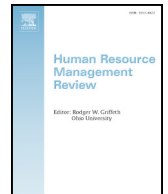


Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

## Human Resource Management Review

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/humres](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/humres)

## Blue skies and black boxes: The promise (and practice) of grounded theory in human resource management research

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### ARTICLE INFO

Available online xxxx

#### Keywords:

Qualitative methods  
Inductive methods  
Grounded theory  
Human resource management

### ABSTRACT

We provide an overview of the grounded theory approach, a methodology with significant (and largely untapped) potential for human resources (HR) research. Grounded theory is an abductive, data-driven, theory-building approach that can serve as a conceptual link between inductive and deductive research approaches. We begin by explaining the grounded theory approach in detail and outlining two versions of the method that have been used in high-impact management publications—the Gioia approach and the *Tabula Geminus* (twin slate) approach. We then provide an overview of the similarities and differences between grounded theory and other inductive and/or qualitative methodologies, namely, ethnography, discourse analysis, rhetorical analysis, and content analysis. Following this discussion, we offer a step-by-step guide to using grounded theory in human resources research, illustrating these principles with data and processes from extant research. Finally, we conclude by discussing best practices for achieving rigor with the grounded theory approach.

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### 1. Introduction

Grounded theory research has been conducted for the better part of a century in sociology, but in recent years, the organizational sciences have seen a virtual explosion of interest in the approach. Broadly defined, grounded theory refers to a set of strategies through which theory is generated via the simultaneous collection and analysis of data and the abductive interplay between induction and deduction (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The primary goal of such concurrent efforts is to build theory that is deeply informed by the data—the theoretical output can thus be said to be “grounded.” Given the management field’s prioritization of theory development (Pratt, 2008), the grounded theory approach is increasingly popular among management scholars (Corley, 2015; Suddaby, 2006; Walsh et al., 2015). However, the adoption of the method has not been without its challenges, including not just understanding *what* grounded theory is and is not (Suddaby, 2006), but *how* to conduct rigorous, innovative, and impactful research using a grounded theory approach. These challenges notwithstanding, grounded theory is the most commonly used qualitative method in management’s leading journals.

Part of grounded theory’s appeal comes from its role as a conceptual bridge between inductive and deductive research approaches, allowing researchers to build new theory that can eventually extend to concrete, testable hypotheses derived from those theoretical models. Moreover, grounded theory can be used to merge new observations with extant theory to facilitate new perspectives that better explain a given phenomenon. In this way, grounded theory is both a theory-building and a

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theory-elaborating technique. Grounded theory thus excels at exploring new (i.e., “blue sky”) research domains and at providing fresh perspectives on well-trod but ill-understood (i.e., “black box”) research topics. In this article, we outline not only what grounded theory is, but also what it *could be* for human resources (HR) scholars.

HR research has lagged other domains within management in terms of embracing grounded theory, despite prior calls for its use (Egan, 2002; Huselid, Jackson, & Schuler, 1997; Mazzola, Schonfeld, & Spector, 2011). Indeed, a search of the HR literature reveals a relatively small number of publications that employ a grounded theory approach, and this dearth is particularly evident in the top journals in management that publish HR research. For instance, a cursory search reveals that of the nearly 200 articles published in the *Academy of Management Journal* that have employed some tenets of grounded theory, only ten focus squarely on HR-related research questions. In comparison, articles using grounded theory that focus on organizational behavior topics were over four times as prevalent. Moreover, as of June 2016, *Personnel Psychology*, which is dedicated to HR research, has never published an article using a grounded theory approach. Grounded-theory based explorations of HR phenomena are also exceptionally rare in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* and the *Journal of Applied Psychology*. Although HR-based grounded theory research is more common (though still rare) in outlets such as the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* and *Human Resources Management*, it is clear that HR scholars have yet to embrace this research approach.

Part of the reason for this shortage may be that HR researchers understandably wonder about the benefit of this technique over the deductive methods that have served the field well for so long. In addition, HR scholars may view grounded theory with some skepticism, in the same way qualitative methods more generally have been met with concerns about rigor over the years (Pratt, 2008; Shah & Corley, 2006). Among HR scholars who *have* used the grounded theory approach, these attempts have not always been successful. Indeed, when HR researchers have historically claimed to use grounded theory in their analyses, they have tended to use the technique in an incomplete or incorrect manner (as lamented by Lee, Mitchell, & Sablynski, 1999). For example, the term grounded theory has sometimes been used by HR researchers to describe an inductive coding effort, rather than the development of new theory. In other cases, the entire grounded theory process is described, but transparency regarding how the author team moved from the data to the resulting theory is lacking or absent. Not unlike other areas of business research, then, HR researchers may need some demystification of grounded theory as it applies to their research (O'Reilly, Paper, & Marx, 2012).

Grounded theory may be useful for HR researchers in particular. First, grounded theory naturally directs researchers' attention to the context in which individual behavior takes place. And indeed, although context is a crucial part of an individual's experience at work, and is thus germane to nearly all HR research, HR scholars have been criticized for ignoring the role that context plays in most HR phenomena (Ferris et al., 1998). Specifically, Johns (2006) argues that even in some of the most well-studied processes in HR, such as selection and performance appraisal, researchers have not paid sufficient attention to context, and have also “assumed a very narrow, nonsystemic conception of what the functions or outcomes of these processes should be” (p. 390). The grounded theory approach is designed to address precisely these kinds of oversights (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012). Indeed, grounded theory brings researchers in close proximity—both conceptually and spatiotemporally—to the contexts of the phenomena they study, permitting for deeper engagement with the social settings in which individuals operate (Fendt & Sachs, 2008). As such, this approach may be especially useful for extending our understanding of how organizational policies, practices, and systems influence employees' experiences of their jobs.

Second, grounded theory is well suited to build theory in response to new, previously unaddressed research questions, such as those that arise when organizations, and the people within them, adapt to changes in the environment (Bansal & Corley, 2011). For example, more and more individuals are forgoing traditional careers in favor of patching together multiple jobs as independent contractors for companies involved in “the gig economy” (e.g., Uber, Amazon Mechanical Turk, Etsy; see Hathaway, 2015; Miller & Miller, 2012). Grounded theory techniques would be particularly useful for understanding how these new types of employees experience their work, how they define career success, and how they view their connection to their organization. In addition, the way that leaders in these organizations view human capital may be profoundly different from managers in traditional firms, and grounded theory is an ideal tool for converting the lived experiences of these executives into an understandable model of human capital in this new form of organization. In short, grounded theory provides a means through which HR researchers can efficiently build theory that accurately represents how individuals experience new developments in the field, thereby offering useful and timely guidance to employees and practicing managers trying to adapt to new economic developments.

Third and finally, “black boxes” exist in our understanding of many well-researched areas of HR, and grounded theory can propel these areas forward by eliciting fresh insights into how complex processes unfold. For instance, although the literatures on applicant attraction and person-organization fit have provided a great deal of insight as to the factors that influence applicants' job choices (Cable & Judge, 1996; Chapman, Uggerslev, Carroll, Piasentin, & Jones, 2005), it remains unclear how applicants actually weigh up the many different pieces of information they receive during the recruitment process (da Motta Veiga & Turban, forthcoming, in press). Given its ability to probe the subtleties of human subjectivity, grounded theory could illuminate these features of an applicant's experience of job choice and job search.

More generally, grounded theory may also be fruitful in research domains that have predominantly been explored using quantitative (i.e., functionalist) approaches, thus compensating for some of the weaknesses inherent to a quantitative paradigm (Shah & Corley, 2006). For example, using almost exclusively quantitative methods, researchers have developed a seemingly deep understanding of how employees and job applicants manage impressions in the workplace and in job interviews (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008). Recently, however, Wilhelmy, Kleinmann, König, Melchers, and Truxillo (2016) used a grounded theory approach to examine how *interviewers* use impression management in the context of the job interview. Their resulting grounded theory not only unearths a number of previously undiscovered impression management tactics used by individuals at work, but

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