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Andy Lowe, PhD, Thailand

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Intellectual Autonomy of PhD Researchers who use the Grounded Theory Methodology

Andy Lowe, PhD, Thailand

Abstract

The decision to choose the grounded theory methodology (GT) for one's PhD research should never be done lightly, as outlined in Glaser (2015). The emergence of a researcher's own intellectual autonomy is often of more importance than the research itself. Intellectual autonomy can be fostered perpetually and spasmodically.

Keywords: intellectual autonomy, grounded theory, perpetual fostering, investigating, negotiating.

Perpetual fostering

Intellectual autonomy can be fostered perpetually in three main ways; discovery of "voice", investigating, and negotiating. Intellectual autonomy involves the discovery of one's own "voice" without arrogance but with humility.

The PhD researcher should never bury missteps in the PhD thesis. Instead write about them and explain how they arose and then the means with which they were dealt. The formal acknowledgement of these errors is always an indicator for the PhD committee that researcher's intellectual autonomy has emerged.

The process of intellectual autonomy begins when the researcher starts understanding, by discovering his own "voice", by critically reading the published works of others. The researcher has to delve beyond the descriptive narrative and begin to tease out the more fundamental deep-seated concepts that underpin the research of others. This approach will also reveal the line of argument being used by various authors. Glaser (1978) emphasized the importance of the GT researcher being able to develop theoretically sensitivity. Put very simply, this means that the researcher has to go directly to the ideas and concepts that underpin the research.

Investigating

Before embarking on any PhD research, it is the researcher's task to demonstrate his intellectual autonomy by using due diligence.

It is the duty and responsibility of the researcher to choose the location where the GT PhD will be registered. This issue is not just administrative; this is because the researcher should be cautious of naively assuming that all research environments are likely to be equally competent and intellectually stimulating.

Find a university that is tolerant of an inductive research design. The dominant research paradigm in academia is the deductive hypothesis approach. Many universities automatically assume that all PhDs will always follow this path. This has the potential to be problematic for the GT PhD researcher because GT research is principally an inductive research method. An online research will reveal the attitude of different universities to inductive research based PhDs. Be wary of universities who compel PhD researchers to use the identical chapter headings and structure regardless of the type of research method being employed. Do remember that what is considered to be the appropriate structure of a PhD is highly variable even at the same university. If a PhD researcher is already signed up to a university with an inflexible system, it still might be possible to do a GT PhD. The workaround is called "the retro fitted PhD". Here the GT PhD researcher faithfully follows the tenets of the authentic GT research method that will result in a robust core variable. Then return to the rigid PhD structure that the university has imposed on the research and repackage the legitimate GT PhD research into the thesis format retrospectively. However, what frequently happens is that when the supervisors read the GT research they often are so impressed by the research that they find ways in accepting the authentic GT PhD structure.

The Conventional full-time PhD

Younger novice researchers may wish to opt for a PhD process that pays the annual registration fee as well as income from teaching at a university. Apart from the obvious financial advantages of this type of PhD process, there are several negative aspects. The problem is that it can be extremely difficult to develop and maintain one's intellectual autonomy if one is being employed by the university to fulfill other tasks. The anonymous (2010) author from The Economist has also cited this as one of the main reasons for dissatisfaction and PhD completion failures.

Conventional part-time PhD

The type of PhD is widely used by researchers who already have their own careers that they do not wish to terminate. There are some negatives in this part-time route. The PhD research is in danger of academic isolation. In Europe and the U.S., a part time PhD registration period can range from 3 to 6 years to complete. In many parts of Asia taking 10 years to complete a PhD is not considered unusual.

Online PhD supplemented by formal training

This system of doing a PhD can work well if the university has a robust support system in place. The Open University in the UK is a good example of how this can work well.

Totally online PhD

This route to the PhD is not recommended because few PhD researchers would be able to develop their own intellectual autonomy in a vacuum.

The investigation of the formal role of the PhD research proposal must be an early priority.

The vast majority of universities have specific requirement that before the researcher is formally enrolled to a PhD degree a formal written research proposal be submitted. The prospective GT PhD researcher should understand the real significance of

this document. It is much more than just a bureaucratic requirement; in certain circumstances it can shield the researcher from ill informed criticism as the research progresses.

Negotiating

The GT PhD researcher should feel comfortable about having frank negotiations with a potential PhD supervisor prior to signing up for the PhD. The PhD researcher should always be the client; the supervisor and university are the service providers. Frequently PhD researchers view things from a reverse perspective, which is not going to enhance their own intellectual autonomy. The GT PhD researcher should begin the process and be prepared to dialogue with potential PhD supervisors *before* committing.

Negotiating the PhD researcher's approach to the final PhD committee

The GT PhDs researchers' opportunity to present their thesis to a committee of experienced academics should be viewed as a being a very positive experience. Once the PhD is completed, there will be no other person in the world that knows as much about the thesis than the PhD researcher.

Spasmodic fostering of the researcher's intellectual autonomy by publishing throughout the PhD process

To spend time and effort carrying out research that is never published is an indulgence. One's intellectual autonomy can only flourish through publication. The act of writing for publication accelerates and clarifies one's thought processes. Most of us only think with clarity once we had externalized our thoughts through writing.

Intellectual autonomy starts with developing theoretical sensitivity, prior to doing the research, and ends with a robust defense of one's own thesis to the PhD committee.

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