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Understanding Abstract Wonderment: The Reflections of a Novice Researcher

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present a novice researcher's understanding of Glaser's dictum to approach classical grounded theory studies with a sense of abstract wonderment. In the paper, the argument is made that far from being a preposterous concept, cultivating abstract wonderment as a form of praxis can help liberate the researcher from the bonds of preconceptions and attachments, which impede the emergence of a grounded theory. The paper reflects a personal grounded theory study arising after a crisis of confidence encountered during a formal PhD grounded theory study. It offers considerations on how to cultivate a sense of awe and abstract wonderment.

Keywords: abstract wonderment, engagement, cultivating awe, memoing, panic, communicating.

Introduction

Novice researchers face a plethora of difficulties when setting out on a grounded theory study. Apart from the confusing array of grounded theory research methods, those interested in Classic Grounded Theory (CGT) are challenged to approach the study with an "abstract wonderment of what is going on that is an issue and how it is handled" (Glaser, 1992, p. 22). The meaning of abstract wonderment is left to the individual researcher to explore. Occasional advice is provided as it is a means of differentiating Glaser from Strauss and Corbin in not having preconceived ideas about the research (Jantunen & Gause, 2014), and that it should be replaced with "general wonderment" (Cutcliffe, 2005, p. 422). Within this paper, as a novice researcher, I will provide an interpretation of his understanding of Glaser's dictum, and argue that any move away from "abstract wonderment" will hinder the process of emergence.

I start from an assumption that Glaser is challenging novice and experienced researchers to approach their study much as a young child would approach a new experience, free from the shackles of health and safety. It is a challenge to temporarily suspend the use of those concepts and labels we have collected over our lives, which have made the world familiar and less scary, to move away from a place of safety, where all is known and ordered, into a space of "unknowing". He is daring us to let go of our desires to join the ranks of the theoretical and methodological capitalists whose only relationship with their research is that of an overly concerned parent with a child or maybe worse, that of the knowledgeable specialist—the technocratic priest (Saul, 2013). Glaser is demanding that novice researchers learn how to let go of damaging

attachments and develop a critically conscious relationship with their data and participants—and engage in a genuine dialogue based on trust rather than control.

As with many of Glaser's challenges within CGT, it is a counter-cultural move. Counter-cultural in an age of fragmentation where concepts and labels are required to provide a sense of certainty and security that ensures the desired outcome is achieved. It is a challenge to join the ranks of the "maladjusted" (Freire, 2013, p. 4) who retain their autonomy, view the world through a lens of critical consciousness thereby transforming their research fields and the wider environment.

Engaging with Wonderment

In "Discovery" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), readers are challenged to let go of the hegemonic instinct to fit the unknown into the already known; they are advised that it is "presumptuous" to identify categories and hypothesis in the early days of a CGT study. A succinct summary of the criticisms of this approach, offered by Thomas (2007), asserts that this dictum "is nothing to the presumptuousness of assuming the empty, directionless, uninflected mind of 'abstract wonderment'" (p. 132). This paper is a response to Thomas, arguing that far from being empty, directionless and plodding, abstract wonderment is essential to extend the development of a critical curiosity that counters the desire to constrict the unknown within known, predetermined, boundaries.

"Abstract wonderment" is a strange phrase to use; Thomas (2007) argued that it is a contradiction in terms. A return to the historical usage dispels the myth of contradiction by identifying the key foci for its use. The phrase first appears at the turn of the 20th century relating to the "abstract wonderment of childhood" (Harte, 1896, p. 417) followed twenty years later in a reference by Woodsworth that equated the phrase with "distant admiration" (Mills, 1991, p. 138). It is not until we reach 1959 when abstract wonderment is referred to in terms similar to that described by Glaser—to situations where issues are "taken out of the context of abstract generalisations, and encountered in the form of applied specifics" (Esquire, 1959, p. 6). Drawing from these three historical understandings, abstract wonderment appears to reflect the adoption of a detached admiration or awe where the researcher seeks to explore familiar, or maybe not so familiar, situations through a childlike lens.

Pedagogical writers have expounded the benefits of engaging wonderment in teaching children, and adults, linking it with curiosity (Malik, 2014; Nelson & Palumbo, 2013; Valiga, 2012). Abstract wonderment is more radical; it demands that the researcher move towards a space of unknowing, to be willing to encounter their research in much the way a young child encounters new experiences. Imagine a toddler with a new toy; the toddler looks at the toy, examines it from all angles, feels it, smells it, tastes it, shakes it—while he/she is seeking to make sense of it and trying to understand it. This wonderment does not disappear, rather it transforms; new toys or experiences are constantly compared to previous encounters; it is only as we get older that we begin to let go of this ongoing sense of wonderment—only allowing it catch us, as adults, by surprise. Glaser is challenging researchers to deliberately cultivate and reengage with that childish skill whilst using our adult skills of being able to intellectualise and conceptualise our experiences; he is simply asking us to spend some time enjoying the data—play with it—while seeking to understand it.

A radical interpretation of wonderment, such as this, does not ignore prior knowledge, rather it requires the novice researcher to suspend their theoretical and experiential “knowing”. In “Theoretical Sensitivity”, Glaser (1978) warns the novice researcher about the dangers of following in the footsteps of the “theoretical capitalists” (p. 9). His challenge is not just that we will be influenced by the big names but, more subtly, he argues that that we should treat the data with more reverence than we would the works of Weber, Vygotsky, Senge, or even Glaser. This demand resonates with the challenge of the Kantian parallax wherein we are called to set aside our own expectations and beliefs, along with those of others, to be able to observe the reality of that which lies between the different perspectives. In my research, I have been interviewing people about workplace behaviour; these personal stories, sometimes harrowing, are of people who have been bullied or mobbed; these stories, or data, deserve to be treated with respect and admiration and not as a means to a professional end.

Glaser (2015) extols the virtues, and difficulties, of achieving autonomy, at a methodological and institutional level but neglects to explore how this autonomy is limited by our own attachments. Wonderment is not just a concept it is an action; it is the act of letting go of our concepts and labels, our attachments, and experiencing something unique, such as holding a new-born baby or watching a sunset—moments where our vocabulary is just not broad enough to describe what we are experiencing, or in terms of research, what we are observing and discovering. This “emotional response to perceptually vast stimuli that defy one’s accustomed frame of reference in some domain” (Piff, Dietze, Feinberg, Stancato, & Keltner, 2015, p. 297) closely identifies with the key characteristic of wonderment; awe.

The Impact of Awe

Awe pushes against the boundary between pleasure and fear, challenging us to change our mental schemas (Keltner & Haidt, 2003) within an extended perception of time (Rudd, Vohs, & Aaker, 2012). This challenge arises as a response to our awareness of the vastness of what we are experiencing and the need to accommodate that experience (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). In approaching CGT with “abstract wonderment” (Glaser, 1992, p. 22), researchers are being asked to free themselves from time, place, and people to enable them to experience the vastness of the data and challenged to construct new mental models (concepts/codes/theories) that will explain that vastness.

The experience of wonderment carries a risk. Allowing ourselves to experience the shock that surprise can generate within us, especially when we realise that we are at the limits of our own knowledge (Foucault, 2001) or that we have an error in our own thinking (Cooke, 2012) is not comfortable. It requires us to experience an unfiltered reality, to experience the disruptive influence of the Kantian parallax; it requires us to let go of our comfortable, and comforting, self-centred attachments. This increased self-awareness, it is suggested, is the product of experiencing awe—a movement towards focusing on the social context in which we exist (Piff et al., 2015) or are researching. The main focus of the CGT researcher is social—the people and their problems (Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967); a focus which, when grounded in awe, offers the opportunity to develop new information resources as opposed to gaining social or material rewards (Shiota, Keltner, & Mossman, 2007). The researcher therefore

emerges as an autotelic person, one who researches for the love of researching (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998). With the increasing demands on academics, including novice researchers, to satisfy performance criteria, namely achieving output measures, the autotelic researcher may be viewed as being “maladjusted”.

Becoming a “Maladjusted” Researcher

We often think of someone who is maladjusted negatively—someone who is struggling to cope with the demands of society or their workplace. Glaser (2001, 2015) drew attention to the ways a “normal” society, the academic community, demands that the novice researcher adapts and surrenders their autonomy, bringing to mind an image of a “stifling atmosphere of prejudice and traditions” (Kropotkin, 2002, p. 35). Such an atmosphere is dominated by theoretical and methodological capitalists (Glaser, 1978, 1998) who have spent their time “organizing society around answers and around structures designed to produce answers” (Saul, 2013, p. 7). While Saul described such people as technocratic priests, it may be more accurate to use the language of Pope Francis who draws a distinction between clericalism, which seeks to control and restrain, and the role of the priest, grounded in awe and wonderment, that supports and empowers people. The distinction is the use of the expert knowledge to support or restrict individual autonomy.

When we “adjust”, we surrender our own freedom of thought; we see the world through the eyes of another; we become satisfied that someone else has the answer and engage in discussions on their behalf, passively receiving information. To be maladjusted is to be a heretic, to become a critically conscious human being, and to live in relationship with others and the environment. Freire (2013) argued that being separated from, and yet open to, the world is the distinguishing characteristic of being human; “unlike [other] animals, [we] are not only in the world but with the world” (p. 3). This active engagement in developing understanding and choice, which leads to a transformation of our environment, is opposed to the adjusted status in which the critical being is reduced in state to little more than a serf (Samson, 2014). Fromm (2013) took this one step further likening the well-adjusted person to “an automaton [who] cannot experience life in the sense of spontaneous activity [taking] as a surrogate any kind of excitement or thrill” (p. 253) and “conforms to anonymous authorities and adopts a self which is not his. The more he does this the more powerless he feels, the more he is forced to conform” (p. 254).

Achieving an autonomous state does not entail the rejection of all that has gone before. Indeed Glaser (1998) and Freire (2013), recommended the researcher to avoid direct conflict with the clericals and their vested fictions, preferring a more subversive and emergent approach through conversion and respectful argument. Freire argued that the maladjusted “can discuss respective positions. He is convinced he is right, but respects another man’s prerogative to judge himself correct. He tries to convince and convert not to crush his opponent” (p. 9). Glaser re-emphasised this point by arguing that “diplomacy is important as revelation starts” (Glaser, 1998, p. 248). The autonomous researcher, armed with the cultivated skills of awe and wonderment, will be able to trust that this process of emergence will achieve the ends that they desire.

Cultivating Awe and Wonderment

Awe, and by extension, wonderment can be cultivated (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Piff et al., 2015; Rudd et al., 2012). It can recreate itself; the more one becomes mindful of the power of awe, the more aware of the instances of it one can experience (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). This section is a practical exploration of how, as a novice researcher, I have sought to integrate “abstract wonderment” into my research.

My ongoing study, among a diverse group of UK based employees, representing different hierarchical levels, sectors, and age groups, is an exploration of what people understand by workplace behaviour. A key concern raised by the participants was not the expected issues of workplace abuse, in which I have specialised for the last ten years as a professional workplace counsellor, but the performance required by each employee to satisfy the actual, and perceived, demands of their intended audience. This performance is disconnected from the reality of everyday life outside of work, where the meek and mild can become emboldened and encouraged in a hyper-competitive and individualistic organisation to transform into psychopaths in business suits.

Through the memoing process, I gained a surprise insight into my own tendency to adapt my message to please the research audience. Looking back over my memos, I realised that an important aspect of which I had known but dismissed, was the anarchist perspective on business with its emphasis on mutual aid. I had implicitly under-emphasised and excessively critiqued this approach as being unrealistic and unworkable. This critique was founded upon a belief, based upon my past experiences as a senior purchasing manager in multinational organisations, that if I were to walk into a business meeting and suggest adopting anarchist principles, the reception would be, at the very least, somewhat muted. I was unconsciously constraining my research because I was attached to my perceptions of what an audience would accept.

I had to accept that, despite my protestations of having no preconceptions, I always had an attachment to the future career potential of my research. I became aware that I had succumbed to the ethos of careerism that “fuels a timid, if not cynical, intellectual inertness, which allows otherwise smart energetic people to not pose critical questions as they hide in the thickets of mainstream professional correctness” (Luke, 2016, p. 1). This realisation was challenging as it required a conscious decision to continue in this way, or to find a new way of doing things that would be more congruent; it went to the heart of what the purpose of my study was. To carry on doing just enough would satisfy the university’s minimum evaluation criteria and would probably help in developing a career (being an exotelic person). It would not, however, satisfy the reason I began my research project, which was to explore employee’s understandings of workplace behaviour (being autotelic) and offer future employers a higher quality, autonomous researcher.

This realisation resonated with a particular category emerging for the data particular data comparison in which I was engaged, and was of no small consequence. The interviewees constantly stated that they felt like their roles were consistently being devalued and that they were merely; “doing their job” and more specifically “doing just enough”. They suggested that the workplace was no longer a place where you could have “fun”—where fun meant “having the opportunity to be yourself”. Work was viewed as a place to “go through the motions”—institutional exotelism”; and that was just what I had been doing.

The impact of this realisation cannot be underestimated. It exposed a fragility of which I was not aware in relation to data analysis, but also encouraged the resurfacing of a deeper fear of “getting things wrong”, particularly in relation to writing. My response to this new situation was simple; I panicked. The hubris I had felt as a novice researcher, thinking I had read all the books and understood the process, evaporated. It was replaced with thoughts about the whole process being “a waste of time . . . [becoming] irritable. . . [and going into] a somewhat deep depression and [feeling] a disturbing identity loss” (Glaser, 1978, p. 23); I wondered whether I really knew what I was doing and if I could do it.

A Creative Use for Panic

Panic is disabling. It is a destructive cycle epitomised by two key characteristics: procrastination and the search for the perfect solution (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008); the main purpose of this behaviour is to avoid the stimuli and, therefore, avoid the panic. For this novice researcher who had lost confidence in his own abilities, it meant avoiding the research and hiding away and seeking sanctuary in non-structured reading.

A three-phased structured approach is required to help reduce the impact of panic. An educational phase, where the client is helped to make sense of what is happening, is supported by cognitive restructuring—helping the client comprehend that this is a normal response to an external stimuli and not a catastrophe—and, sometimes, interoceptive exposure where the client is exposed to the stimulus and helped to re-conceptualise panic attacks (Wolf & Goldfried, 2014). While a CGT study does not seek to provide solutions, it is clear there are similarities with the approach; the counsellor helps to develop a theory to explain the clients main concern (the panic attacks) and how they resolve that process. The additional element is addressed by Simmons and Gregory (2003) in their discussion of grounded action, where the next logical step occurs in finding an alternative way to process their concern.

While panic is often viewed as stifling, it can be part of a creative process. Drawing on Edvard Munch’s painting of “The Scream”, Zausner (1999) suggested that it offered an insight into the artist’s creative response to his own panic attacks—a process described as “active insight” (Zausner, 1999, p. 103). This is an organised process of using information about the panic, and its stimuli, to help discover connections, generating new information, which transforms the panic into “creative chaos”. Parallels, for developing this creative chaos, exist within “Theoretical Sensitivity” in the recommendation that “the pressure for venting . . . must be dissipated only in writing memos or text” (Glaser, 1978, p. 23); or, put more simply, write your way out of the panic. Not only is information transformed, but the person moves towards greater self-esteem, and important for my particular situation, greater self-awareness.

Self-awareness, according to Morin (2005) is a “complex, multifaceted, phenomenon which is shaped by a host of ecological, neurological, social and cognitive processes” mediated through our inner speech (Morin, 2005, p. 128). This inner speech is described as “a flashlight [which is] used to find one’s way through a gloomy room” (Morin, 2002, p. 523); it provides a clarity to our emotional responses, such as values, beliefs, sensations, and so on; without the spotlight, we know they are there but we may

not be aware that we are experiencing them. Thus, the inner voice helps us to develop our skills at self-reflection and the being able to compare external and internal stimuli (constant comparison).

Communicating with Memos

By approaching data intending to understand, using constant comparison to explore what emerges through abstract wonderment, as opposed to confirming hypothesis or preconceived ideas, the researcher adopts a different mental model of communication. The model evokes a relationship of equals with the data, understanding communication as a horizontal activity. Freire (2013) contrasted this empathic, critical dialogue with a transmission, what he called "communiqué", of "anti-dialogue" (p. 43), founded on acritical arrogance and mistrust. His argument was simple; a critical dialogue should cause the surprise emergence of new understanding.

While Glaser (1998) emphasised the importance of memoing at each opportunity for personal and academic situations, it was not until I explored the meaning of abstract wonderment in relation to the panic I had felt that I realised the importance of his advice; memos had been quick notes that acted as reminders. Exploring "abstract wonderment" and the importance of horizontal dialogue led me to the strange relationship that Niklas Luhmann had with his note taking system, or Zettelkasten (Luhmann, 2012). Luhmann's note taking system was predicated on the idea that communication was generated by random acts of surprise, based upon trust, which help lead to a further and deeper understanding of a topic; this communication can be achieved with a dialogue between the researchers and their memos.

Memos should not be static but dynamic helping to make connections. Such a relationship should be capable of inspiring moments of awe, moving from a sense of chaos towards creative chaos; it forms a partnership in which each partner should be capable of surprising the other. This surprise is stressed when the two communicators (the researcher and the memos) operate different schema; placing this in the context of abstract wonderment means we enter the research field open to the experience of engaging with a different schema. This movement is supported by a nascent critical consciousness, a maladjustment which encourages a critical curiosity (Freire, 2013); the birth of a "maladjusted" autotelic researcher.

As with any relationship, the creative partnership between the autotelic researchers and their memos demands concentrated effort and time. It is easy to ignore advice about pacing a CGT study (Glaser, 1998); however, this becomes important in relation to entering the creative space. The experience of my own journey suggests that while it is possible to develop an attitude of wonderment built upon a critical consciousness; entering the creative space of "abstract wonderment" is time limited. Inspiration can strike at any moment but building the habit of developing a period to time during each day dedicated to creative thought is a recommended strategy; how long that period should be, will differ between people.

This time is dictated by our ability to remain cognitively absorbed. Cognitive Absorption (CA) is a concept identified by Agarwal and Karahanna (2000) within the technology field, to refer to the deep, immersive state of involvement that a person enters when using software; its characteristics can apply to the state of abstract

wonderment. The authors argue that when a person engages with CA, they enter a state of “flow”, or period of complete, focussed, immersion, while engaged in an intrinsically rewarding activity that is only just on the edge of being “doable”. It is playful state characterised by; curiosity, control, temporal dissociation, focused immersion and heightened enjoyment. In this state a researcher will work at the limits of their abilities at the border between excitement and fear; this is the point when, as discussed earlier, we experience “awe”.

To develop an expertise in any field requires periods of “deliberate practice” (Ericsson, 2008), p. 1) not practising what we already know but pushing ourselves to the limits of our abilities. For the CGT novice researcher this implies practising letting go of our preconceptions, trusting ourselves and experiencing abstract wonderment. Ericsson et al. (2007) quoted Auer who advised that “It really doesn’t matter how long. If you practice with your fingers, no amount is enough. If you practice with your head, two hours is plenty” (p. 124). While deliberate practice is valuable, what may be described as “purposeful leisure”, time spent recovering and recuperating from deliberate practice, intending to facilitate further thinking, is equally important. Outdoor recreation has empirical research foundations for its restorative power in restoring mental processes and positive functioning (Kaplan, 1995; Ulrich, Dimberg, & Driver, 1991)

My initial attempts at entering a state of abstract wonderment were fraught with difficulties. Apart from finding a place where I would not be disturbed, the primary difficulty was understanding how long I could remain in this state for and it being effective. The first attempts at using the Pomodoro Technique, or the therapeutic hour—50 minutes with a ten-minute break—proved to be of limited use. First, I found it difficult to enter the CA state, to let go of the daily trivia enough to fully engage with the sense of abstract wonderment and, second, to stop and start broke the flow. Being able to see a dingle from my study led me to settle on a pattern of working two 90-minute sessions a day interspersed with taking the dog for a long walk in the wood, thereby mixing wonderment with wanderment.

Conclusion

My single voice reflects on personal experiences seeking to understand what Glaser meant in his use of the term abstract wonderment. It is true that I could have written to him to ask what he meant but that would have placed him among the ranks of the theoretical capitalists, a position in which I do not think he would appreciate being placed. The autonomous researcher must seek out his or her own understanding, conceptualise on his or her own, and then address the current literature.

I began this paper by drawing attention to Thomas’ (2007) belief that the concept of abstract wonderment is preposterous. If the researcher demands a risk-free existence supported by the comforting structures of society, it would be foolish to engage with abstract wonderment. To view abstract wonderment as a concept is to miss the point; abstract wonderment is a praxis. Although Freire (1996) regarded praxis as the means by which the oppressed can develop their own critical awareness, in light of Glaser’s (2015) concerns for the autonomy of novice researchers, this concept may not be too far off being the right word. It implies developing an experiential understanding of the topic under investigation, which can only be attained by letting go of our

attachments and being open to the experiences that are offered to us. For the researcher who is passionate about his or her topic and is willing to risk the praxis of abstract wonderment, it demands the inhabiting of the borders between enjoyment and fear, so we can enter a creative space in which new concepts, and meanings, can emerge. For abstract wonderment, the closure of meaning, that is inherent where forcing and preconception are dominant, is anathema.

Grounded theorists research the real world. The aim of a CGT study is to “generate a theory that accounts for pattern of behaviour that is relevant and problematic for those involved” (Glaser & Holton, 2004, p. 1). Abstract wonderment is a creative skill that helps a researcher encounter those involved with an attitude of openness, acceptance and curiosity. By deploying this skill, a researcher can not only empower him or herself but empower participants by identifying the underlying unity (Glaser, 1999) that explains “what is” and helps them move to “what ought to be” (Simmons, 2011, p. 18). In my case, this means talking to real people who are facing real difficulties in their workplaces. The problems they have highlighted are messy and complex; they are the experts in this situation; my role is to try and make some sense out of what they offer me. Participants have said that they have no voice in their workplace; it is my responsibility, as a researcher, to listen and understand to what they are saying. I can only do this if I truly let go of my own attachments and approach them as unique human beings with their own stories. For me, this release can only happen if I approach them with a sense of awe and abstract wonderment as the wonderful, unique human beings that they are.

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