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Teaching Qualitative Research: Versions of Grounded Theory

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Abstract

This paper concerns the teaching and iteration of Grounded Theory, taking published accounts referring to Grounded Theory as instructional materials on the workings of Grounded Theory. The paper identifies problems associated with later versions of Grounded Theory that are anticipated and avoided in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It alerts practitioners and students to theoretical options in doing research. Based on a critical incident analysis of literatures as 'fieldwork sites', looking at information science and dentistry research, this paper discusses iterations of qualitative research – particularly, what we call the versioning of Grounded Theory – in clinical settings and interdisciplinary studies. Reading accounts of qualitative studies revealed misapprehensions regarding the use of qualitative methods. Critical reading facilitates the examination of analytic claims, to alert researchers in interdisciplinary fields to adverse consequences of using inferior accounts.

Keywords: Cumulation Problem, Grounded Theory, Qualitative Research, Research Evaluation, Thematic Analysis, Theoretical Imperialism

Introduction

This paper seeks to contribute to an important thread in this journal (Breckenridge et al., 2012; Evans, 2013; O'Connor, Carpenter & Coughlan, 2018), continuing a focus on readers and the communication of qualitative research methodologies. The origins of this paper are located in the authors' shared concerns with children's storytelling practices, and their disillusion with thematic analysis as a methodologically adequate means to study how accounts are produced within interaction. In terms of research design, the use of thematic analysis (e.g. Jones & Argentino, 2010; Nelson et al., 2008; Ross & Green, 2011) produces studies that are about analysts' research decisions rather than people's orientations to stories; and is reductionist by treating stories as simplistic conduits for information on topics for operationalization. The current authors' specific interest in stories (Carlin, 2009; Kim, 2016, 2019), and finding extant analyses of stories to be wanting of phenomenological integrity, led to a broader consideration of accounts of research methods.

The authors of this paper are interested in qualitative research, and the utility of qualitative research methods for education, linguistics, logistics, the study of second language acquisition, urban studies and the analysis of public space. Therefore, the authors seek to engage with accounts of qualitative research in various fields. Further, as teachers of qualitative research, the authors have been struck by students' uncritical acceptance of accounts of qualitative methods in different fields. Thus, while the pool of discipline-specific, relevant and student-friendly materials has increased (Davis 1995; Hadley 2017), our arguments complement teaching and learning arguments that distinguish between "downloading information" (Brabazon 2007, p. 99) – having materials available – from the effort of reading original sources and interpretations. In this paper, the authors draw upon their engagement with information science

and education in various professional environments, including clinical settings, to consider the presentation of qualitative research in general, and the use of recent versions of Grounded Theory (GT) within these fields.

Publication of studies in professional journals confers tutorial status, or authority, on accounts of research paradigms and research methods which, even mediated by peer-reviewed journals available through bibliographic databases hosted by institutional libraries to ensure quality, may not be completely warranted. Readers may take published studies as credible, pedagogic materials; as formative accounts of research methods for use in their own projects. Accordingly, their education about these methods, and the qualitative evidence-base, are compromised when inferior accounts or incomplete methods are not challenged. For educators, this trend is “worrisome” (Glaser, 2002, p. 1) and an “abiding concern” (Glaser, 2002, p. 1).

As a conceptual discussion of qualitative research – and GT in particular – this paper considers the ‘versioning’ of GT, i.e. the application of variant iterations of GT that have been noted to impact upon inquiries in different ways; and how this finds expression through ‘the cumulation problem’, ‘theoretical imperialism’, and the ‘tutorial’ (or pedagogic) status of published accounts of GT, that are reliant on later versions.

The authors of this paper suggest that recent iterations of GT neglect important aspects of the original formulation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), such as the connection between library research and sociological research; as a result, subsequent iterations of GT are less radical for doing sociological inquiry. The tutorial status of recent accounts of GT displaces research effort to return to the original formulation of GT, which remains unaffected by issues of cumulation or theoretical imperialism.

As suggested in further detail below, the cumulation problem was anticipated in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in the improper or incomplete application of GT to sets of data. When steps are missed in the development of GT, the potential for making a contribution to theory-building is reduced. The cumulation problem – when outcomes of studies remain unattached to bodies of research – is avoidable by following the guidance for doing qualitative research in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*; however, as suggested elsewhere (Glaser, 1998), it is an attendant risk for researchers who are reliant on subsequent iterations.

Similarly, “theoretical imperialism” (Schegloff, 1997, p. 167) is an issue that results from the use of more recent versions of GT, and it is strongly associated with a piecemeal approach to the procedures of GT as set out by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Theoretical imperialism is an analytically imposed reconstruction of the procedures of a setting, insufficiently sensitive to the understandings of a setting’s participants, and importantly is at variance with the admonitions for doing qualitative research as set out in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*.

Both theoretical imperialism and the cumulation problem are avoidable if researchers follow the procedures of doing qualitative research contained in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. In particular, these issues relate to ‘desk research’, which was discussed in the original formulation¹ but does not receive the same prominence in subsequent iterations. The library research – fieldwork connection within the original (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is of such importance that Barry Glassner (1980, pp. 41-56, 152-156) used “literature sites” as an organizing principle for his own monograph treatment.

¹ See “Part II: The Flexible Use of Data”, especially “Chapter VII, New Sources for Qualitative Data”.

Borrowing Glassner's nomenclature, this paper proceeds to look at discipline-specific uses of qualitative research – including the salience of the 'versioning' of GT – in clinical settings and in information science.

Literature as Fieldwork Sites: Information Science

Articles intended to surface 'qualitative' research methods, to bring qualitative methods to the attention of wider disciplinary areas, tend to gloss over organizing principles in the philosophy of research. The authors of this paper were alerted to this during projects in information science. Information science is a perspicuous setting for considering the nature and profiles of paradigms and interdisciplinary commitments: an important paper (Cronin 2008) highlighted the contribution of sociological work within a field that was resistant to sociological approaches – for information science, sociology represented a 'paradigm' in itself, sociology was one paradigm among several, e.g. 'cognitive', 'behavioural', 'neuroscientific', 'psychoanalytic' (Hjørland 2002), and information science did not distinguish between the competing paradigms that constitute organizing devices within sociology. For instance, in trying to formulate another paradigm for information science – 'socio-cognitivism' – Hjørland (2002) glosses over the cognitivism immanent within sociological work that is incorporated into information science. For the practical purposes of teaching and learning sociology, 'quantitative methods' and 'qualitative methods' are recognized to depend upon distinct paradigmatic bases; yet, such recognition does not account for different paradigmatic bases that may draw upon qualitative research (Murdoch, 2013).

Yet, what Glaser (2002, p. 1) noted as "worrisome" extended from the philosophy of research into the use of particular methods. Blaise Cronin (2008) importantly highlighted the 'turn' towards sociological forms of inquiry and their interdisciplinary potential; unfortunately, and significantly, Cronin's celebration of sociology's contributions to and potentialities for interdisciplinary inquiries was to be deflated by the variable application of sociological work. For example, in attempts by Elfreda A. Chatman to introduce sociological work as relevant to information science, that were based upon distortions of the internal debates within sociology (Carlin, 2003).

In a similar manner, the review article that avers "Qualitative research, is, of course, the basic alternative to quantitative research" (Powell, 1999, p. 102) – this broad claim misses the nuances of the philosophy of research and the linguistic bases of both 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' forms of research (Rose, 1960). When a renowned instantiation of 'quantitative methods' in sociology (Downey, 1967) is examined, the author complains of the "folk parlance" (Downey, 1967, p. 49) of categories. However, in the attempt to operationalize these folk categories in terms of "the typical language used by professionals" (Downey, 1967, p. 49), the work involved is not 'quantitative' but requires the use of natural language activities to organize the work and to re-describe 'folk' categories as 'professional' categories in order to be seen as recognizably 'quantitative'.

That being so, we can see 'quantitative' research as necessarily requiring 'qualitative' research, as a ubiquitous feature of its own quantification practices. The practicalities of published accounts of 'quantitative' research, the presentation of 'quantitative' research and setting up the logics of operationalism, implicates phenomena that would be topics for 'qualitative' research – the broad gloss provided by Powell (1999) does not account for the instability of the qualitative/quantitative dualism. In any case, "the distinction usually drawn between qualitative and quantitative data [is . . .] useless for the generation of theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 9).

Nevertheless, while qualitative research was gaining a higher profile within information science, as documented in and by dedicated monographs and collections (Glazier & Powell, 1992;

Gorman & Clayton, 1997; Mellon, 1990), the coverage of qualitative methods conformed to such paradigmatic bases.

Within information science, the authors found the use of GT to be rather arbitrary, with inconsistent levels of application. Some accounts of GT are more adequate (Attfield & Dowell 2003) than others; and GT provided the methodological approach for one of the classic studies in Library & Information Science (Mellon 1986), through which the library-specific concept of "Library Anxiety" was identified. Mellon's original study was accorded classic status and admitted to the canon of LIS research through the process of a systematic review (Bailey, 2008), evaluating its usefulness for future inquiries, and through its inclusion in the 75th anniversary issue of *College & Research Libraries* as one of its classic papers (Mellon, 2015):

Mellon's article was chosen as one of the seven most important in the 75-year history of *College & Research Libraries* because it made 'library anxiety,' a phenomenon observed by practitioners, official and uncovered its origins. The article also legitimized the use of qualitative research methods by giving grounded theory wide recognition in a premier journal. (Gremmels, 2015, p. 268)

However, some accounts of GT are heavily dependent on quotations from prior accounts (Westbrook 1994); or contain a perfunctory description of GT method and display a reliance on secondary literature (Talip 2015), of the "worrisome" variety. There is contempt for the discipline-specific origins of GT for interdisciplinary studies (Seldén 2005); and, following the thread of this journal, the conflation of versions of GT (e.g. 'classic' and 'constructivist'), of not seeing these as different (Mansourian, 2006) – nor, concomitantly, seeing the differences as problematic, or having implications for the use of GT in information science inquiries. Such accounts contrast with a paper (Star 1998) that aligns core principles of GT (constant comparison and constant iteration) with core competencies of information work (classification and its practices).

The authors of this paper see that the reductive cast of adopting disjunctive versions of GT continues in information science, as a recent study (Hicks, 2018) endorses constructivist GT for the very reasons that constructivist GT should be approached with caution: namely, its aprioristic and ideologically-driven approach to GT – attaching theoretical commitments to GT, such as positional reflexivity based on erroneous understandings and complexities of its coordinates (Lynch 2000), which are ironically antithetical to the hypothetico-inductive method of generating theory from data. Induction – working from data to generate theory – is a *raison d'être* of GT, in its classic formulation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In bringing preformed theoretical commitments to data – what we may call 'theoretical imperialism' – the constructivist version of GT, in various iterations (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz & Bryant, 2008), ceases to be GT.

The 'measurable' commitment to GT is questioned elsewhere:

While it is important that methodologies are open to development and improvement, it is important to be wary of the point at which a methodology has been changed so much that it has become something different altogether. (Breckenbridge et al., 2012, p. 65)

In this paper, the authors suggest that any refinements to the methodological procedures of GT, as developed in Straussian (or Corbinian) GT and constructivist GT, are distortions of classic GT at the epistemological level.

As such, constructivist GT exemplifies the paradigmatic confusion referred to at the beginning of this paper: in redefining the 'classic' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) version of GT there may have been an intention to increase the distance from normative, positivistic approaches

(Clarke, 2007), but the admission of aprioristic theoretical commitments to the research process is in itself derived from normative, positivistic trajectories.

Literature as a Fieldwork Site: Clinical Settings

The authors now turn to bringing some of these issues into greater visibility for clinical education. The use of qualitative research methods has provided extraordinary insights into clinical environments (e.g. Becker et al., 1961; Cahill, 1999; Smith & Kleinman, 1989). Taking dentistry research as the next exemplar, the authors explore the use of GT in illustration of distortions of 'qualitative' research in dentistry education.

These observations are connected with the notion of "theoretical imperialism", which will be returned to later in the paper. Theoretical imperialism refers to the imposition of analytic categories on data that are external to the settings of investigation, which are then used to codify these data. In the classic version of GT, Glaser and Strauss (1967) were clear that such a procedure is a departure from the production of GT. The use of exogenous categories produces an intervening and unwarranted 'layer' to analysts' accounts of these data. In these circumstances, theoretical imperialism conceptualizes the practices whereby these data are produced by analysts, not the participants who, purportedly, featured in the study design.

Commentaries on the use of qualitative research for dentistry scale up as qualitative studies proliferate (Gussy, Dickson-Swift and Adams 2013; Masood, Masood, and Newton 2010; Meadows, Verdi and Crabtree 2003; Stewart, Gill, Chadwick and Treasure 2008). This is problematic when qualitative research in dentistry is traduced by the misapplication of terms, in a similar way that was noted above when information science incorporates concepts such as "reflexivity" (Hallbert, Camling, Zickert, Robertson & Berggren, 2008, p. 28), which are admitted to the dentistry research base.

Whilst the growing corpus of commentaries on qualitative studies may seem an axiomatic feature of the research, that over time there are more studies to review, there are a number of misconceptions upon which this growing 'meta-literature' is based. Rather than separate research studies, these items are literature reviews that synthesize qualitative studies intended to highlight the significance, and advocate the admissibility of, qualitative research studies within dentistry research. However, this paper suggests out how recommendations for judging qualitative research are misleading (Masood, Thaliath, Bower, & Newton 2001).

In part, this relates to the use of measures for evaluating research that are not suitable for the assessment of qualitative research (Given 2006; Grypdonck 2006; Peräkylä 1997). However, noting the existence of different paradigms (Gussy, Dickson-Swift, & Adams, 2013) and the problems in assessing research studies from different paradigms, does not reflect the whole story. The relevance of distinct paradigms is not limited, as some commentators assume, to the assessment of research studies from different paradigms.

The authors' readings of qualitative research located in various fields requires comment for dentistry research, particularly regarding Grounded Theory, and what is frequently taken as GT. This is significant for peer-review processes: that dentistry researchers are able to use the insights of qualitative studies; and are enabled to discern quality among qualitative studies. This is important so that their own research practice is not compromised by inferior qualitative studies, nor qualitative studies making erroneous analytic claims. The potential for qualitative research studies is further reduced by such lowering of quality in published research: "poorly conceptualized and executed qualitative studies that continue to unintentionally 'make the case' that qualitative research has limited value" (Joy, 2013, p. 272)

When accounts that are claimed to be 'outcomes' of the application of GT are consistently what Glaser (1998) warns against, e.g. disconnected observations rather than the careful, cumulative generation of theory, then as Joy (2013) suggests readers with reservations about qualitative research may have their doubts confirmed. Thereby, a disservice is being done to qualitative researchers who are following through with rigorous, robust methodologies.

Literature as a Fieldwork Site: The Cumulation Problem

There is also a 'cumulation' problem with the application of more recent versions of GT, both in dentistry research and in information science. The cumulation problem is witnessable in the atomization of individual studies, which do not address prior research except for the purposes of reviewing 'the literature'. Such atomization may be explained, in part, by the allocation of research grants to original studies, rather than to studies that seek to build upon existing theories; also, more speculatively, by the desire of researchers in these fields to make their own, unique contributions to the research-base. These conjectures on atomization were addressed in the original formulation of GT, where there may be a possessive or ownership relation in regards to field notes, or recordings of interviews and their transcripts: "This kind of ownership can yield great depth of substantive knowledge but add little to social theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 168).

The cumulation problem is exhibited in iterations of GT which pass over one of the neglected aspects of the original formulation of GT (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) – the connection and relevance of library research. Distinguishing between "technical and non-technical literatures" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, pp. 48-56) is a lessening of the sophistication provided by the identification of similarities between doing fieldwork, and doing library research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The cumulation problem is illustrated by a use of prior research, e.g. made available through library databases, as topically relevant. We refer to this as a "'reading list' approach" to topics (Carlin, 2016, p. 628), rather than the exploration of the array of library materials that (potentially) constitute data for the development and extension of GT. Documentary, or text-based sources may provide data relevant to ongoing inquiries or provide the impetus for new inquiries. Furthermore, the cumulation problem is evidenced by a lack of engagement with existing studies as the basis for the development of GT:

If we do not practice [...] extending grounded theories, then we relegate them, as now, mainly to the status of respected little islands of knowledge, separated from others, each visited from time to time by inveterate footnoters, by assemblers of readings and of periodic bibliographical reviews, and by graduate students assigned to read the better literature. While the owners of these islands understandably are pleased to be visited, in time they will fall out of fashion and be bypassed. This is no way to build a cumulative body of theory. (Strauss, 1973, p. 53)

The cumulation problem marks a missed opportunity that users of recent iterations of GT for Dentistry and Information Science contribute towards. In passing over the original formulations of GT, and the many advisories for doing quality qualitative research that these contain, current constructivist GT studies produce a series of discrete, disconnected inquiries that fail both a constant comparison requirement, and fall short of building a corpus of adequate GT studies that demonstrate the value of 'qualitative' research for interdisciplinary fields. An adequate corpus evidences the value of GT, and qualitative research, to sceptical practitioners unconvinced of the relevance of qualitative research to their own inquiries.

Grounded Theory or Thematic Analysis?

A feature of discussions of 'qualitative research', originating in sociology but adventitiously relocated to different disciplinary contexts, is the recycling of work that may be characterized as "theoretical imperialism". A range of 'qualitative research methods' are outlined but to what extent do these methods actually afford knowledge of participants' understandings of their worlds? Or are readers of such studies recipients of what the researcher claims are participants' understandings? This can be illustrated with reference to GT: in its original form (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we find the careful administration of data-generated categories, which are inductively available through sensitive analysis; however, sensitivity to people's understandings of settings is not carried forward in more recent versions of GT, and a diluted form of categorization is witnessable in various studies (e.g. Lowe-Calverley & Grieve, 2018) known as 'thematic (or 'content') analysis'.

GT was a serendipitous outcome of a series of organizational ethnographies (which happened to be hospitals) in the Nineteen Sixties by a research team, led by Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser (Glaser and Strauss 1965, 1968; Strauss et al., 1964). These were distinctive (or applied) studies because they were oriented to sociologists and health professionals. GT emerged from internal debates within Symbolic Interactionism, a perspective in sociology, about the verifiability of qualitative research; a significant aspect which has been airbrushed out of recent accounts of GT (Travers 2001), and one which causes difficulty for interdisciplinary practitioners when accounting for its development (Seldén, 2005).

GT was formulated as an assembly of methods for developing theory. Even though its authors regarded it as a preliminary exploration of GT (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* is a highly sophisticated book – in methodological and sociological terms. This original formulation in its entirety was not followed through within sociology, however; for instance, in the connections made between library research and fieldwork: "Although this methodology is mentioned by Glaser and Strauss, its potential has not been explored beyond their initial descriptions, neither theoretically nor in actual fieldwork" (Glassner, 1980, p. 43).

Thus, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* was used selectively, and was cited much more frequently than it was used or even understood. It is somewhat ironic that their identification of "conveying credibility" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 228-230) in academic reports would be inverted, so that the book is itself invoked to confer 'credibility' upon 'qualitative' presentations (Gilbert, 1977; Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984).

Within the literature sites that the authors were interested in, the "user-friendly" (Travers, 2001, p. 43) *Basics of Qualitative Research*, which demonstrates how GT can be used (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), is preferred to the original formulation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967); and a second edition, published in 1998, claims an even wider applicability of GT and comparative approaches (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This claim to accessibility is illusory and not supported by close reading and analysis of the texts concerned (O'Connor, Carpenter & Coughlan, 2018). Yet any accessibility hides a permissiveness to the point of analytic 'incoherence' attempts to refine GT resulted in a situation in which data became subjacent to the workings of the methodic procedures themselves – a betrayal of the core principles of GT in its original formulation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which put data at the forefront of theory generation: "The additional prescribed steps encourage students and researchers to *look for data* rather than *look at data* leading to emerging theory" (Robrecht, 1995, p. 171 [emphasis in original]).

The importance of the remarks above, regarding sociological paradigms, is brought into focus by a prefatory statement wherein Strauss demonstrated that GT was not limited to 'qualitative' analyses of organizational structures (Strauss, 1967). However, he does not give any

indication that GT was unsystematic, which could be yoked into research studies, and he (along with Glaser) repeatedly emphasized the importance of “constant comparison” (Glaser & Strauss, 1970, pp. 102-105) as a method for theoretical development. It is important to note that some sources fail to distinguish between GT and thematic analysis, and the rigour which theoretical sampling provides (Rice & Ezzy, 1999); the contribution that robust sociological methods bring to clinical environments is diminished through misrepresentation.

This impoverished version – ersatz GT – has since been introduced to dentistry research (Amin, Harrison & Weinstein, 2006; Burnard, Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008), in sources citing the original formulation of GT to “convey credibility” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 228-230). However, only the Strauss and Corbin formulations would allow these authors to use GT as a variant of thematic analysis. It was Glaser who ‘revised and updated’ GT in the light of subsequent advances in available methods (Glaser, 1978). It is Glaser who is continuing GT, the introduction of a complicating constructionist version of GT notwithstanding (Charmaz, 2006; O’Connor, Carpenter & Coughlan, 2018), which he argues Strauss had diluted (Glaser, 2009). There is some justification for this, as *Basics of Qualitative Research* (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) is looser, with regard to data, than its original formulation.

Glaser (1998) argued that GT can be so rewarding and stimulating that researchers only make it half way through the method. He suggests that the practices of categorization and the development of categories are so engrossing that these are not used properly, for the generation of theory:

Grounded theory methodology leaves nothing to chance. It provides rules for every stage on what to do and what to do subsequently. If the reader skips any of these steps and rules, the theory will not be as worthy as it could be. The typical dropping out of the package is to yield to the thrill of and seduction by developing a few new, capturing categories. The researcher then yields to using them in unending conceptual description and incident tripping rather than analysis by constant comparisons. (Glaser, 1998, p. 13)

Instead, this stage is taken as the outcome of the research, not the beginning; examples of which are commonplace within the dentistry research literature (Lönnroth & Shahnavaz, 2001) and other clinical features (Dimond, 2014). One of the problematics of applying GT in this form is not progressing beyond the generation of categories. Indeed, this is a theory-lite form of analysis, and exemplifies the misrepresentation of qualitative research – claiming “flexibility” as a virtue of qualitative research when this term may conceal insubstantial application (Holloway & Todres, 2003). Justifications for a thematic analysis approach have appeared in the literature, attempting to establish thematic analysis as “a method in its own right” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78); unfortunately, advocates of thematic analysis reify “flexibility” (e.g. Overcash, 2003) but sacrifice meaningful contribution to theory, or conceptual distinction.

Discussion

In clinical contexts, the sociological ‘paradigm’ (as constituted by both the normative and interpretive paradigms) is only one of a number of competing paradigms. Dentistry is not the only field in which researchers treat topics in paradigmatic terms (Hjørland, 2002), though the rubric of paradigms is more focused on treatment outcomes (Fejerskov, 2004), and studies have been oriented towards ‘techniques’ rather than ‘paradigms’ (e.g. Salvi & Lang, 2001). Trends in sociological research are resulting in outcomes wherein the sociological and cognitive paradigms are less distinct. But the selection of a sociological paradigm over a rival paradigm does not in itself result in “better” realizations of a research problem, merely different ones (Coulter & Sharrock 2007, p. 212).

It is in the generation of categories that we see a particular, pernicious problem with presentations of qualitative research, and the claim to be using GT, in information science and in dentistry research. As this paper explains, sociology is characterized by its orientations (quantitative/qualitative) to phenomena, its paradigms (including interpretive/normative paradigms) and by its sub-fields. One of the most significant contributions to the sociology of health/medicine was the thesis of "professional imperialism" (Strong, 1979). Whilst professional (or theoretical) imperialism has its critics much of this is misdirected (Conrad & Schneider, 1980). The original article (Strong, 1979) prosecuted the thesis by reviewing the arguments that the medical profession was extending its reach beyond the medical; suggesting that a "medical model" (Strong, 1979, p. 211) is a simplistic approach and that studies indicating that there was an increasing medicalization of society were, in the light of data, 'exaggerated'.

In an analogous way to missing literature sites, research based on the classic formulation of GT (Glassner, 1980), Strong's correlative argument – that imperialist tendencies were not confined to medical professions but were evident in sociology itself, too – remained unaddressed. However, in this paper, it should be noted that whilst 'qualitative' studies provide dentistry research with dentists' and patients' understandings of oral health, the tendencies towards coding people's understandings within thematic analysis says more about researchers' practices than about the social world they purportedly describe.

'Qualitative methods' can be used to capture people's understandings; however, unless researchers are careful to follow the admonitions of the original formulation of GT, the coding of these understandings may be at variance with the lived experiences of those who participated in the research study. This point is evident with the (mis)use of software programs for qualitative analysis (Amin, Harrison & Weinstein, 2006). As noted elsewhere (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014: 134-135), these are expedient data management tools but analyses remain contingent upon the codes inputted by the researcher. Whatever claims are made for qualitative methods, they remain instruments of what Strong (1979) and Schegloff (1997, p. 167) called "sociological" and "theoretical" imperialism.

The form of the foregoing analysis is crucial for researchers in interdisciplinary fields. This critical incident analysis of literature sites in information science and dentistry research indicates that researchers are recipients of inflationary and distorted analytic claims. This has ramifications for those reliant on a qualitative evidence-base within these areas.

'Qualitative research' glosses a wide range of methods and methodologies, and is not reducible to Grounded Theory (GT). As accounts of theoretical considerations testify (Talja et al. 2005), methodological ramifications of doing qualitative research cause problems for the introduction of qualitative research to interdisciplinary literature sites. GT requires researchers to follow a series of stages. The incompleteness of research designs that claim use of GT reflect looser analytic strategies such as 'thematic analysis'.

Researchers using qualitative research methods need to take care in regard to the generation of categories used to codify data. The current state of the art in information science and dentistry research is characterized by "theoretical imperialism": the imposition of analysts' categories external to the data they are used to codify.

The observations made in this paper are connected with "theoretical imperialism". Theoretical imperialism refers to the imposition of analytic categories on data that are external to the settings of investigation, which are then used to codify these data. This produces an intervening and unwarranted layer to analysts' accounts of these data. In effect, theoretical imperialism conceptualizes the practices whereby these data are produced by analysts, which documents a failure to follow the original formulation of GT (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

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