some degree my area of media/journalism research, the type of theorizing Charmaz advocates is not as effective for some of the reasons Clarke and Charmaz champion diffuse theories: the indeterminacy makes intervention and accountability more difficult to bring about. Although I enjoy the intellectual stimulation I get when I read the kind of work Clarke and Charmaz do, I nevertheless appreciate that classic and objectivist grounded theories are often important for the practical fields in which they are published. That potency is due to classic grounded theory's insistence on a theory grounded in data, a core category, and integrated concepts. It allows for more effective communication on the floor where the work is getting done, and it is what makes classic grounded theory unique. Right now classic grounded theory is still a method unrealized, a road less taken, in the creation, dissemination and adoption of substantive and formal theory. Shall we take the postmodern turn? Classic grounded theory can learn from its critics, but a full embrace of postmodernist critiques would be an unnecessary detour.

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