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Unpacking researchers' creativity and imagination in grounded theorizing: An exemplar from IS research

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ABSTRACT

Although interest in the use of grounded theory methods has been increasing over the last decade, [Urquhart, Lehmann, and Myers \(2010\)](#) take note of the criticism that, in fact, such use has not yet produced higher levels of theory development in IS research. Along these lines, the current essay intends to make two main contributions. The first is to respond to the recent call for more studies developing grounded theorizing in IS research by providing a detailed description of the application of grounded theory methods in an emergent research area that combines IS and sustainability. The second, to extend current interpretations of grounded theory's basic characteristics by focusing on one important element: researchers' creativity. We argue that the role of researchers' creativity and imagination in the implementation of grounded theory methods has rarely been emphasized and should be the subject of further reflection. Although imagination is, from our perspective, inherent and crucial to any cognitive or intellectual process, the fact of being frequently neglected in IS research precludes its mobilization as a more purposeful influence in the process of building new theories.

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1. Introduction

Although the connecting of data and theory lies at the heart of strategic research activities, theory building remains one of researchers' biggest challenges. Whatever methodological approach is used, there is always an untraceable step that relies on the researcher's insight and imagination (Weick, 1989). Making sense of and interpreting data is a creative process, for both writer and reader. Our work is inspired by Langley's (1999) paper in which she evokes three processes involved in theory building: induction, where data drives generalization; deduction, where theory drives hypothesis testing; and inspiration, where creativity and insight hold sway. This last process, inspiration, seems to be crucial in plausible and sound connection of empirical data, prior knowledge, experience, readings and imagination. Langley (1999) argues that theorizing may mobilize both inductive and deductive approaches, iteratively or simultaneously, guided by inspiration. Sensemaking being the objective, "let us make sense whatever way we can" (p. 18).

Whenever inductive theorizing is under consideration, grounded theory inescapably enters into the discussion – sometimes approached as a methodology (Elmes, Strong, & Volkoff, 2005; Jones & Noble, 2007), sometimes as a method (Fendt & Sachs, 2008; Lings & Lundell, 2005) or a set of coding techniques (Levina, 2005; Vaast & Levina, 2006). Indeed, while Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 24) clearly define grounded theory as "a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon", Glaser (1992, p. 16) posits it as a "general methodology of analysis linked with data collection" that "uses a systematically applied set of methods to generate inductive theory about a substantive area".

When researchers refer to grounded theory as a methodology, they refer to a general philosophy of conducting inductive research. In this essay, we refer to grounded theory as a method, in line with Strauss and Corbin's definition of grounded theory as a set of techniques that guide the researcher in data collection and analysis (Elharidy, Nicholson, & Scapens, 2008). Such a method or set of techniques is designed to help researchers in producing innovative theories or explanations of a phenomenon in a delimited context. Applying grounded theory means developing theories that would explain a phenomenon in ways that have never been articulated before. However, the concept of creativity has not been explicitly addressed in the pioneers' work (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) or in latest versions of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Morse et al., 2008).

We recognized one seminal concept of grounded theory that is inherently connected to creativity: theoretical sensitivity. Sensitivity is the "ability to pick up on subtle nuances and cues in the data that infer or point to meaning" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008 p.19). Theoretical sensitivity should enable the researcher to creatively develop innovative theories. A set of techniques has been proposed to increase the researcher's capacity for theoretical sensitivity (Clarke, 2005; Merlino & Martinez, 2007; Scott, 2004) but, still, those techniques for sensitizing the research do not stand alone: they are subject to the imaginative process that researchers go through in order to make numerous choices during data analysis and interpretation. To what extent a researcher's choices do not transgress methodological principles yet, at the same time, are capable of seeing beyond data description towards innovative explanations is an important challenge for grounded theorists and remains a question meriting examination.

Not surprisingly, grounded theory is considered a risky research venture (Suddaby, 2006). The risks of the delicate balance between objectivity and subjectivity are manifested in several ways: the unavoidable presence of preconceptions when analyzing data; the predisposition to avoid considering incoming data that would cast doubt on previous analysis; the forcing of data into established frameworks; working with "blinkers" when coding the data (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000) and, most detrimental to inspiration, a blind adherence to a rigid method. Regarding this last "risk", Urquhart (2007) notes that coping with a set of guidelines, as grounded theory authors often propose, does not imply confining the creativity of researchers: prescriptiveness might come to be at odds with the essentially creative and emergent nature of the grounded theory process. Grounded theory's procedures "were designed not to be followed dogmatically but rather to be used creatively and flexibly by researchers as they deem appropriate" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 13).

While a number of IS researchers corroborate the importance of mobilizing prior knowledge in grounded theorizing (e.g., Boudreau & Robey, 2005; Mahnke, Wareham, & Bjorn-Andersen, 2008), comparable importance has not been attributed to the role of IS researchers' insight, imagination or creativity.

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