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Vivian B. Martin, Ph.D.

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A Commentary on Ekins (2011)

Vivian B. Martin, Ph.D.

Early in his article Richard Ekins concedes that the work before us is “inimical” to classic grounded theory. Unlike many who fly the flag of grounded theory, Ekins, the author of a well-regarded study of what he calls male femaling, or male cross dressers, is a student of grounded theory, but it appears that in his latest phase of research, jazz historiography, he is grappling with combining grounded theory with some of the strictures of his new substantive area. He offers what is in effect a case study of the rediscovery of New Orleans jazz pioneer William Geary “Bunk”Johnson, as an exploration in “managing authenticity,” his core category. I will discuss some basic classic grounded theory breaches he might reconsider, forgoing constant comparison and adopting existing theories among them, as well as the challenge of navigating a grounded theory study that is faithful to classic strictures but also aligned with a discipline’s norms. I briefly address the challenge of conceptualizing and transcending data in a field, jazz historiography, where excessive description is one of the ways in which authenticity is achieved.

The subtitle of Ekins’ paper, which invokes the “case study,” alerts us to the fact that there is some method-mixing under way, and that usually does not augur well for classic grounded theory. Case studies, like many other methods, are useful for certain types of research. But one has to decide which method works best for the subject at hand. Ekins has essentially produced a case study with a few grabby concepts; there is nothing close to a theory with integrated concepts here, despite the claim of a core category. Managing authenticity, which is what Ekins has identified as his core category, mainly works as a conceptual label here rather than a core of a theory. This outcome is the result of how Ekins proceeded with his work. Case studies, at least the single case study as Ekins has executed it, come loaded with assumptions and preconceived concepts largely because they have been chosen specifically because of what they are perceived to contain. Ekins sought to study the resurgence of

a near-forgotten early jazz trumpeter and has produced an article about the four different ways in which Bunk Johnson's place in jazz history is narrativized over time. The four modes are: trailblazing, mythologizing, debunking and marginalizing. These concepts are Ekins' contribution to the discourse around Bunk Johnson and his place in jazz history. Ekins' work starts with this resurgence as a foregone conclusion and then proceeds to give conceptual labels to the highly descriptive story that unfolds.

Ekins has not produced a classic grounded theory—nor does he claim to have done so. He aligns himself with symbolic interactionist and constructivist perspectives and has situated his work in these perspectives and influences such as George H. Mead's theory of the past, a priori commitments very much counter to classic grounded theory. In starting with extant literature, any theory-building he would have hoped for is held hostage to the built in assumptions he has imported.

Working a pre-formed agenda is just the first falling domino here. Case studies, as the well-regarded collection edited by Charles Ragin and Howard Becker (*What is a Case*, 1992) discusses, can take many forms. A researcher can have hundreds of cases or just one. But that's not how ground theory works. At the heart of grounded theory is constant comparison, something not so easily accomplished with one case, excruciating details aside. To take his work further, Ekins needs to delve in and examine other cases of rediscovery and related discourses. This would give many more concepts, including some that might allow him to move beyond what Mead's theorizing accomplished. Of course, this can only be tackled through fidelity to the process of open coding, memoing, theoretical sampling, selective coding, theoretical coding, and sorting. His current, albeit tentative core concept, of managing authenticity had not veered far from the "Managing, "constructing," or "negotiating" core concepts so common in grounded theories (authenticating might work a little better here).

An important thing to say here is that I really enjoyed reading Ekins' article. It is good scholarship, and within the fields he invokes, popular music studies, cultural studies, jazz historiography, much of what he has done here would probably be admired. For a classic grounded theorist, though,

the work raises another important issue: the challenge of extending classic grounded theory, with its insistence on high conceptualization over description, to fields where description of evidence is highly valued. We speak of altering “illustration dosage” as a way to please reviewers, and many of us have thrown in the extra quotes or examples to win the publication nod. But historic works contain much elaboration of detail in order to convince readers the writer has the goods. Footnotes can handle some of the data, but the argument is built through description and detail, much like the explication in Ekins piece. The details make it difficult to see beyond the specific situation.

The solution would seem to be to commit to classic grounded theory fully (as paradoxical as that may sound). Bunk Johnson’s case is really just the open-coding phase with ideas to test. A skillful execution of constant comparison across a number of cases as a form of theoretical sampling would ultimately build a theory dense and impressive enough to transcend disciplinary worries because the developed theory would truly be unique and add a contribution in areas where Ekins has identified a void. The concepts and the supporting indicators can easily be illustrated through the kind of matrices and tables that are convincing, or at least provide a credible argument, even for historians. Constant comparison would be the not-so-secret weapon.

I hope the author forgives any presumptions on my part. It may well be that by invoking more constructivist approaches he has written off classic grounded theory. That would be too bad. A little bit of grounded theory goes a long way, but only classic grounded theory, faithfully applied, can identify the intertwined patterns waiting to be discovered and turn them into a fully integrated theory.

Author:

Vivian B. Martin, Ph.D.

Associate Professor

Department of English

Central Connecticut State University, USA

Email: viviamartin@gmail.com

