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Writing a compromised GT proposal

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

Sherry L. Xie, Ph.D. Candidate

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

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research; third, based on my past research experiences, I trust that I am theoretically sensitive and capable of generating concepts and hypotheses.

The requirements of writing a research proposal in my school are contained in the *PhD Handbook of Policies and Procedures*, which explains the purpose of defending the research proposal (Table 1), lists the required contents of the proposal (Table 2), and explains that: “A well-designed proposal should provide the basis for the first two or three chapters of the final dissertation. In most cases, the proposal should be at least 30 pages long” (SLAIS, 2005).

Table 1: Purposes of the Defence

- to ensure that the student has a clear understanding of the research he/she proposes to conduct,
- to ensure that all Committee members have a clear conception of the research proposed,
- to reach agreement on the methodology to be followed for the dissertation research, and
- to ensure that all Committee members formally approve of the student's topic and research plan.

Table 2: The Contents of a Proposal

- Title page, with student's name, working title, and names of Committee members
- Table of contents
- Introduction, including an explanation of the Research Question
- Literature review
- Methodology
- Information on issues relating to ethical review and their resolution, if applicable
- Planning information - Timeline, itemized budget, if applicable, any other appropriate planning information
- Reference list

While not as constraining as some proposal formats, students are required to demonstrate to the committee the breadth and depth

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of their knowledge about the research subject (i.e., literature review, research questions), the suitability of the selected methodology and the do-ability of the project. The purpose and format of the GT proposal are apparently not considered, or accommodated, here.

The Substantive Area of Research

The term “substantive area” does not have a formal definition in Glaser’s books. In *Theoretical Sensitivity*, Glaser states that a substantive area in GT is “a specific area e.g., heart disease or route milkmen” (1978, p. 52); however, the criteria for determining “specific” are not provided. Based on my understanding of Glaser’s discussions on “substantive theory,” “general substantive theory” and “formal theory” (1978, p. 52; 1992, p. 99), the substantive area that interests me is defined as the Electronic Documents and Records Management System (EDRMS) implemented in the process of developing electronic government in the Government of Canada. This substantive area is comprised of a general substantive area, i.e., the EDRMS, and the qualifiers that make it specific: electronic government development in the Government of Canada. The EDRMS is a complicated piece of software designed to manage (or control) the creation, use, and maintenance of documents and records in electronic format, which now predominates in organizations. The design, implementation, and operation of the EDRMS are primarily relevant to the academic field of Archival Science, which I study.

To write a GT proposal for this substantive area following the GT requirements, I need only to specify two items: area of interest and data source (Glaser, 2001, p. 111). Thus, my GT proposal would only identify the substantive area that interests me and how I would collect data to discover problems, and generate theories for the discovered problems within a Canadian federal government department. This, however, will not satisfy the program requirements for proposal defence. I did not request changes to the current *PhD Handbook* to consider GT when writing my proposal because I am the first PhD SLAIS student who has selected GT and consider that a request for change would be more likely to be accepted after I had successfully defended my GT proposal. I decided to write a compromised GT proposal – a proposal satisfying the current program requirements to the degree that my Committee is willing to

accept and support it but still maintaining the essence of GT. In other words, the proposal needed to present an acceptable balance between the program requirements and GT principles.

The Compromised GT Proposal

The major difference between a standardized social research proposal and a GT proposal rests with the literature review. A literature review is an indispensable requirement for writing a standardized proposal because it is used to formulate the theoretical framework (i.e., identified research gaps and proposed hypotheses) under which a research project is designed and conducted. As such, a literature review serves as the foundation for traditional social research on which the researcher demonstrates his or her theoretical grasp of the substantive area (i.e., research questions and researcher qualifications), justifies the suitability of selected methodology, and defends the do-ability of the research design. GT, however, requires that the literature review be avoided at the research proposal stage. According to Glaser, "There is a need not to review any of the literature in the substantive area under study" (1992, p. 31), which is one of two "very strong dicta" (Glaser, 1998, p. 67). The "need not to review" is derived directly from the underlying logic of GT to ground theories in empirical data, that is, the perceptions of the actors in the real world. In GT's view, both research problems and the theories developed to account for the problems emerge from field data. The preconceived theoretical framework based on the literature review typically causes data to be forced into the framework and the preconceived research problems most likely are irrelevant to the substantive area being studied (Glaser, 1992, p. 21; 1998, pp. 115-132). At the proposal stage, reviewing literature may be a waste of time and may be counterproductive to theory generation (Glaser, 1998, p. 69).

However, to avoid a literature review in a research proposal "only works with a PhD committee that is totally sold on GT" (Glaser, 2001, p. 111). To help students overcome the difficulty of satisfying the standardized requirements, Glaser recommends the following:

- 1.) Studying areas with no literature. When possible, open up areas where there is virtually no literature, thus the researcher does not have to contend with what has been "said" (1998, p. 73);
- 2.) Relying on all-is-data and constant comparative analysis:

a.) Turn the literature review into data collection to be constantly compared after the review is done. The attitude is data collection, not reverence for the authenticity and authority of the printed word and the published author (1998, p. 72);

b.) If a researcher has studied for years the substantive area, he/she should take his/her knowledge of the literature as data and write copious notes on it. Later as the study begins, these notes become more data to be constantly compared (1998, p. 73);

c.) Delimit coverage to giving the committee what they emphasize. Then do the study and let GT correct the preconceptions (2001, p. 114).

3.) Writing the proposal with stated flexibility: The proposal should provide some strategies for building a clear conceptual framework while retaining the flexibility to allow the unanticipated to emerge (2001, p. 114).

4.) Demonstrating research qualification:

a.) Examples of conceptual ability can be shown to the committee (2001, p. 121);

b.) The candidate facing a non GT oriented committee should engage in some sort of competence display on as many levels as possible (2001, p. 121).

5.) Finding a mentor: To be supervised and supported by a GT mentor resolves a major committee concern on guiding skill and its development (2001, p. 121).

Recommendations 1), 2) b, 4), and 5) were relevant to the writing and defending of my GT proposal, which also took advantages of the characteristics of the substantive area to be studied. The compromised GT proposal occupies 44 pages (references not included), satisfying the program requirement of being "at least 30 pages long" (SLAIS, 2005). Furthermore, the strategies used to strike the balance between the program requirements and GT principles were reflected in the sections of my proposal, i.e., *The Setting, Area of Problem, Area of Research, Research Methodology and Project Planning*.

The Setting

The term "setting" is used as it is in a traditional research proposal, which serves the purpose of delimitating the boundaries

of the research focus and keeping the project to a manageable level. In the context of GT, this section is about the substantive area, specifically, its three aspects: the Government of Canada, the development of electronic government, and the development of electronic government in the Government of Canada. These areas were the subjects of my minor area which I studied in the first two years in the PhD program for the purposes of understanding and of identifying relevance to my major study (i.e., electronic records management and its sub-field, the EDRMS). The literature in these areas includes the type of discipline-specific (i.e., electronic government, the development of electronic government in the Government of Canada) and the type of government publications (i.e., the Government of Canada, the development of electronic government in the Government of Canada). The literature in these areas were not studied to identify research gaps or to formulate research questions/hypotheses. In the proposal, the literature was used, in the form of quoted or summarized factual information, to introduce the three areas and their defining features. I thus do not consider it a violation of the GT principle of “not to review literature” at the beginning of the research. At the same time, the literature was noted as data for constant comparison at the later stage of the research process.

While information in these areas was quoted or summarized, it was carefully selected based on its relevance to the proposed project, which is an analytical process similar to the search for relevant literature in a standardized research proposal. Because of the vast amount of information in these areas, figures for each area were crafted to depict key features and relationships within and amongst the areas. This, to a large degree, satisfies the program’s requirement regarding researcher qualifications because it demonstrates to the committee the width and depth of my knowledge of the areas relevant to the proposed study as well as my abilities of assessing and sorting massive information. The analysis was done using factual information from the literature, not research findings or theoretical articles. I consider this section necessary even for an uncompromised, GT-compliant proposal because the substantive area in this case is not readily understandable like “dying patients” or “alcoholism,” which do not require explanations.

Area of Problem

In contrast, the section *Area of Problem*, is not necessary for a GT compliant proposal. The section was included to satisfy the program requirement of identifying research problems or gaps. The problem “identified” here is a publicly reported and serious issue: there is an *information management crisis in the Government of Canada*. Because information management emerged in the *Setting* section as one of the two key defining features (the other being information technology), the information management crisis looks like a research problem identified in relation to the setting. Satisfying this program requirement does not violate the GT principle of not identifying research problems before the research starts because the “identification” was not based on a literature review, thus the problem was not pre-conceived. The GT research problem that should wait for emergence was not identified and is still waiting for discovery in the substantive area.

Area of Research

The *Area of Research* introduces the specific EDRMS that the proposed research intends to study, which, together with the setting, forms the substantive area of study. The literature used for this section is the type of government publications, which again is not reviewed but presented. This section also identifies the EDRMS’ relationships with the areas in the setting through analyzing the factual information previously presented in the proposal. The identification of relationships between the EDRMS and the setting establishes the significance of the research because of the publicly reported information management problem. The analysis demonstrates my research competence, which, at the same time, follows the GT requirement of avoiding literature review in the substantive area. Literature on the core area of my substantive area, i.e., electronic records management and its sub-field, the EDRMS, is not reviewed in its entirety.

Although a considerable amount of information is presented in the proposal and in-depth analyses were conducted to identify complex relationships, the research question (the other critical program requirement) was not formulated because the literature was not reviewed. The research question is where I applied GT principles authentically without any compromises. The justifications for not formulating the research question in my

proposal include:

GT requires, fundamentally, avoiding pre-conceptions, i.e., research questions and/or hypotheses derived from literature review, as much as possible in order for concepts to emerge from data collected from the substantive area. Researchers are required to be open to data and not to be restrained by research questions.

The absence of research questions creates no problems but instead offers benefits for conducting the research. It creates no problems because GT's theoretical interviewing and theoretical sampling techniques are capable of guiding the direction of research, thus replacing the guiding role of research questions required by other types of methodologies. It is beneficial because lack of research questions eliminates the danger of forcing data into existent concepts or pre-conceived categories, thus guarantees the generated theories are relevant to the area of study and powerful for explaining the main concern.

Research Methodology

A detailed *Research Methodology* section is unnecessary for a GT proposal because as a general method of inquiry, GT can be used for any substantive area and can work with all types of data and is already well documented (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The *Research Methodology* section is absolutely necessary for a compromised GT proposal because GT needs to be first introduced and then justified for being selected. My proposal introduces GT and its three "versions" and justifies my selection of Classic GT. The justifications focused on the need for theories to be generated for the substantive area where currently theories do not exist and my personal cognitive style which finds Classic GT convincing. I find it is hard to appreciate constructivist "GT" and it would be unreasonable to require a researcher to apply a methodology with which he or she has issues.

Classic GT was introduced to satisfy the program requirement of "[reaching] agreement on the methodology to be followed for the dissertation research" (SLAIS, 2005). Following Glaser's advice on not rewriting GT, key concepts and processes are introduced using information directly from the Classic GT books in simple sentences, with references being made to Classic GT books when necessary (Glaser, 2001, p. 127). These concepts

include constant comparative analysis, theoretical sensitivity, and all-is-data; procedures include theoretical interviewing, sampling, coding, memoing, sorting, etc. Emphasis was placed on the fact that GT is a complete methodological package which contains guidance on each step in the research process and that GT can be understood effectively when it is being practiced. Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis (Glaser 1992) helped answer many questions during the proposal defence.

Data collection techniques identified in the proposal include: free-style conversational interviewing and document reading. Free-style interviewing with emergent questions is a GT-specific data collecting technique which is driven by the logic of GT (Glaser, 2001, p. 174). The employment of this technique is critical to the generation of theories and to the quality of the generated theories. To follow this GT requirement, there should not be identified informants or pre-conceived interviewing questions. This, however, causes difficulties for obtaining ethical review approval because the letter for informants' consent and sample questions – two typical requirements for any research involving human subjects – cannot be submitted in the ethical review application. Compromises were made in my proposal to address the difficulties following Glaser's advice to offer "general questions to cover [the] area of interest, with explanations on the emergence of interview style and specific questions" (Glaser, 2001, p. 141). Sample questions were conceived but focusing on the technological aspect of the EDRMS. These questions are necessary for the researcher to understand the operation of the system and at the same time, demonstrate to the Ethical Review Board that the questions are unlikely to cause privacy concerns. An initial group of informants (i.e., records managers of departments) was identified to allow a sample consent letter to be drafted. The proposal explains the possibility of site- and informant-spreading using the rationale of theoretical sampling and states that updates will be submitted to the Board when major changes in informants and/or interview questions occur.

The aspects of the substantive area serve as qualifiers for site selection. Both the initial or concentration site and the subsequent sites are designed to be selected based on their status of participating in the electronic government development in the Government of Canada. The site needs to be a department or agency in the Government of Canada which participates in the

development of electronic government and which is a user of the EDRMS.

Role of Literature

While literature was a significant component in the writing of my proposal, there is not a section named *Literature Review* because literature was not reviewed in the manner required by the standardized research proposal. For the purpose of explanation, the section *Role of Literature* is placed within the *Research Methodology*, summarizing the usage of literature in the proposal and the proposed project:

Literature in this proposal

Literature in this proposal was not reviewed for identifying research gaps or formulating research questions, hypotheses; instead, it was used to:

- describe the setting in which the proposed research is situated,
- reveal a publicly reported problem that is relevant to the research,
- describe and justify the area of research in relation to the setting,
- introduce and justify the selected methodology, and
- plan the research.

Literature in this research

Literature in this research will be read and reviewed as data at a later stage following the GT's all-is-data principle: "The literature is not forgotten or ignored, it is put in proper sequencing of GT research phases" (Glaser, 2001, p. 139). A note was created in this section addressing literature review on the core aspect of my substantive area, i.e., electronic records management and its sub-field, the EDRMS. Although literature in this area was not reviewed in this proposal, it was reviewed when I studied my major area and for other research projects. As such, pre-conceptions exist in my mind though they are not explicit in the proposal. The note documents this fact and serves as a reminder of re-reviewing the literature later in the research process and in light of the discovered concepts and hypotheses.

Project Planning

The *Project Planning* is a section needed by both the GT-

compliant and the standardized research proposal; it contains information regarding the do-ability of the project, which is usually a major concern of the committee. A standardized proposal provides detailed information on timeline, resources, anticipated difficulties, etc., for the purpose of ensuring the successful execution of the designed project. To provide details on these aspects in a GT proposal is quite difficult because the research process follows the track of theory generating and it cannot predict how concepts and their properties will emerge, when they will emerge, or when theoretical saturation can be reached. My proposal uses direct quotes to help answer the program requirement of project planning:

"Time is very predictable in GT research. It should not take more than a year to do a GT dissertation or study.... GT data management is not expensive and does not require staff.Tape recording and typing, which costs greatly in time and money, is not necessary in GT.... A GT can be stopped at anytime if resources are near exhaustion since a little theory goes a long way. Most people use one or two GT hypotheses based on a few categories no matter how complex theory" (Glaser 2001, p. 115). This information, however, did not ease the committee's concern about the execution of the project. To address the concern, it recommended inviting a GT expert on campus to join my committee for the purpose of guiding the conduct of the project and to ensure my questions to be answered.

Summary

Applying Glaser's advice and taking advantages of the characteristics of the substantive area, my compromised GT proposal achieved the balance of satisfying the program requirements without violating GT principles. Through the "alternative use" of literature, the proposal demonstrated my qualifications and competence of conducting research, highlighted the significance of the proposed research, and justified the suitability of the selected methodology. However, it did not completely ease the committee's concern about the execution of the methodology. This is perhaps due to the fact that none of the committee members have supervised GT projects. The proposal was successfully defended on May 4, 2009, with all committee members agreeing on the significance of the research and the suitability of GT to the research area; no revisions were requested. An on-campus GT expert was solicited by my

supervisor after the defence, who agreed to join my committee. My project is ready to begin. As the first student in my School who has defended GT as her research methodology, I hope GT will be recognized by more students as a defensible methodology and the work I have done will pave the way towards a smoother, easier process of proposing GT research projects in the School.

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