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Selection of Grounded Theory as an Appropriate Research Methodology for a Dissertation: One Student's Perspective

James W. Jones, Ed.D.

Abstract

Doctoral students wanting to use grounded theory as a methodological approach for their dissertation often face multiple challenges gaining acceptance of their approach by their committee. This paper presents the case that the author used to overcome these challenges through the process of eliminating other methodologies, leaving grounded theory as the preferred method for the desired research issue. Through examining the approach used successfully by the author, other doctoral students will be able to frame similar arguments justifying the use of grounded theory in their dissertations and seeing the use of the method continue to spread into new fields and applications.

This paper examines the case built for selecting grounded theory as a defensible dissertation approach. The basic research issue that I wanted to investigate was *how practitioners in an applied field sought information in their work*; in other words, how they researched. I further narrowed the investigation down to a more specific field, but the paper presented here is left in broader form so that other students can see the approach in more general terms.

Introduction

> "How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth?" … Sherlock Holmes to Watson in **The Sign of the Four** (Doyle, 1950, p. 163)

Like many other doctoral students aspiring to use grounded theory for their dissertations, I had a graduate committee comprised of members who had never supervised a dissertation that used grounded theory and whose members had never done

grounded theory themselves. As there were no other faculty members on campus who were experts in the approach, and because a dissertation exclusively using grounded theory had never been done on that campus, I had to fill the role of both educator and sales representative for the approach.

For me, the key to being successful in this approach was to show how grounded theory was not just one *possible* approach for the desired purpose of the study, but in fact the *only* appropriate methodology. I moved from broad research issues down to more focused examples, eliminating all the "impossible" (as Holmes put it), eventually leaving grounded theory as the only acceptable choice for the study.

I deliberately selected texts and references that had been used in previous courses with the committee members as it was felt that they would make relevant exemplars. The intent was to use resources that the committee members were familiar with and already trusted in order to make the case, so that the argument could be kept focused on the methodology rather than the references. Other references that were similar in research intent were also used to illustrate the acceptability in the academic community of the approach, albeit in other disciplines. This resulted in a more limited but focused literature review than might be used in other instances, but one that was intended to be more persuasive.

Research Approach and Intent

Research has been defined as "the formal, systematic application of the scientific and disciplined inquiry approach to the study of problems" (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p.3). Just as there are many different types of problems, there are consequently many different types of research methodologies used to investigate them. Glatthorn and Joyner (2005) see the research problem and how to investigate it as intimately intertwined, "The identification of the problem and the choice of methodology may be seen as an interactive process, with each influencing the other" (p. 46). Selecting the appropriate methodology for a research problem is therefore much like selecting the right tool out of your toolbox; you might be able to get the job done with screwdriver, but it will not be as effective or efficient if you really needed a hammer all along.

There are several important factors to consider when

selecting a methodology. Madsen (1992) states, "Once you have set forth the research problem…you must set forth precise steps you propose to take to answer your question and solve your problem" (p. 68). Sogunro (2002) describes this process:

> When faced with the question of which method to choose in conducting research…the following factors are important for consideration: matching research purposes and questions with methods; depth of study of phenomena; availability of resources (money, time, etc [sic]); availability of supporting literature; 'knowledge pay off' (i.e., which approach will produce more useful knowledge); and 'style' or preference for a method….and so forth. (p. 8)

Note that the first factor Sogunro (2002) advises us to consider is the research *purpose.* The purpose of the research will drive the rest of the process of selecting an appropriate methodology. Merriam and Simpson (2000) posit, "Ultimately the value or purpose of research in an applied field is to improve the quality of practice of that discipline" (p. 7). While this lofty goal of improving practice may indeed be the ultimate goal of the researcher, contributing aspects must be examined as well.

First, whose practice is the researcher interested in improving? For the given case of examining how practitioners seek information, the answer to this question may have dramatic effects in the selection of an appropriate methodology. For example, if the researcher was the manager of practitioners and ultimately only wanted to improve the practice of the practitioners directly under his or her charge, this would be a very important consideration. In this case, an *action research* approach might be most appropriate, since "its purpose is to obtain knowledge that can be applied directly to a particular situation" and does not require hypothesis formulation, extensive procedural planning, or experimental condition control (Merriam & Simpson, 2000).

On the other hand, if the researcher is an information manager at a particular firm who is considering subscribing to an improved online search service, action research may not be the most appropriate choice. Instead, the information manager might really only want to know how much practitioners currently use the current package to evaluate whether or not an upgrade would

be worthwhile. In this case, evaluation or evaluation research might be appropriate where a decision will be made based on the systematic collection and analysis of data (Boulmetis & Dutwin, 2005; Gay & Airasian, 2003).

In addition to whose practice the researcher is interested in improving, the researcher must consider the intended audience for the research. In the examples discussed above, the action researcher or the evaluation researcher may or may not be interested in preparing and/or presenting the results to anyone else. It may simply be a separate project undertaken in the course of other duties, or it may be formalized in a report to upper management for approval. On the other hand, a pragmatic academic may want to publish the findings in peer reviewed journals that require more rigorous and/or replicable methodological treatments. This too would influence the researcher's definition of the ultimate purpose for the investigation. Dissertations related to an applied field may want to appeal to audiences in both industry and academia.

The preferences and skills of the researcher must also be honestly evaluated (Brause, 2000; Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005). If the researcher dislikes interacting with people, methodologies that use interviews may not be desirable. If the researcher dislikes statistical analysis, a quantitative approach may be unsuitable. Besides simple likes and dislikes, acknowledgement of skills and preferences towards certain methods may be given and evaluated. For example, if the researcher has extensive experience in correlational research but another approach is warranted, new and/or additional skills may have to be obtained.

There are also other practical considerationsl. As mentioned previously by Sogunro (2002), the resources available, particularly money and time, must be considered. There are at least two related aspects of time that might affect the researcher in the selection of a methodology: the time that the results are required or desired and the time that it will take to produce them. As Glatthorn and Joyner (2005) state, "In general, qualitative studies take more time than quantitative ones. Ethnographic studies are especially time-sensitive" (p. 46). If the researcher needs the results in a month, this will clearly limit the choice of methodologies or preclude the proper conduct of the study altogether.

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Methodology Selection

With the above considerations in mind, the researcher begins to be guided towards certain methodologies and away from others. For the purposes of this paper, it will be assumed that there are no overriding constraints on methodology, such as publishing in a journal devoted to a particular approach or having to have the results in a month. Further, it will be assumed that the research will not be used or consumed solely by the researcher, but will be presented to at least a limited audience of academics and professionals with the goal of explaining and potentially even predicting this information-seeking behavior. The final product is a defensible dissertation of the quality expected of a doctoral candidate and the utility to be used by practitioners.

Although one of the stated intents of the research is for it to ultimately be applied by practitioners in the field, there is no desire to judge the information-seeking behavior of the participants, only to learn what it is. Although considered a form of applied research, evaluation research approaches would therefore be categorically rejected in this case, as they are intended to be used in rating and making decisions on the subject, as discussed previously.

The process therefore turns back to the research question itself. The key word in the research problem is the interest in *how* practitioners seek information. In general, a study to of *how* or *why* things are a certain way would indicate a qualitative approach would be most suitable (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p. 13). This allows for the development of hypotheses about how the behavior occurs, in contrast to a quantitative approach, which would test hypotheses (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p. 8-9). As recommended by Merriam and Simpson, if it is revealed "that no theory fits the phenomenon under investigation, the one study goal may be to formulate a theory and/or hypothesis to explain observed events or behavior" (2000, p. 27).

However, eliminating approaches that are exclusively quantitative only narrows the field of potential methodologies slightly; there are a host of qualitative approaches left to consider. Action research, discussed previously, is considered a qualitative approach, but it is also considered to be non-generalizable and limited to the specific conditions under which it

was conducted (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Since the researcher has a specific audience of both academics and practitioners in mind, with the intent of the research being applied, action research would therefore be eliminated from consideration. Since the researcher is interested in current practices, historical research methods are also inappropriate. This leaves several other options remaining.

A case study approach would allow detailed investigation into how a practitioner or practitioners seek information. Perry (1998) believes that case studies are particularly suitable for offering realistic portrayals of behavior:

> Given this appropriateness of realism for case study research, the research problems addressed in theses are more descriptive than prescriptive, for example, no positivist experiments or cause-and-effect paths are required to solve the research problem. That is, the research problem is usually a "how do?" problem rather than a "how should?" problem. This "how do" rather than "how should" problem captures the positive versus normative dichotomy, for case study research is concerned with describing real world phenomena rather than developing normative decision models. (p. 787)

This fits the stated research problem of *how do* practitioners research. Case studies are likely to provide some important information, as Stake (2005) discusses:

> We recognize a large population of hypothetical cases and a small subpopulation of accessible cases….On representational grounds, the epistemological opportunity seems small, but we are optimistic that we can learn some important things from almost any case. We choose one case or a small number of exemplars. (p. 451)

While learning *something* is a good start, the case study approach has several drawbacks for the proposed study, which focuses on how practitioners in an applied field seek information. First, it may be difficult to actually define a *case* to study for this research. Stake (2005) explains:

> Custom has it that not everything is a case. A child [patient] may be a case, easy to specify. A doctor may be a

> case. But *his or her doctoring* probably lacks the specificity, the boundedness, to be called a case. (p. 444)

Similarly, a practitioner seeking information may likewise not be a suitable case for study. More importantly, while a case study would provide a lot of detail about that particular practitioner being examined, this may be inadequate for the given purpose, since the researcher wants to know how practitioners (plural) seek information. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001) point this limitation of case studies out:

> They are not generalisable [sic] in the conventional sense. By definition, case studies can make no claims to be typical….because the sample is small and idiosyncratic, and because data is predominantly non-numerical, there is no way to establish the probability that data is representative of some larger population. For many researchers and others, this renders any case study findings as of little value. (p. 10)

This leaves us to consider other methodologies as more appropriate.

Ethnography is another qualitative approach that could be considered for this project. Gay and Airasian (2003) define ethnography as "a qualitative approach that studies the participants in their natural setting" (p. 16). This definition seems appropriate for the given study, as the researcher wants to know how practitioners seek information in their natural work setting. However, as Groat and Wang (2002) elaborate:

> Although it emphasizes in-depth engagement with its subject…the researcher's aim is not to create an explanatory theory that can be applied to many settings. Rather, ethnographic research culminates in a rich and full delineation of a particular setting that persuades a wide audience of its human validity. (p. 182)

This level of detail and focus on the context, while potentially interesting, are not what the researcher is seeking in this instance, eliminating ethnography as a suitable methodology for this study.

Although not exclusively a qualitative method, a grounded theory approach may also be considered for this research. The researcher is looking for a way of explaining *how* practitioners in

an applied field seek information; in other words, a *theory* of how this is done in actual practice. Building a theory based on, or grounded in, actual data is specifically what a grounded theory methodology is designed to do. Glaser (1998) defines grounded theory as "the systematic generation of theory from data acquired by a rigorous research method" (p. 3).

Grounded theory is used to investigate problems of why and how in a systematic way, one that is "grounded" in the data itself rather than being deduced logically or hypothetically. It is particularly well suited for fields of practice, as it can be used to "give the practitioner a conceptual tool with which to guide practice" (Merriam & Simpson, 2000, p. 113). This satisfies the aforementioned overall goal of applied research of improving practice.

Another advantage of the grounded theory approach is its flexibility with regard to data collection and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This is particularly important in this case because the researcher wants to know how the practitioners actually seek information, which presents difficulties with regard to data collection, as the behavior may not be possible to directly observe. As noted in Ellis' (1993) grounded theory study of the information-seeking patterns of academics, the use of direct observation is "almost totally impracticable" (p. 475) due to the nature of the study. Even if access and timing worked to the researcher's favor and he was present at the exact moment that a practitioner was seeking information, the actions would not be transparent and would not allow any depth of understanding, specifically regarding the "how" issues, to be obtained. Furthermore, the situation would certainly not ameliorate itself were the researcher to continuously ask the practitioner what they were doing, why they were doing it that way, and what influences were acting upon their decision making process. The observation of research would, by definition, end at that point, with the possible outcome being that the researcher would no longer be welcome in the setting.

Data collection methods other than observation, are therefore required. While journaling or diaries would be possible approaches, they have several drawbacks. First, it is doubtful that they would be properly maintained, if completed at all, by busy practitioners. This is particularly true of personnel in an applied industry, who might not be familiar with journaling and

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may view the process as strange and/or uncomfortable. As Ellis (1993) stated in regard to his study of academic research activities,

> The use of diaries…would have relied on the willingness and ability of the researchers to complete the diaries, and, even if the researchers had been able to complete them, it is questionable whether they would have been able to have done so comprehensively and accurately (p.475).

Furthermore, the data collection would still be post hoc; no one would stop in the middle of their information-seeking to record their actions, thoughts, and motivations. Finally, the collection process would be slowed considerably as the diaries were completed, collected, and read before learning if they contained information of value to the researcher.

Grounded theory often employs interviewing as its data collection technique, and this appears most appropriate in this case. Interviews are particularly suited for this approach; as Fontana and Frey (2005) stated, "the focus of interviews is moving to encompass the *hows* of people's lives…as well as the traditional *whats*" (p. 698). These *hows* and *whats* are exactly what the researcher is seeking.

As with any methodology, there are several potential criticisms of grounded theory as an appropriate research tool for this study. A common criticism of grounded theory studies is that they are not "real" research. These criticisms are nothing new; in 1967 Glaser and Strauss noted that "qualitative research is generally labeled 'unsystematic,' 'impressionistic,' or 'exploratory'" (1967, p. 223). However, these criticisms fall short in the case of grounded theory as a methodology. It is not exclusively qualitative; it has a systemic process including sampling, coding, and memoing; it is based on data rather than impressions; and, while it can explore new subject matter, is a complete methodology rather than simply a starting point for further (presumably quantitative) research.

The acceptance of the grounded theory framework has been evinced by its inclusion in a host of research texts, in subjects ranging from architecture (Groat & Wang, 2002) to education (Gay & Airasian, 2003; Merriam & Simpson, 2000) to qualitative research in general (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) (while it uses qualitative data, it is not a qualitative method). As Glaser has

noted, grounded theory has "product proof" which nullifies criticisms: "Let the product legitimize it self [sic], as it is doing in health, education, and business professions, where it is crucial to have relevant research that works" (1998, p. 16).

Grounded theory is therefore the most appropriate methodology for this research study. It allows the researcher to determine how practitioners actually seek information in their field and develop a theory to explain and predict this behavior. Although there are minor concerns with the methodology, these are outweighed by its applicability for this situation.

Conclusion

The persuasions described previously convinced my committee that grounded theory was not just the best methodology for this study, but was in fact the only appropriate choice. This allowed me to gain the committee's acceptance with grounded theory as the methodological approach and for the study to progress. While there were certainly still other challenges to the use of grounded theory for a dissertation proposal, the acceptance of the method in general was a key factor in the overall success of my completing the process and successfully defending my dissertation in the summer of 2008.

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Striking a Balance between Program Requirements and GT Principles: Writing a compromised GT proposal

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Abstract

Glaser's term "compromised GT proposal" (2001, p.114) refers to the type of Grounded Theory (GT) proposal that is written in order to conform to the requirements of a standardized qualitative research proposal. A GT proposal needs only to supply information on the area of interest, the data source and a statement of method to the effect that the researcher begin to collect, code and analyse the data and let the theory emerge. Thus, the proposal may only occupy "a page or two" (Glaser, 2001, p. 111). Whilst being consistent with the methodology, a GT proposal sometimes has to give way to the format specified by a PhD program or committee even though the format was not defined for a GT proposal and in some areas, conflicts with GT principles; for example, the format may require a literature review. This short paper reports on my experience of writing a compromised GT proposal as a first-time GT researcher. It describes how both Glaser's advice on writing compromised GT research proposals and the characteristics of the substantive area of the proposed research were used to satisfy program requirements while still maintaining GT fundamentals.

The Program Requirements for Research Proposal

As a PhD student at the School of Library, Archives, and Information Studies (SLAIS), my area of research is archival and information studies, which traditionally does not have discipline-specific or preferred research methodologies. Students may select any of the social science research methodologies as long as they justify the selection for their dissertation projects. My selection of GT is based on three grounds: first, it is evident that there are no theories existing in the substantive area which I am interested in; second, I have been conducting deductive (i.e., theory-testing) research for all my research projects and I consider my dissertation project a good opportunity to practice inductive