Formal Grounded Theory: Knowing When to Come Out of the Rain

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Getting started on a formal grounded theory is daunting for many grounded theorists, but now, as I tweak a nearly complete one, I find that knowing when to stop, to come in out of the rain, so to speak, can be a challenge, too.

After more than a decade of procrastinating, one of the lessons for me was one I knew but needed reminding of—the implications of the core help shape and delimit the formal grounded theory (Glaser, 2007). Maybe if I had pasted this to my computer and read it each day I could have cut my theory development time considerably. But having a mantra does not clear the path to a theory. A formal grounded theory takes on the world of knowledge far more boldly than does a substantive theory, which is based in one subdiscipline. It is not always simple to clear a path through the competing knowledge claims and epistemologies on the phenomenon one is studying. This was especially true of my theory on *defensive disattending*, which is evident throughout micro and macro level spheres of life.

Defensive disattending explains the processes through which people seek to protect themselves from information, people, and situations they perceive as threats to their sense of self, comfort, autonomy, freedom, power, or belief system. It is evident in areas as diverse as personal relationships (patient-doctor, the spouse swatting away evidence of a cheating mate) to the ways the NFL (National Football League) refused to accept that concussions cause brain damage and created a system to fight the evidence. It became all too clear during the polarizing 2016 Presidential campaign in the US and its aftermath, where fake news and "alternative facts" became substitutes for facts people did not want to face. Through *discounting awareness*, the core of the theory, a range of disattending strategies allow people to distance themselves from discomfort or threat. Typically, the offending phenomenon works its way into the frame of awareness, forcing an encounter that people ignore, marginalize or aggressively resist. Temporality and emotionality are dimensions of the encounters as well.

The various types of disattending strategies do not typically resolve into moments of acceptance. Generally, people continue to fight the fight unless phenomenon from the outside disrupt the cycle—the anti-vaccine parent's child gets really ill, or people's social network changes. In extreme cases, "organizing doubt," becomes a strategy for governments and organizations – tobacco, the NFL, oil companies—that, due to high stakes, wage war on the truth. In many ways, the theory of defensive disattending is a theory about the social interaction of denial.

My substantive theory of *purposive attending,* which focused on how people deal with news media in everyday life, launched my examination of attending and disattending (Martin, 2004, 2008). Despite my focus on the interplay of awareness, the evaluation of relevance and attending, I became more interested in the many ways in which awareness could be snuffed out before it emerged fully. Glaser and Straus's use of discounting awareness (1964, 1965) had intrigued me on many levels. It contained a number of implications in its discussion of the way medical professionals carried on their conversations and routines in front of comatose or mentally disabled people they assumed could not hear or understand them. The sociologist Erving Goffman (1974/1986) had invoked their work in his discussion of how people move situations in and out of frame. I saw possible connection to these understandings in my interviews with people who reported intentionally disattending conversations on controversial news items to avoid uncomfortable encounters with people in their lives. Looking around, the ways in which people erased all manner of discomfort, including the classic look-away when coming across the disabled or homeless on the street, helped launched my journey.

Data for a study such as this abound. I have made use of a variety of government and technical reports where discounting awareness exacerbated problems. Observations, academic and popular literature, and daily events also became data. Numerous theories address pieces of what I was studying, which nipped at my confidence at times. The Third Person Effect scared me a little at first. It holds that people assume how others are more affected by media in a negative way than they are, in effect, discounting the awareness faculties of others. *Selective exposure* holds that people select content in line with their views of the world, and has some connections to *confirmation bias.* I read a whole lot more on these theories than I probably needed to. Their grounding in experimental data restricted how I could use them for theory development; but they were not the real dragons I had to slay.

In short, I had to grapple with denial, which was clearly an element of what I was looking at. Yet denial is a term brandished recklessly in everyday conversation, and not operationalized carefully enough in the scholarly literature. Its place in psychoanalytic theory scared me. Maye I am wasting my time, I thought. Perhaps enough is known about denial. I would be just another voice saying, "I agree with what they said." Several memos helped me reflect on the problem. It wasn't until I started reading the literature on denial that I realized that it is vague, poorly defined, and does not typically account for the interaction and social processes underlying denial. Sociologist Stanley Cohen (2001) has theorized denial processes to better understand why people fail to intervene in human atrocities such as the Holocaust or genocide in Rwanda. Coding his work in the manner I coded many books and articles was useful for understanding how my perspective and focus on processes was closer to his work than some of the literature I examined. And yet it was also different. It took some languishing on my part, but I soon came to accept that the theory of defensive disattending is a theory about the performance of denial in interaction. Because it is processual it speaks more deeply about phenomena that are sometimes merely labeled in other theories dealing with discounting and disattending. The grounded theory methodology allowed me to tell the story, often vaguely implied in a number of the other theories, through the integration of concepts that brought about the theory of defensive disattending.

When I was able to articulate the role of denial in my theory and how it differed from other claims of the concept, I felt satisfied with where my theory begins and ends. Disattending, of course, is necessary in all areas of life; we need distraction-proofing to get through the day. The theory is most concerned with defensive interaction. Yet while it does not predict when people, buoyed by emergent awareness, might intervene to stop evil, it explains the many barriers to breakthroughs, which are often idiosyncratic.

But perhaps I speak too soon. Another factor that has resulted in my procrastination is that, in today's polarized civil society, in the United States and abroad, the patterns explicated in the theory may produce results that transforms situations, and offers new variables for study. In 2016, as I was drafting a working paper on *defensive disattending*, there was growing talk about the growing polarization signified by news bubbles and Internet echo chambers, where people consumed information and interacted with those who share their views, excluding other influences. I was seeing my concepts and their implications elsewhere. Always up for more theoretical sampling, I began looking around for data to analyze in my pursuit of a fully saturated theory.

A grounded theory, however, cannot cover all identified phenomena. Its implications need to provide openings for others to join the conversation. Too many substantive areas start to push the theory toward description. It took a few months of watching and wondering whether there was still work to do. Along the way I learned about new knowledge areas— there's a sociology of ignorance!—and memoed about areas that dovetail with some of what I have done. But ultimately, some of this was work for another day, another theory. It was time to come in out of the rain.

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