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Naomi Elliott, Trinity College Dublin Agnes Higgins, Trinity College Dublin

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Naomi Elliott, Trinity College Dublin
Agnes Higgins, Trinity College Dublin

Abstract

Grounded theory research students are frequently faced with the challenge of writing a research proposal and using a theoretical framework as part of the academic requirements for a degree programme. Drawing from personal experiences of two PhD graduates who used classic grounded theory in two different universities, this paper highlights key lessons learnt which may help future students who are setting out to use grounded theory method. It identifies key discussion points that students may find useful when engaging with critical audiences, and defending their grounded theory thesis at final examination. Key discussion points included are: the difference between inductive and deductive inquiry; how grounded theory method of data gathering and analysis provide researchers with a viable means of generating new theory; the primacy of the questions used in data gathering and data analysis; and, the research-theory link as opposed to the theory-research link.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to help grounded theory research students deal with challenges arising from doing grounded theory research within an academic context and meeting the requirements of their degree programmes. The status of grounded theory research method in academia is contested (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007); insofar as it is considered that some aspects of grounded theory method do not conform to traditional conventions of academic research. Although each grounded theory research project gives rise to a unique set of challenges, when working in an academic environment that is unfamiliar with grounded theory, there are common problems that many students and researchers experience. Two recurring problems experienced by numerous grounded theory students across Canada and Europe (Luckerhoff & Guillemette, 2011; Walls, Parahoo, & Fleming, 2010) relate to the initial literature review and use of a theoretical framework. For students, these are key issues, not only at the start of their research project, but at the end stage when defending their grounded theory thesis at final examination.

Drawing from personal experiences of two PhD graduates who used classic grounded theory in two universities, one UK (Queen's University, Belfast) and one Irish (Trinity College Dublin), this paper highlights key lessons learned that may help students who are setting out to use grounded theory method. Key discussion points are also identified that students may use when engaging with critical audiences when discussing grounded theory method with other researchers, writing up the thesis, defending at viva or doing conference presentations.

Tensions between Grounded Theory and Traditional Research Approaches

Since its introduction by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, grounded theory is increasingly being used as a research method in diverse areas. It provides a viable means for scholars and participants to generate a new and emic perspective, and to generate theory that is grounded in the realities of the participants' daily life experiences. However, the hegemony of traditional research approach gives rise to difficulties for those researchers who wish to pursue an approach that is outside the traditional research conventions. Many of the tensions between grounded theory and traditional research stem from differences that are rooted in the differences between inductive and deductive enquiry. A key feature of grounded theory is it provides for inductive enquiry, a means of generating new theory and new understandings, and requires researchers to identify the research problem from the research participants' perspectives. By contrast, traditional research provides for deductive enquiry, a means of proving or disproving existing theory and requires researchers to identify the research problem from the extant literature. The traditional research process begins with a literature review, which is used to inform the research question and theoretical framework that ultimately guides data collection and analysis. The crux of the problem for many research students undertaking academic degree programmes is that a literature review is required in order to complete the research proposal, application forms for ethical approval and/or financial funding. At doctoral level, consideration of the theoretical framework underpinning the research study may also be needed in order to satisfy research supervisors and degree requirements.

Challenge 1: Developing a Proposal to meet Academic Requirements

A key challenge facing research students is how to develop a research proposal that meets academic requirements. The process of doing a research proposal involves critical analysis of the extant literature in order to map out what is already known about the topic and to identify the gaps in knowledge (McGhee, Marland, & Atkinson, 2007; Dunne, 2011). At doctoral level, this is critical, as generating new knowledge is a criterion for the award of a PhD (e.g. National Framework of Qualifications, undated; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008). In keeping with the traditional research perspective, Hart (1998) suggests that a prior literature review in the substantive area helps the researcher to think rigorously about the topic and develop a conceptual map of the subject area, thus ensuring that the subject area is researchable before the research commences. It also helps researchers to narrow the focus of the topic, define the research question, select a theoretical framework, and justify the research methodology. A critical review of the literature is used to generate the research question and consequently, for many students, precedes the selection of a research methodology. In other words, students complete a literature review for the purpose of generating a research question, and it is at this stage they are in a position to select an appropriate methodology to answer the research question. For many research students, including Elliott (2007) and Higgins (2007), they do not set out as "grounded theory" research students. It was only after the required research proposal is completed and grounded theory methodology is selected as the most appropriate methodology that they become PhD grounded theory research students.

<u>Elliott's experience as a doctoral student</u>

In keeping with the academic requirement that doctoral candidates generate new knowledge through their dissertation, Elliott (2007) carried out a scoping exercise of the literature on her area of interest, which was clinical decision-making and advanced nursing practice. In

order to provide a justification for the research proposal, a requirement for registration, a systematic analysis of the decision-making literature was carried out to determine what was already known and what was not known. This identified gaps in the body of knowledge and highlighted that little was known about advanced practitioner's decision-making in community care settings, and that previous studies assumed clinical decision-making was explained by hypothetico-deductive information processing, intuition or heuristics. It was at this point that Elliott was able to identify the research question, "how do advanced practitioners make clinical decisions in community care contexts?", and consider appropriate methodologies including grounded theory.

Similar to Urquhart's (2007) view of the literature review as orientation, Elliott used the literature to identify the area of inquiry and research question, which was to explain how advanced practitioners make clinical decisions in community care contexts. Although Elliott's research proposal involved a critical analysis of the decision-making literature and theory, it was not used to inform data gathering or to formulate the interview questions. Instead, the interview questions followed Glaser's (1998) approach, and asked 'what were your main concerns when making clinical decisions [for the patient you have just treated]?" and "how did you resolve your concerns?' These relatively unstructured, neutral interview questions were critical to ensuring that it did not guide data collection, although an analysis of the decision making literature had been carried out. Using Glaser's questions provided a means of assuring an inductive approach to the research, and a means of surfacing the participants' main concerns and not those emanating from the extant literature.

The potential risk that the review of the clinical decision-making literature could colour data analysis was recognised. Strategies that enable researchers stay close to the data are critical if the potential bias from a literature review is to be avoided. Using Glaser's neutral questions of the data namely, "what is this a study of? What category does this incident indicate? And [sic] what property of what category does this incident indicate" (Glaser, 1998, p. 123), using *in vivo* codes and suspending further literature review until the theory was developed, became important to assuring that data analysis remained focused on the participants' accounts. I*n vivo* codes, which came directly from the clinical practitioners' own words, were important to minimizing potential bias from the literature review. For example, the code "keeping the patient's boundaries" was developed from the following account:

> ...I had to say to her [the patient], no you don't need to talk about them [the patient's thoughts] if you don't want to..because often maybe some of them could be very embarrassing now in a rational conversation ..so its about her being allowed to keep her boundaries so she can be comfortable.

One advantage of using *in vivo* coding, such as "keeping the patient's boundaries," was that it focused the analysis on the participants' accounts, and on eliciting their perspectives rather than that of the extant literature. As coding progressed, *in vivo* codes were eventually superseded by analyst specified categories. However, *in vivo* codes served an important function in the early stages of data analysis by keeping the researcher close to the data.

Being aware that the risk of literature colouring data analysis was greatest when coding the initial interview transcripts, Elliott did a review of her early codes and memos to check if they were linked to the literature. The timing of this review was important, and carried out after the grounded theory had been generated. In so doing, the researcher was not influenced by the literature during the analytic process and theory generation. This review showed that very few codes were linked to the decision-making literature, and as data gathering and analysis progressed, these early codes were superseded by new codes.

Gradually, issues relating to the nurse-patient relationship became the focus of data analysis. The link between the nurse-patient relationship and clinical decision-making had not been identified previously in the literature. Using grounded theory methods in data gathering and analysis, therefore, provided a viable means of generating a new perspective, one that was generated from and relevant to the participant's practice. Although the process of reviewing codes for similarities against preliminary literature reviews is not commonly reported in grounded theory research literature, it provided a useful means of demonstrating to any critic that the theory and its constituent components were grounded in the data.

In summary, although Elliott carried out a critical review of the decision-making literature as part of justifying her PhD research proposal, the literature was not used to inform interview questions. By using the interview questions "what were your main concerns when making clinical decisions [for the patient you have just treated]?' and 'how did you resolve your concerns?," the data gathering focused on eliciting the participants' concerns. The risk that the literature review coloured data analysis was limited by using Glaser's grounded theory data analysis questions, namely "what is this a study of? What category does this incident indicate? And [sic] what property of what category does this incident indicate?" (Glaser, 1998, p.123); including *in vivo* codes during data analysis, and suspending further literature review until after theory development.

Higgins's experience as a doctoral student

Higgins's (2007) research was focused on sexuality and mental health nursing practice. Unlike Elliott, Higgins's research question was formulated prior to engaging in a literature review, and arose from her experience of working in clinical practice and from informal conversations with colleagues. Being convinced that sexuality was an ever present issue within nurse-client relationships; Higgins was interested in how nurses coped, addressed and responded to issues of sexuality within clinical practice. Similarly to Elliott, a detailed review of both nursing and mental health literature was conducted, under the mentorship of a librarian, to ensure that nothing of importance was omitted. This strategy was employed not just for academic registration, but to enhance the likelihood of receiving national funding for the study. The literature review suggested that limited research was conducted in the area, and no framework or model existed that explained or aided understanding of the phenomenon of interest. It was following this review that Higgins selected grounded theory as her preferred methodology, and successfully defended the choice to academic supervisors and funders on the grounds that the key outcome of the study would be "a substantive theory of how mental health nurses respond to issues of sexuality in a clinical practice context." The decision to adopt a classic grounded theory approach only occurred after in-depth study of Grounded Theory method, and attendance at workshops facilitated by Dr. J. Corbin and Dr. B. Glaser, on their respective method. Classic grounded theory was selected for a number of reasons. Firstly, it emphasises letting the problem emerge from the participants' perspective. Secondly, the classic approach, although no less rigorous, seemed flexible enough to allow freedom to follow leads and use a variety of data collection methods, as ideas emerged. Thirdly, the notion of finding a latent pattern of behaviour also fitted with her idea of developing a theory of practice (Glaser, 1978; 1992; 1998; 2001; 2005).

As part of the research proposal for funding, Higgins developed an interview schedule consisting of a list of possible questions for discussion. Following a workshop with Dr. Glaser, she recognised that using the interview schedule at the beginning of the research process was inimical to grounded theory methodology, as it risked pre-framing the problem, and leading participants to talk about the researcher's concerns. Consequently, the real issues

would become obscured. As advised by Glaser (1998) she abandoned the original interview schedule and endeavoured to "instill a spill," by commencing the interviews with a very open and broad statement, which permitted participants to talk freely about their issues. As the study unfolded and categories began to be developed, questions aimed at identifying properties of categories were identified and explored in subsequent interviews. In this way, the interviews gradually became more focused as the emerging concepts determined both the questions asked and the development of a theoretical sample.

Once coding of data commences, the aim is to get the best concept that fits and authentically reflects the data, as opposed to developing concepts by conjecture or importing received concepts from the literature. As Glaser (1998) states, "no theoretical capitalism is tolerated" (p. 31). A number of writers highlight the need to make every effort to uncover and challenge preconceived ideas, and only bring into the study concepts that have earned their way and are supported by data (Blumer, 1969; Glaser, 2001; Schreiber & Noerager-Stern, 2001). In other words, grounded theorists cannot "shop their disciplinary stores for preconceived concepts and dress their data in them" (Charmaz, 2000, p. 511). For example, Higgins had identified some concepts from the literature, such as "lacking comfort", "compliance" and "maintaining silence" and was constantly on alert to anything in the data that might reinforce or refute these concepts. While these concepts did emerge, they only accounted for a small amount of the final theory. Throughout the analysis a combination of *in vivo* codes (come from the language of the participants), and *in vitro* codes (constructed by the researcher to reflect the data) were used. Once the grounded theory concepts were identified, they were modified, sharpened and verified throughout the data collection and analysis phase of the study and concepts that best fitted the data were selected. Similarly, categories, properties and their relationships were checked repeatedly, using the constant comparative process and theoretically sampling, to see if they patterned out in both new data and in previously collected data. This self-correcting process ensured that pet ideas and assumptions were not imposed.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) acknowledge that no researcher can erase from their mind all the literature or theory they know before beginning research. Hence, they identify the importance of cultivating ideas from the literature, within the framework of the developing theory, by constantly comparing one's own and others theoretical ideas with the emerging data. In addition to using the constant comparative process during the coding and analysing stage, Higgins also used analytic memos to capture and track conceptual ideas, and to document her own non-grounded ideas about the emerging theory (Glaser, 1998). Another strategy used was peer debriefing. The role of a peer de-briefer was to ask probing questions of the researcher and help search for alternative perspectives and explanations (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). This approach helped identify ungrounded assumptions prior to commencing and throughout the study; thus, stopping the creative mind from being a conjecturing mind (Glaser, 1998).

Key Discussion Point - GT Questions for Gathering and Analysing Data

The role and place of literature review in grounded theory has generated debate amongst researchers and scholars (McGhee *et al.,* 2007; Walls *et al.,* 2010; Dunne, 2011). From a grounded theory perspective, a pre-research literature review is "inimical" to generating grounded theory (Glaser, 1998, p.67), as preconceptualising the problem, theoretical framework, or concepts have the potential to contaminate the emerging theory, and can result in forcing both the problem and the data into a preconceived model. In Glaser's (1992) view, it is hard enough for researchers to generate their own concepts, without having to contend with "the derailment provided by the literature in the form of conscious or

unrecognised assumptions of what ought to be in the data" (p.31). Conceptual ideas may be conjectured from the literature and superimposed, as opposed to emerging from the data. Since the main concern of the participant cannot be known beforehand, neither can one know the pertinent literature to review. Once the main process has emerged and theory development is at a stage that literature will not derail the researcher from seeing what is going on in the data, the required literature becomes apparent and is reviewed. In other words, "the literature is discovered as the theory is" (Glaser, 1998, p.69). In keeping with the maxim all is data; the literature is then treated like any other source of data, and woven into the theory in the constant comparative process. In this way, it is hoped that the "grounded theorist will generate a theory that transcends the literature, synthesises it at the same time" (Glaser, 1998, p.120), and produces a theory that is relevant and fit for context.

Although discourse on the place and role of literature in grounded theory research is important, what is missing is a discussion about other key determinants of data gathering and analysis. As such, key determinants that directly influence the process are, the questions used to collect data, and the questions asked of the data during the analysis. Researchers bring their own mix of theoretical, academic, professional and personal knowledge into the research field, so the crux of the issue is what questions are used in gathering data and later, what questions are asked of the data during analysis. A critical discussion point, therefore, is how grounded theory methods and the use of relatively neutral questions for gathering and analysing data provide researchers with a means of generating a new and emic perspective; one that is rooted in the participant's perspective. Grounded theory research students can demonstrate this by specifying what questions were used to gather data, and how data analysis informed the subsequent interview questions. Importantly, the logic of the line of inquiry can be demonstrated by tracing the progressive modification of interview questions from the initial interview questions to those used in the final interview. Finally, this issue needs to be discussed in the context of differences between inductive and deductive enquiry.

Challenge 2: What Theoretical Framework is Underpinning your Study?

Another challenge, for grounded theory research students, is how to deal with the question, "what theoretical framework is underpinning your study?" In academic contexts, scholars are responsible for making explicit the assumptions they are using within their research project. The relationship between theory and qualitative research, however, is complex and there are divergent views as to what the term "theoretical framework" means. On the one hand, Anfara and Mertz (2006) define theoretical framework as "...any empirical or quasi-empirical theory of social and/or psychological processes, at a variety of levels (e.g. grand, mid-range, and explanatory), that can be applied to the understanding phenomena" (p. pxxvii). For Anfara and Mertz, theoretical frameworks are not synonymous with methodological issues (e.g. symbolic interactionism, narrative analysis) or research paradigms (e.g. post-positivist or constructivist). By contrast others, such as Wu and Volker (2009), adopt a broader view of theoretical framework, and recommend that researchers articulate an understanding of the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the research approach they are using. Although they recognise that "theory is the outcome of [grounded theory] research" (Wu & Volker, 2009, p.2728), they also position grounded theory within symbolic interactionist philosophy without any consideration if this is appropriate. Notwithstanding the different understandings of what theoretical framework means, a challenge for doctoral students undertaking grounded theory research is how to deal with the question, "what theoretical framework is underpinning your study?"

Elliott's experience as a doctoral student

At doctoral level, in addition to generating new knowledge, students are expected to engage in a discussion of their research at higher levels of theory, epistemology and philosophy. The question regarding which theoretical framework was underpinning Elliott's (2007) grounded theory study on clinical-decision making by advanced practitioners was posed by her supervisor in the early stages of her PhD study. A review of the literature identified several scholarly papers on symbolic interactionism and grounded theory (Becker, 1993; Hutchinson, 1993; Morse, 2001; Locke, 2001; Milliken & Schreiber, 2001). Given the predominant view in the literature that asserts a link between grounded theory and symbolic interactionism, Elliott initially reasoned to her supervisor that symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) was an appropriate theoretical framework for her study. However, it was only after the grounded theory was developed, when Elliott critically examined her theory to determine how symbolic interactionism had influenced its development that she realised it had not. It became apparent that data gathering and analysis had focused on how advanced practitioners resolved their main concerns when making clinical decisions for patients without influence from symbolic interactionism. The assumption commonly held by research scholars that symbolic interactionism underpins grounded theory was reinforced further during Elliott's experience of publishing a paper, *How to recognise a quality grounded theory study* (Elliott & Lazenbatt, 2005). One reviewer's recommendation that the paper include the link between grounded theory and symbolic interactionism, again reinforced the notion that symbolic interactionism underpins grounded theory.

The main lesson learnt from Elliott's experience, is for grounded theory researchers to avoid falling into the trap of thinking they are using, or that they have to use, symbolic interactionism. Grounded theory methodology does not require symbolic interactionism. The theoretical discussion which characterises a doctoral thesis can be achieved after the grounded theory has been developed, when the new theory is critically discussed with the relevant extant literature. For Elliott, after the theory of mutual intacting had been developed, a search of the theoretical literature led to a discovery of Habermas's theory of communicative action (1984; 1987), and it was only after the grounded theory had been developed it became known that Habermas's theory was most relevant to her discussion. The key issue, therefore, is how can grounded theory researchers know what theories are relevant until their grounded theory has been developed? If grounded theory research students are asked to discuss the issue of theoretical frameworks early in their PhD, perhaps one way of demonstrating that they are theoretically aware is to discuss the theory of grounded theory, in other words the epistemology and the inductive approach to generating new theory.

Higgins's experience as a doctoral student

In the context of Higgins's experience as a doctoral student, part of the requirement for funding involved the demonstration of an awareness of the state of existing theory regarding the phenomenon under study, in order for the funding body to evaluate the proposal. Although a preliminary review of relevant literature and theories (e.g. Foucault theory of power) was conducted prior to the enquiry, they were not used as a theoretical framework to guide the study but, as Glaser (1978) suggested, to help develop theoretical sensitivity. Theoretical sensitivity is the ability to sense the subtleties of the data. A distinction, therefore, must be made between using sensitising concepts to sharpen one's awareness, and using concepts to impose a framework on the data. However, in the early stages of the research there were some suggestions from academic colleagues that Higgins should use

Foucault's (1976; 2001) work as the theoretical framework for the study. The following memo was recorded six month after Higgins had commenced her study.

> Memo title: Using prior theoretical framework
>
> Currently reading Chapter 6 on forcing the data in Doing Grounded Theory (Issues and Discussion). Just realising what was happening in a recent seminar when I presented my research. Came away from the seminar very anxious but now realise that the advice being given was going to force me into looking at a prior theoretical framework (Foucault's work) as a basis for my study. Be careful of perceived wisdom from academic colleagues who have already completed PhD's using a traditional framework. In Glaser's (1998) view, "preconceptualising the problem, theoretical framework, or concepts have the potential to contaminate the emerging theory and can result in forcing both the problem and the data into a preconceived model" (p. 67).

As far back as 1978, Glaser points out that "one needs good scholarship to be a good analyst" (Glaser, 1978, p.12); consequently, to enhance her scholarship and analytical skills, Higgins read various theoretical perspectives throughout the research process. In addition to enhancing her analytical skills, this approach also provided her with some insights into the theoretical codes other theorists used to weave their theory together, and enhanced her understanding of the variety of theoretical codes discussed by Glaser in his text on theoretical coding (Glaser, 2005).

> In addition, once the grounded theory was developed, Higgins returned to the literature and reviewed other relevant theories, such as theories of self presentation (Goffman, 1959), cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), and interpersonal theory of nursing (Peplau, 1952). Following that review, she positioned her own theory of 'Veiling Sexualities' in the context of the wider theoretical literature and discussed how her theory might confirm or refute previous theoretical or philosophical positions.

Key Discussion Point- Interaction between Inductive and Deductive Enquiry

As with the literature review, the use of *à priori* theoretical frameworks within grounded theory research is a contentious issue. Mitchell and Cody (1993) critique grounded theory methodology on the grounds that the role of prior theory is "veiled in obscurity" (p.171). Morse (2001) fears that without a theoretical context to draw on, new researchers may "find themselves rapidly mired in data" (p.9) without the ability to conceptualise or position their study or findings within the existing body of theory. Thus, she states that "literature should not be ignored but rather 'bracketed' and used for comparison with emerging categories" (Morse 2001, p.9). There is no doubt that the role of existing theory in grounded theory differs from that of the traditional research approaches. This is not to suggest, however, that the generation of a grounded theory proceeds in isolation of existing theory, or that a grounded theory is atheoretical. Glaser and Strauss (1967) acknowledge that the researcher "does not approach reality as a *tabula rasa*" (p.3), and as such cannot erase from their mind all the theory they know, before beginning research. What Glaser (1998) objects to, is the selection of a theoretical framework prior to commencing a grounded theory study, and using theory to preconceptualise the problem or concepts. However, Glaser (1978) does advise the researcher to read in areas other than the substantive area throughout the study. Reading for ideas and style not only fuels the researcher's creative processes, but it helps develop theoretical sensitivity. Theoretical sensitivity can also be gained by a preliminary review of the literature in the substantive area, or from personal experience in the clinical

field. However, a distinction must be made between using sensitising concepts to help sharpen ones awareness, and using theoretical concepts to impose a framework on the data. Grounded theory research students can demonstrate scholarliness by addressing the issue of theory from a research-theory perspective, as opposed to a theory-research perspective.

In addition, research students need to address the distinction between inductive and deductive enquiry, and acknowledge the subtle interaction between induction and deduction within classic grounded theory. Although classic grounded theory is primarily an inductive methodology, in that it commences with the data and builds a theory based on the systematic analysis of the data, to classify it as wholly inductive is to ignore its deductive element as one theoretically samples. Glaser (1998) however, points out that "it is not logical, conjectured deduction based on no systematic research" (Glaser, 1998, p.43), but a carefully grounded deduction based on an induced category, which directs the researcher on where to go next for data. Thus, the researcher starts by coding, conceptualising and generating hypothesis about the relationship between concepts, and then begins to deduce where more data can be found (theoretical sampling) for comparative purposes. Thus, grounded theory is both inductive and deductive, with deduction primarily in the service of induction. The logic and interaction between inductive and deductive enquiry can be demonstrated by tracing how concepts and theory were generated from raw data and importantly, by demonstrating how grounded theory methods, such as theoretically sampling and constant comparative analysis, are used to test emergent concepts throughout the research process.

Conclusion

Preparing a research proposal and using a theoretical framework to underpin a study are two key challenges for many grounded theory researchers in academic environments. These issues usually present in the early stages of the research process yet, they are relevant at the end stage when students are required to defend their choice of methodology at examination, or at research conferences. The lessons learnt from the experiences of two PhD graduates, who survived using grounded theory in an academic world, provide future students with key discussion points to consider when engaging with critical audiences, and discussing grounded theory methods with other non-grounded theory researchers.

Grounded theory researchers can demonstrate academic scholarliness by focusing on the following four key discussion points: what inductive enquiry means and its contribution to generating new knowledge; secondly, the primacy of the classic grounded theory questions used in data gathering and analysis; thirdly, the research-theory link as opposed to the theory-research link; and finally, how classic grounded theory provides a viable means of inductively and deductively generating a theory that is derived from the participant's lifeworld. Using classic grounded theory research method in an academic world can create tensions for students, who on the one hand want to use classic grounded theory as a whole methodological package whilst on the other hand, need to make adjustments to meet academic requirements. The challenge for all researchers is to know what is important to fight for, and what adjustments can be made without compromising on methodological integrity.

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