
Story vs. Concept:**A Few Notes on a Challenge Journalists and Grounded Theorists Share**

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Abstract

In grounded theory, concerns about the tension between description (storytelling) versus theorizing mirrors the tensions between description and analysis in journalism. In this essay, the author, a former journalist, discusses some of the shared history between journalism and qualitative research and suggests how a journalistic organizing practice – “the nutgraph” — can raise the conceptualization of even some theoretical work.

Keywords: Robert E. Park, journalistic method, grounded theory history, Chicago Sociology, Barney Glaser

To some of their critics, sociologists doing qualitative research in the late 19th century were not doing much more than descriptive journalism. Some critics still throw that kind of shade at qualitative research. In grounded theory in particular, concerns about the tension between description (storytelling) versus theorizing mirrors the tensions between description and analysis in journalism. “Stop the story talk. What’s the concept?” was Dr. Barney Glaser’s frequent admonition at troubleshooting seminars when people eagerly shared—overshared in Glaser’s view—data at the sake of conceptualization. The Journalist

Resource (2016) quoted Nicholas Lemann, an accomplished nonfiction writer and former dean at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, on the challenge:

A central problem in the practice of journalism is that most of the time, we are trying to engage in narrative and analysis at the same time. They don't naturally go together. Journalists more often unwittingly let the narrative distort the analysis than vice versa (para. 2).

As a former journalist, now a professor and grounded theorist, I wish more grounded theory was accessible to lay people and that more journalists produced work that was smarter. I agree with the sentiments expressed by both Glaser and Lemann, but I often think about how a better balance can be achieved in both. It is not an easy challenge for grounded theorists or journalists, but I write this essay to give grounded theorists a little insight into the shared historical challenges. It is an old problem.

Robert E. Park, a leading figure in the development of sociology at the University of Chicago, worked as a newspaper reporter in several cities before he went to Germany to earn a doctorate in sociology. He saw the sociologist as being a "a kind of superreporter like the men who write for *Fortune* (*influential magazine founded in 1929*) ...reporting on the long-term trends which record what is actually going on rather than what, on the surface, merely seems to be going on (as cited by Denzin, 1997, 285). Park's interest in merging elements of journalism and theorizing began early in his career. As the University of Chicago Library (n.d.) noted in a centennial tribute, in the 1880s, while an undergraduate at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Park studied with philosopher John Dewey and, along with journalist Franklin Ford and Dewey conceived of the "Thought News," a "philosophizing newspaper," never launched, although it foresaw the ways journalism and qualitative re-

search n would grow in sophistication using interviews, documents, surveys, and statistics. Qualitative work evolved in this way as well.

Park's studies with sociologist Georg Simmel in Germany resulted in urban sociology and the early studies in social interactionism that provided the foundation for symbolic interactions and broader concerns with social processes. At Chicago, the first sociology department in the country, Park also created the first course on race relations, having spent seven years as public relations advisor to Booker T. Washington, the noted African American educator who built the Tuskegee Institute after returning from Germany. The path from Park to grounded theory is a fairly clear one. Park's student, Howard Becker, was on the team of Chicago sociologists, along with Anselm Strauss, who conducted an in-depth study of the process of medical students becoming doctors. Without the *Boys in White* (Becker et al., 1961), there would not have been Awareness of Dying. *Boys in White* helped Strauss develop as a medical sociologist, eventually moving to the University of California-San Francisco, where he started the graduate nursing school and soon recruited Barney Glaser and his analytic techniques from Columbia University.

The specifics behind the San Francisco death and dying projects do not need to be elaborated here, but I invoke the Awareness Context, not just because of its landmark status, but in illustration of the tension between description and conceptualization in a journalistic project close to 30 years ago that I did in a hospital. I am intentionally descriptive about my process to discuss the similarities between a longform journalism project and a grounded theory project.

In 1995, I was a contributor to a Sunday magazine, an almost nonexistent product today, suffering along with the decline of newspapers that carried them. At the time of this as-

signment, the hit television drama *ER* was getting a lot of attention in the press; its compelling storylines and attractive cast (actor George Clooney played a pediatric specialist assigned to the ER) resulted in many feature stories about life in real ERs. My editors wanted to take advantage of that interest, perhaps linking it to some of the issues, such as gang violence in our city, which was resulting in weekly shootings, and led to beefed up police security as rival gangs showed up in the emergency room after shootings. I started hanging out on the 3-11:30 p.m. shift, observing and sending memos to my editor. At that point in a story, the goal is just to observe and take notes and help people get comfortable with your presence, and keep the editors interested. I needed to find a character or small group of characters through which I could bring together a story on concerns in the ER. One evening, the public relations director who was my minder, asked, “Have you spoken with Pat yet?” I was not even sure who she was at that moment, but I took notice; like many in his position, the public relations man was a former news reporter. I got the hint. Meeting Pat, the charge nurse, would give me the center for the story, which I worked on for several months. At the time I met her, Pat was just back from a four-month leave she took after the kind of tragedy that leaves one breathless upon first hearing about it. As she had started her shift on a day in September, her husband called to tell her that her seventeen-year-old son “had done something to himself” and was being airlifted to the ER. Her son took his life with a gunshot to the head after an embarrassing arrest with pot. As she sat in the family room, she saw colleagues, some who had come in from days off, going in and out of the trauma room. Eventually, the trusted surgeon came into the room, took her chin in his hands and said, “He’s gone.”

It took time before I heard the entire story from Pat. The door cracked open one night when I noticed the little elephant jewelry, she wore each day and asked her the significance

of it. She said she would tell me eventually. The story came out in small pieces. She had started wearing the elephant to ease the discomfort of colleagues who avoided mentioning the tragedy when she returned to work. Taking on the elephant in the room was her way of breaking the silence and healing herself and the emergency department. As Pat spoke to me more, I noticed her colleagues were ready to speak with me about the night, one of those dynamics in ethnographic work as people follow the lead of the gatekeepers. Her cooperation was the signal they could talk to a reporter about that night. Shadowing Pat and her interactions with patients and families allowed me to see how she worked and put the ER in context with issues ranging from trends in nursing to the ER as a depository for social problems ranging from abandoned children to the publicly inebriated. As a form of literary journalism, there was quite a bit of description, from scenes in the trauma room to the sounds of keeling from someone whose child had died. The black oblong bag Pat is described as holding at the beginning of the story is last seen in a plastic bag carried out of the hospital by the son of a woman who died after a car accident.

Whenever I teach feature or magazine writing, sometimes using this article, I emphasize storytelling, description, the need to engage the reader's senses, I sometimes hear Glaser in my head: "Description runs the world, conjecture is a close second." After meeting Glaser, I began to see how true this is, and often, I get annoyed with the overemphasis on description and journalist's identification of themselves as storytellers rather than thinkers.

Inadvertent pickups of random descriptions can divert attention. After the ER story ran, there were the expected compliments for the story, but there were also a few people triggered by the detail that her son was home with the family's older bichon. What happened to the dog? they asked worriedly. Inadvertent pickups of random descriptions can divert atten-

tion. Yet I also know that complex social processes need characters and narratives to engage nonspecialists.

In grounded theory we propose a core concept that holds together categories. We do the same thing in journalism through the nut graph (or nutgraf) to orient readers to the larger unifying idea. Nutgraphs pretty much write themselves in short event-oriented stories. In long pieces like the ER story, it takes lots of time to develop the orienting neck of the story. After the opening scene, the nut graph, which signals what the article is about and its layers, comes together through a mix of memos of impression, images and data points. In this case, it's a section that underscores the uncertainty and fragility the ER symbolizes. The start to the approximately 800-word nutgraph reads:

The emergency department, or ER as it is colloquially called, is daily witness to the way fragile moments can turn against people, sometimes altering lives forever. It is a detour off of the routine course usually traveled, a fall into a zone in which time and life as they are usually experienced are suspended. With some glaring and troubling exceptions, people don't wake up in the morning thinking, *'Hmm looks like a nice day to visit the ER.'*

It's not something you plan for, like a trip to the hairdresser or family doctor for an annual checkup. When life takes an abrupt turn to the ER, it unleashes the kind of feelings expressed by a 29-year-old woman wheeled into an operating room with both legs broke after an automobile accident one weekday afternoon in March, *'I don't have time for this in my life,' she cried out from the gurney* (Martin, 1995, p.11).

Grounded theorists can take something from this process. Glaser counseled that grounded theorists should think theoretically and write substantively. In many ways the nut-

graph helps connect the dots and move stories along. A good nutgraph raises the conceptual level of memos and, subsequently, the conceptualization. It would filter the use of descriptive details to the most poignant.

One reason sociology is eschewed by journalism and others in the public sphere is that it is heavily jargonized, and grounded theory contributes to some of these writing problems with its language use. Like it or not, theorists need some writing techniques to attract readers and help them engage with important concepts. On the other hand, journalists are often accused of “not letting the facts get in the way of a good story.” Like Lemann, quoted earlier in this essay, I think much of it is unwitting and tied to various professional dictates. I have a couple of projects with which I am hoping to blend the strengths of both of my worlds, but I have been too long in the grounded theory world to bury a good concept.

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Disclosures:

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