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Grounded Theory: A theoretical and practical application in the Australian Film Industry.

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Among the various methods of qualitative analysis, Grounded Theory provides researchers with a unique tool for theoretical development. Most conventional forms of qualitative analysis require the researcher to preselect a path of investigation in a method which is primarily deductive, where investigation and theoretical aggregation are a product of discovery, and data are informed by this discovery. Grounded Theory works in a manner which is contrary to this conventional path by being inductive. Using Grounded Theory, a researcher is afforded the luxury of maintaining an open mind and allowing the data to inform the discovery of theory. In this way emergent findings are highly representative of natural phenomena, and evolving theories are not forced to fit into preconceived moulds explicated from the literature.

This paper presents a theoretical and practical application of Grounded Theory, illustrated with a case from the Australian Film Industry. Grounded Theory has been applied in this case to induce theoretical findings which explain the processes of motivation and commitment in this industry. The paper outlines the value and the practicality of using Grounded Theory for this type of study and provides a practical understanding of how the method can be used. The paper provides a brief discussion of the findings that have emerged as a result of applying the rigour of Grounded Theory. Finally, a list of analytical guidelines are provided for readers interested in pursuing this path of theoretical discovery (Appendix A).

Introduction

There are various ways in which research methods can be compared. A common and convenient scheme for comparison is the division between qualitative and quantitative. Quantitative methods derive from positivist and post positivist research paradigms. They were originally developed to study, through means of quantification, natural phenomena in the natural world. Knowledge through quantitative methods is gained through several analytical techniques including: cause and effect thinking, reduction using variables and hypotheses, measurement and observation. The various methods adopted by quantitative researchers include: surveys, experiments, statistical analysis, and numerical modelling (Myers 1997; Creswell 2003).

Qualitative methods were developed to address some of the short-comings of pure quantitative research, and worked to place a more human focus on natural enquiry such as cultural and social phenomena. A sample of some of the methods used by qualitative researchers include Grounded Theory, Case Study, Ethnography, and Phenomenology. Empirical information is acquired from numerous sources, but are usually confined to observation, interviews, questionnaires, documents, historical interaction and researcher's impressions and reactions (Myers 1997; Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Language is the main medium of analysis, this increases methodological saliency as the discourse upon which it is based is better able to examine the feelings and perceptions of participants, and thereby clarify the cultural and social contexts within which people interact and express meaning. Kaplan and Maxwell (1994, 47) argue qualitative methods are able to analyse data in a way which enables the retention of their inherent textual nature. "This is because the goals of qualitative research involve understanding a phenomenon from the points of view of the participants and in its particular social and institutional context. These goals largely are lost when textual data are quantified." Researchers are therefore motivated to undertake qualitative research to be able to engage with humans at a higher level and gain a more complete understanding of their world and its accompanying phenomena, this understanding can be lost when textual data are quantified (Kaplan and Maxwell 1994).
This paper will enter into a brief discussion on some of the various methods of qualitative analysis which are frequently practiced, and will end in a discussion which explains what Grounded Theory is, how it works and why it is the best method in the case of this current research.

Case Study

A case study is "an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used" (Yin 1989, 23). Case studies allow the researcher an opportunity of explaining the causal links in real-life interventions that would be too complex for surveys or experimental strategies (Yin 1989, 25). The method is most appropriate when there is a desire to find broad definition, rather than narrow discovery (Yin 1993). Case studies provide thick description and provide little basis for generalisation. By contrast, Grounded Theory enables the researcher to investigate phenomena at great and narrow depth, and while the report is augmented through contextual excerpts, it does not rely upon thick description, finally as the unit of analysis is generically defined, Grounded Theory is able to provide a generalised explanation of the social process under study (Glaser 2001).

Ethnography

Ethnography is the study of culture, where people share similar patterns of beliefs and behaviour, as such it is seen as the science of cultural description, where a group is studied with the purpose of understanding them from a native point of view (Mertens 1998; Sarantakos 2005). Ethnographic research is guided by implicit or explicit theory where the researcher endeavours to find a fit between what is observed and the way things work or are said to work. Observations are analysed and interpreted either from the perspective of an insider *emic* or an outsider *etic*. Or can be combined to create a third perspective which creates an ethnographic picture which is a theoretical interpretation of the phenomena being studied (Goulding 2005).

Using ethnography a researcher will represent meaning by focussing on one or a combination of three fundamental constructs: (a) functionalism – establishing the appropriateness of the

reported data to those of human needs; (b) structural- functionalism – by reinforcing social and cultural equilibrium with the observed data; and, (c) structuralism – by highlighting the harmony of the data with presumed meta-patterns of thought (Rosen 1991). The data which informs theoretical development is compiled from the researcher's observations, experiences, and interviewee reports, these are recorded in field notes which are consciously and unconsciously value-compared against the researcher's own beliefs, understandings and imaginings, and as time and data accumulate these interpretations are constantly reconsidered and reworked. "What appears as written ethnography, therefore, is as much a product of the time and context in which it was written as of any purported truth of interpretation" (Rosen 1991, 2).

As ethnography is concerned with a group of people sharing a similar culture, it is in-depth and focuses on a single, but complex, social system. Findings are atypical and are not independent of time, place or situation, and therefore cannot be generalised. Grounded Theory however relies on the examination of multiple sources of data, including individuals, who may not share a common culture, to develop social theory (Miller and Salkind 2002). Grounded Theory is also unconcerned with extant theory whether implicit or explicit, in fact it works in antinomy to this, relying on the absence of theory. Grounded Theory is therefore best suited to conditions which are opposite to those which suit ethnography. Finally, ethnography is predominately longitudinal and works best when the data have time to develop: "A key feature of ethnography is that it is labour intensive and always involves prolonged direct contact with group members in an effort to look for rounded, holistic explanations" (Goulding 2005, 299), this also requires that the researcher become acclimatised to the field, which also adds time to the investigate, therefore before meaningful data is acquired a period of time must have elapsed. This luxury of time, which is a prerequisite for ethnographers, is not a requirement for Grounded Theorists.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is an inductive, descriptive research method which seeks to gain understanding from human consciousness and experience. It "is the study of essences; and according to it, all problems amount to finding definitions of essences: the essence of perception, or the essence of consciousness, for example" (Merleau-Ponty 1999, vii). It is inductive because the researcher does not consider causal explanations, or endeavour to validate predetermined theoretical concepts. A fundamental assumption of phenomenology is that individuals can only understand their existence through the contemplation of the perceptions, and their meanings, as they awaken conscious awareness (Husserl 1962). Understanding of awareness is achieved through assessment of multiple forms evidence. Phenomenology utilises principles of linguistic and hermeneutical research approaches (Goulding 2005). The linguistic approach adopts language as the medium through which humans express meaning about their experiences, therefore it is the words of those who experience a phenomenon that become the primary data for analysis. The hermeneutic approach relies on researchers putting themselves into the original context to gain an understanding of meaning of the phenomenon. The process of research involves studying a small number of subjects, but the focus is intense and extended, so that patterns and relationships of meanings can emerge (Creswell 2003, 15).

Phenomenology provides a subjective view of what the participant is experiencing in any given situation (Mertens 1998, 169). It provides a detailed analysis of specific individuals in specific situations. It follows many of the guidelines of Grounded Theory in that findings are allowed to emerge through a process of induction, and preconceived ideas are set aside. The

literal use of language however does not allow easy conceptualization of categories describing social process, and this is heightened by the fact that the method relies on a group of people who have experienced similar phenomena (Miller and Salkind 2002, 152-153). Grounded Theory, on the other hand uses a process of theoretical sampling to select individuals who, having different perspectives, add to and complement the accumulating body of knowledge (Glaser 1978).

Grounded Theory

What is Grounded Theory?

Grounded Theory is an interpretive qualitative research method originally conceived by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The method differs from other qualitative methods for two major reasons, (1) it is "unencumbered by explicit expectations about what the research might find, or by personal beliefs and philosophies" (Pole and Lampard 2002, 206), therefore allowing the researcher to make discoveries without *a priori* knowledge, and (2) "it is an approach that leaves itself open to charges of relativism" (Pole and Lampard 2002, 206), meaning that the findings and theoretical assumptions are not uniquely valid. Other researchers using the same method are equally likely to derive empirically grounded explanations for other social processes which have equal substance in any given field of investigation: "the constant comparative method is not designed (as methods of quantitative analysis are) to guarantee that two analysts working independently with the same data will achieve the same results" (Glaser 1967, 103). These two distinguishing principles of Grounded Theory render it an excellent tool for analysis of social phenomena, particularly when there is little known about the situation under investigation (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Martin and Taylor 1986; Sarantakos 2005). Hence, Grounded Theory has been used in this study, as little social or managerial research has been previously undertaken in the Australian Film Industry (Jones and Kirsch 2004). The use of Grounded Theory in this study also provides the advantage of delving into an unknown area, to see what real social problems emerge. It therefore, provides the researcher with an opportunity of having the data inform the research and consequently discovering the theoretical principles that are relevant to the situation under investigation, rather than the converse relationship which is more customarily applied with conventional research methods.

Grounded Theory provides a mix of structure and flexibility, with clear and unambiguous guidelines. Glaser sees it as being comprehensive, yet perfectly straightforward: "Following the full suite of GT procedures based on the constant comparative method, results in a smooth uninterrupted emergent analysis and the generation of a substantive or formal theory' (Glaser and Holton 2004, 3). Grounded Theory will not provide accurate facts or factual description, rather the results, after analysis, are theoretically grounded conceptualisations of a basic social process, which explains the preponderance of behaviour in a substantive area of the research environment. As the analysis is abstract in time, place and people it lends itself to modification in light of new data (Glaser 2001; Glaser and Holton 2004).

Grounded Theory takes a research approach, which is contrary to most of the more conventional research models (Figure 1). As Glaser says: "The best way to do GT is to just do it" (Glaser and Holton 2004). Data collection, coding and analysis occur immediately, concurrently, and throughout. The process is not impeded by the development of research problems, theoretical understanding or literature review. Instead, the researcher is granted the freedom to enter the field and discover the main concerns of participants and analyse ways

they resolve these problems. Grounded Theory is founded on the conceptualisation of data through coding, using a method of constant comparison. Through analysis, data, mainly in the form of transcripts, observations or literature, are fractured into conceptual codes. Then, during a process of comparison these individual codes are compared, and are collected together to form meaningful categories. Finally, through a process of abstraction, these categories build and are refined until they are able to lead the researcher toward the development of substantive theories or conceptual hypotheses.

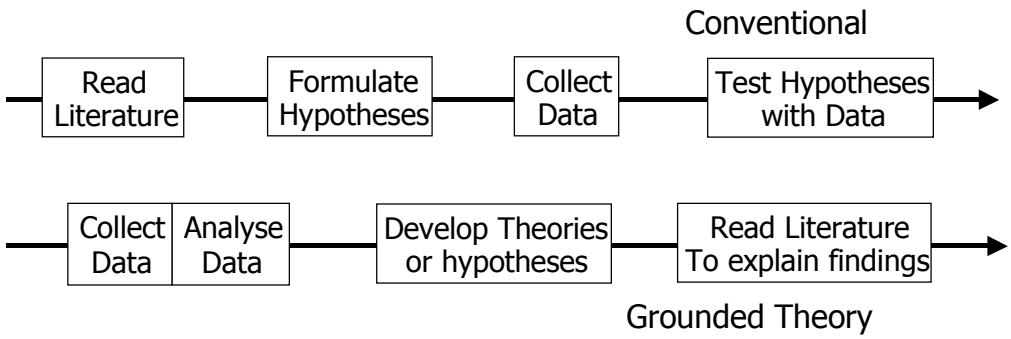

Figure 1. Comparison of Conventional Research Methods to Grounded Theory (Jones 2005).

Rigorous application of the Grounded Theory method yields a set of categories – usually a core-category, coupled with some sub-categories – which "explain with the fewest possible concepts, and with the greatest possible scope, as much variation as possible in the behavior and problem under study" (Glaser 1978). When these hypotheses are located within the relevant literature pool, the final product demonstrates parsimony and theoretical totality (Yee 2001).

The aim of Grounded Theory is to discover theory: 'grounded theorists want to know what is going on. They look at areas that have either never been studied before or those that are inundated with disparate theories' (Yee 2001). The Australian Film Industry represents an excellent research opportunity. There is a distinct paucity in 'management' research in this area and consequently a scarcity of developed theories and literature, therefore the field represents an ideal target for this style of research, which allows the researcher to question 'what is going on' with an open mind (Jones and Kirsch 2004).

How does Grounded Theory Work?

Grounded Theory bases its unique methods on a pair of principle foundations *theoretical sampling* and *constant comparison*. Theoretical sampling regards the process of data collection, where new targets for data collection are directed by the results collected from the preceding sample, as the theory emerges and the investigation focuses, so too does the selective sampling. Constant comparison is the simultaneous and concurrent process of coding and analysing the collected data (Partington 2000). These two processes lead the researcher through the exercise of theoretical discovery using Grounded Theory.

A Grounded Theory study begins with a general opening of a subject area. This research began with an observation of a film production to decide who was active in the management of the film, and how they could be approached. Following this, a Film producer was approached and subsequently participated in an initial, semi-structured, interview.

From this initial opening, the study becomes continually focussed towards an area of social concern. The interview from the first participant leads to selection of other participants based on the problems that are unveiled through the progress of the research process.

After transcription, the researcher begins the process of open coding. Grounded Theory uses three levels of coding, initially *open coding* is adopted, this is the stage where the raw data, for example transcripts, are initially examined, and are coded through a process which fractures the interview into discrete threads of datum. These data are eventually collated and accrue to form categories of similar phenomena. The process of open coding examines the data without any limitations in its scope, and without the application of any filters, thus all data are accepted and none are excluded, this allows the researcher to look for patterns which may lead to social processes which may be of eventual interest. As the categories begin to fill, those that are most dense become known as *core categories* (Glaser 2001).

From the results of the first set of interviews, core categories began to emerge which highlighted areas of 'motivation' and 'work conditions', which according to the participants were areas of concern, and hence were potentially problematic with regard to management.

As core categories become apparent, the researcher switches to the second level of coding, known as *selective coding*. Selective coding allows the researcher to filter and code data which are determined to be more relevant to the emerging concepts. Therefore only the most pertinent passages of a transcript are used and coded, and to facilitate this, interview questions are continuously reformulated to encompass the new and more focused direction of the research.

Once it became obvious that the emerging core categories were 'motivation' and 'commitment' subsequent interviews become increasingly focused, as did the coding, the retrieved data were relevant only to the unfolding social process.

The final stage of coding is known as *theoretical coding*. Theoretical coding occurs when core categories have become saturated. *Saturation* is both a peculiarity and a strength of Grounded Theory. Unlike other methods of qualitative analysis which acquire rigour through multiple levels of confirmation or triangulation (Mertens 1998). Grounded Theory builds an analytical case by constantly seeking new categories of evidence. Eventually, after a period of data collection, a point is reached where no new data result from additional data collection, this is the point of saturation: "One keeps on collecting data until one receives only already known statements" (Seldén 2005, 124). Theoretical coding examines these saturated categories and provides the researcher with analytical criteria which assists in the development of conceptual relationships between categories and their relevance to the literature (Glaser 1978, 1992). As the coding procedure before this phase worked to fracture the data and cluster them according to abstract similarity, *theoretical coding*, along with sorting, knits the fractured pieces back together again to conceptualise relationships between the hypotheses derived through open and selective coding.

As the data received more focussed collection categories quickly began to saturate, at this stage collection stopped, and the data were reassembled as a basic social process which described the situation that workers experience when they engage in film production.

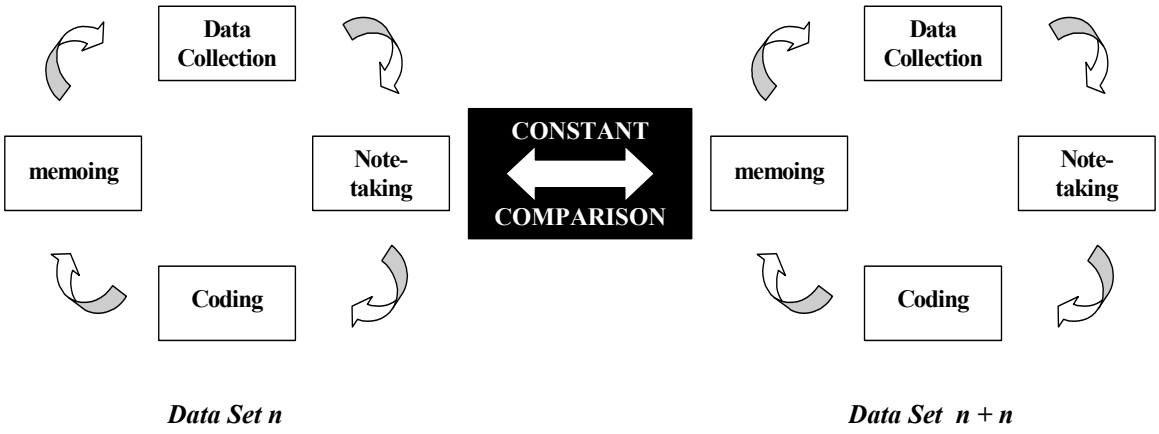

Figure 2. Constant Comparison (Glaser, 1967, 1978, 1992, 1998, 2001)

These stages of coding comprise the process known as *constant comparison* – Figure 2 – (Glaser and Strauss 1967). As categories start to accumulate and gain depth constant comparison compels the researcher to begin to reflect on the data, and to commence conceptualisation, usually through 'memos', eventually leading to hypothesis and theory: "The purpose of the constant comparative method of joint coding and analysis is to generate theory more systematically … by using explicit coding and analytic procedures" (Glaser 1967, 102). "The constant comparative method is designed to aid the analyst … in generating a theory that is integrated, consistent, plausible, close to the data" (Glaser 1967, 103). The process does not, however, yield tested theory, it produces a general or substantive theory which derives from a set of plausibly induced (but not scientifically tested) categories, properties and hypotheses which regard real social problems (Glaser 1967, 104), the validity of which arise through data saturation.

Constant comparison continues until core categories emerge from the data, and no new phenomena are reported in the data. As data are being coded, compared, and accumulated to form categories and core categories, an on-going process of sampling takes place, known as *theoretical sampling*, this works to systematically select new participants or data which will guide the researcher to select data samples which are most salient for the research being undertaken.

Theoretical sampling works by selecting subsequent subjects based on the information which emerges from the data already coded (Sarantakos 2005, 166). This process provides a means of ensuring that new data add value, and that they work with the concepts already compiled through a measure of fit and relevance (Glaser 1978). New data are confirmed and disconfirmed to ensure the emerging theory develops rigour and parsimony.

There are two main steps involved with theoretical sampling; in the first step the researcher targets participants whom share minimal differences with regard to the subject under examination. After data from this set have passed the scrutiny of constant comparison the sampling moves into the second stage which commences an enlargement of the sample until differences between participants are ultimately maximised. By initially minimising differences the researcher is able to quickly develop categories and determine their properties, secondly, maximising provides the benefit of ensuring that categories have been fully developed and that data saturation is actually occurring. (Glaser 1978).

The final result of research using Grounded Theory as a method of qualitative analysis is a model depicting the *basic social process* – a basic social process is a core category which has been developed and is found to substantially represent a major process of the phenomenon under study. It is through the articulation and explanation of the basic social process that the explanatory theory will emerge. To qualify as a basic social process the category will "have two or more clear emergent stages" (Glaser 1978, 97). Basic social processes also share other important characteristics: they should be *pervasive*, in that they reflect and summarise the patterns of behaviour which are fundamental to the phenomena, taking into account the intervening variables which work to alter the process; by being abstract of unit structure they should be *fully variable* and therefore maintain validity in other settings and structures independent of social unit. Basic social processes are not only durable and stable over time, they are also flexible enough to accommodate for temporal change – or *change over time* – maintaining an interchangeable consistency in meaning, fit and workability through the addition of new conditions and stages which account for the changing environment.

Thus the basic social process is the discovery of a human process that transcends the typical research boundary of 'social unit' by examining the social process occurring within that unit, subsequently studies revealing Basic Social Processes are not grounded by their research context, but gain a degree of universality (Glaser 1978, 101). Another outcome is a collection of clearly articulated and conceptualised categories, which once sorted and integrated with relevant literature, become substantial components in the writing up of the research.

Why Grounded Theory?

There are two main elements of choice when selecting a methodology. Firstly, the merits of each method must be assessed in light of the needs of the research goal. Each method has its advantages, and its strengths and weaknesses. For instance, ethnography provides data which is rich in depth and detail, but results acquired through ethnography cannot be generalised (Mertens 1998, 165). Secondly, the research method must be able to accommodate the researcher's personal preferences and philosophical assumptions. For example a person with positivistic tendencies would not be comfortable with the highly subjective nature imposed by phenomenology.

In the case of this research, and this researcher, Grounded Theory is the method of choice because it enables an understanding of an area which requires no preformed concepts of knowledge or reality. The ontology and epistemology adopted in this research accepts that knowledge in not static, but is always emerging and transforming, and is interpreted by both observer and participant. Meaning is conveyed through dialogue and action and within dialogue and action is embedded understanding, experience and emotion, and only through interaction and discourse can meaning be unlocked and conveyed to the observer. From this perspective, Grounded Theory provides a method which enables a researcher to adduce true meaning and understanding.

Most of all Grounded Theory allows researchers to get into the field, and quickly acquire an empirically grounded understanding of social phenomena, and to evaluate the phenomena without reliance on extant theory. The research allows theory to emerge through the inductive process of Grounded Theory.

Conclusion

Grounded Theory is an exceptional useful and rigorous method of qualitative analysis. It provides researchers with a means of engaging with the research environment without having to develop theories and hypotheses, and without needing to become comprehensively acquainted with the literature. This paper has discussed the value and applicability of the method. It has placed the method within a context of other qualitative methods, and has explained what Grounded Theory is, how it works and why it has been selected for this current research.

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Appendix A

GROUNDED THEORY - Guidelines for Analysis

1. Number each paragraph of the transcript.
2. Label: Identify and tag each phenomena discussed in each paragraph – use multiple labels for each paragraph if necessary. At this stage generic titles should not be sought, titles must exactly represent the information they describe. The fit must be perfect. They can be 'long-winded, ungainly or fanciful' (Turner 1981). The level of abstractions should be high enough to provide enough coverage of very similar phenomena, and low enough to remain explicitly descriptive (Martin and Taylor 1986).
3. Saturate Categories: Accumulate enough examples of each category until there is sufficient information to understand instances when exposed to similar phenomena in new data (Turner 1981).
4. Abstract Definitions: As each category becomes saturated, an explicit definition of the category must be stated, one which describes what it is about each new instance that would have it classified into this category (Turner 1981).
5. Contemplation: Definitions are explored to develop theoretical ideas and abstractions (Turner 1981). This process of contemplation should harness a method of free-writing which lists all of the ideas stimulated by the concept in the researchers mind. This process should be uninterrupted and unedited. The process involves reading the description and all of the related entries and contemplating what ties these together. This process is similar in technique to a brainstorming process (Martin and Taylor 1986). The process will result in 'Theoretical Memoranda' (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Some questions the researcher will ask are:
    i. Do any common themes connect these incidents?
    ii. Do any two or more incidents seem to address the same ideas or phenonema?
    iii. If so, what is the theme they reflect?
6. Exploit categories fully: look for instances of these definitions in other similar yet different environments (Turner 1981).
7. Develop and explore links: Form hypotheses and check their validity, looking for other explanations (Turner 1981).
8. Consider the validity of alternate hypotheses (Turner 1981).
9. Look for connections to existing theory (Turner 1981).
10. Look for elements or variables which may contradict these findings, to see how the theory stands up and in order to confirm or disconfirm the theoretical development (Turner 1981).