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Grounded theory and empirical ethics

Abstract

Building on the success of the bestselling *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory* (2007), this title provides a much-needed and up-to-date overview, integrating some revised and updated chapters with new ones exploring recent developments in grounded theory and research methods in general. The highly acclaimed editors have once again brought together a team of key academics from a wide range of disciplines, perspectives and countries. This is a method-defining resource for advanced students and researchers across the social sciences. Chapters are arranged around the following parts: Part One: The Grounded Theory Method: 50 Years On; Part Two: Theories and Theorizing in Grounded Theory; Part Three: Grounded Theory in Practice; Part Four: Reflections on Using and Teaching Grounded Theory; Part Five: GTM and Qualitative Research Practice; Part Six: GT Researchers and Methods in Local and Global Worlds

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Grounded Theory and Empirical Ethics

Stacy M. Carter

An activist critiques the valorization of men who join the Violence Against Women Movement (Charmaz 2014: 126). A young person believes she is worthless as a result of relentless bullying at school (Charmaz 2014: 143). An employee with a disability protests that it is unfair that she should not be allowed to lie down in the office in her lunchbreak (Charmaz 2014: 145). These are all examples taken from grounded theory studies, examples that focus on the moral dimensions of social life, the everyday judgements we make about whether things are right or wrong. In this chapter I will consider how grounded theory approaches and moral considerations might be explicitly married in the doing of social research.

I will argue that explicit attention to normativity can enhance grounded theory research, but also that grounded theory, and the symbolic interactionist and pragmatist commitments that animate it, have much to offer normative theorizing. Before we proceed, some definitions. Throughout I will be referring to normativity, and normative statements, reasoning or judgements. When I use 'normative' as an adjective in this way, I am indicating a particular quality: that of expressing a prescription about how things ought to be, or an evaluation of whether actions or states of affairs are good or bad, right or wrong, laudable or blameworthy. The issues I consider in this chapter relate to an old debate about the place of normativity in social research: the degree to which social research should not only describe things or explain how they come to be, but also examine moral judgements, and perhaps even make moral prescriptions.

To illustrate the broad difference between descriptive or explanatory work, and normative work, consider the dairy industry. The former type of study could provide a detailed explanation of how the industry works: a typical day in the life of a dairy farmer or a farming family, how cows are acquired and looked after, what happens when they get sick, what happens to calves when they are born, how much farmers are paid for their milk, how it is distributed. But a study focused on the normative dimensions of dairy farming would also ask whether the treatment of the humans and the animals involved is justifiable, indeed whether the industry itself is justifiable, and on what grounds we might argue for or against that conclusion, weighing up considerations such as benefits and harms to humans and other animals, and what freedoms may be either considered absolute, or reasonably restricted.

Notice here a critical difference. The more descriptive a claim, the more it can be verified by examining evidence (Do dairy farmers get up at 4am? Do they express a strong sense of vocation?). The more normative a claim, the more contestable it becomes: rather than being verified using evidence, it needs to be supported with good arguments, and good arguments may be available on both sides of a question (Is the way calves and cows are treated in this industry morally justifiable?

Why or why not?). It's useful to keep this distinction in mind. However, I will take the position throughout that the descriptive (or explanatory) and the normative are interleaved rather than dichotomous. If we don't pay attention to normative issues such as animal welfare, we may not collect adequate empirical data about them, and conversely if we don't do good empirical work, we might make moral judgements that don't adequately reflect the social process under study.

The academic discipline that traditionally concerns itself with theories of good and bad, right and wrong, is moral philosophy or ethics; a person who works in this discipline would usually be called a moral philosopher or an ethicist. For a long time, ethicists have put most of their attention into making good arguments and haven't seemed too concerned with whether those arguments related much to the world as it exists. Indeed, some ethicists seem deliberately to make their case studies unlike the social world, 'cleaning them up' in an effort to make their philosophical points more strongly (e.g., see Fried, 2012, for a critique of one such tradition). More recently, however, a rapprochement between social science and ethics has seen a greater acceptance that ethics isn't much use unless it is informed by rigorous research about the social world (De Vries 2004; Scully 2016). This is how the practice referred to as empirical ethics or empirical bioethics was born, on the border between social science and ethics, and attempting – usually – to make best use of the methods of each discipline.

My purpose here is to argue that grounded theory can benefit from engagement with empirical ethics, and that the reverse is also true. Explicit attention to ethical reasoning and values encourages normative theoretical sensitivity, presentation of counterfactuals and elicitation of moral reasoning in data collection, attention to values as significant components of most social and psychological processes, and a sophisticated approach to the problem of epistemic authority. Grounded theory can offer empirical ethicists a path to epistemological sophistication, a systematic set of empirical methods, connection to social science traditions and theories, and attention to valuing as a dynamic process. Any grounded theorist who advocates social change based on her findings takes a position on what people or institutions ought to do. Here I seek to make a case that the synergy between empirical ethics and grounded theory can expand both approaches, and can provide a better basis for making the ought statements that often arise – implicitly or explicitly – from social research.

EXISTING THEORY AND GROUNDED THEORIZING- AN UNEASY RELATIONSHIP

As the questions I'm considering here turn on the relationship between existing theory and the creation and interpretation of qualitative data, I begin briefly with this issue in the fractured grounded theory tradition. I will assume that most readers are familiar with the various forms of grounded theory and the tensions between them (e.g., Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978, Morse et al. 2009; Corbin and Strauss 2015). I locate myself in the later, 'constructivist' traditions led by Kathy Charmaz, Antony Bryant and others (Bryant 2002; Bryant and Charmaz 2007b; Charmaz 2014). These authors explicitly developed grounded theory methodology and methods in several ways, including recognizing that data, concepts and eventual theory were co-constructions between the researcher and the participants. Theories were no longer absolute truths that somehow 'emerged' de novo from the data; they were active interpretations in which the analyst connected data with existing concepts and theories to create new knowledge, knowledge which may resonate with, or challenge, previous conceptualizations (Charmaz 2014). A common but somewhat naïve critique of grounded theory is that grounded theorists believe themselves to begin from nowhere, and thus fail to take advantage of centuries of theoretical development. Although a small proportion of grounded theorists may believe that they enter a new study as a blank slate and create completely original codes and categories, there is little in contemporary grounded theory methodology to support this view. As Charmaz has said, quoting Ian Dey, 'there is a difference between an open mind and an

empty head' (Dey 1999, cited in Charmaz 2014: 48), and none of us have truly empty heads. If this position is accepted, the important question is not whether existing theory should be used in grounded theorizing (as doing so is unavoidable), but rather which existing theory should be used, and how. It also seems reasonable to expect an analyst to be aware of and reflexive about the concepts they employ, concepts that will reflect what she thinks is worth paying attention to in the social world. I hope to make a case that values and normative reasoning are central enough to the social world to be worth our explicit analytic attention.

FACTS, VALUES AND SOCIAL RESEARCH

There is a considerable literature regarding whether social science researchers should attend to values at all. This prompts me to consider two issues: first, what I mean when I talk about values, and second, how scholars have (dis)connected facts and values.

Defining Values

What are values? To provide a starting point, I will draw on just two of the scholars who have written extensively on this question: the legal, moral and political philosopher Joseph Raz, and the critical realist social scientist Andrew Sayer. Raz defines value in this way:

Any property which (necessarily) makes anything which possesses it good (or bad) at least to a degree is an evaluative property, standing for some value. ... We could also say that every property whose presence in an item (action, person, institution, or anything else) can in itself make an action, a choice, or a positive or negative appreciation or preference, intelligible or justified, is an evaluative property. (Raz 2001: 43–44)

Sayer defines values as follows:

I suggest that we should think of values as 'sedimented' valuations that have become attitudes or dispositions, which we come to regard as justified. They merge into emotional dispositions and evaluations we make of particular things, as part of our conceptual and affective apparatus. They are more abstract than the particular concrete evaluations from which they derive and which they in turn influence. The relation between value and particular valuations is thus recursive. (Sayer 2011: 26)

Bringing Raz and Sayer together suggests that the value of something (to a person or a group of people) makes sense of people's positive or negative attitudes towards it; in addition, people hold values – more abstract 'sedimented' attitudes or dispositions – which inform their everyday evaluative judgements in different situations. This establishes a connection between the values people hold and the making of evaluative, or normative, judgements. Sayer's reading also draws our attention to the agency of people in the process of valuing, an inflection that will become important later in the chapter.

THE FACT/VALUE DICHOTOMY AND SOCIAL RESEARCH

Traditionally, a hard line has been drawn in social science and philosophy between facts and values, description and normativity, is and ought, with science (including social science) on the 'is' side, and moral judgements and prescriptions on the 'ought' side. For those committed to the hard line, discovering facts is the work of science and making prescriptions is the work of moral and political philosophy. Despite much criticism (e.g., Sayer 2011: 49–54; see also Hedgecoe 2004) this view persists in some methodological writing. There are two interconnected assumptions embedded in this way of thinking: (1) that values and facts come apart cleanly; and (2) that social researchers should focus on facts (empirically grounded description or explanation) rather than values, in their research questions, analyses and outcomes. Gewirtz and Cribb (2006) refer to this as the 'value-neutral' model of social research, and note that it can lead to different kinds of errors. On the one

hand, in assuming that their research can be value-neutral, researchers may fail to recognize that there are inevitable policy and ethical implications of their work. Conversely (often in the critical tradition), researchers may leap to normative conclusions without the careful work required to justify them, demanding that 'things ought to be done differently, with insufficient attention being given either to clarifying or defending the evaluative judgements made or ... working through the feasibility of, and practical dilemmas associated with, implied alternatives' (Gewirtz and Cribb 2006: 149).

People who defend a strong fact/value distinction often connect it back to David Hume, the 18th-century Scottish enlightenment philosopher, via 'Hume's Law' or 'Hume's Guillotine'. Hume's Law is often simplified to 'you cannot derive ought from is', and people take this to mean that it is not possible to draw normative conclusions (about what ought to be done) from empirical findings.¹ In my view, and that of others (see McMillan 2016), this is not the best interpretation. Hume seems to me simply to ask that we clearly distinguish two different types of statement – descriptive statements of fact on the one hand, and normative statements about what one ought to do on the other – and to be thoughtful about the relation between them. Hume doesn't condemn authors for making 'ought' statements: rather, he says that he often observes that people leap from a statement about how things are to a statement about how things ought to be, as though the second follows automatically from the first. Against this, he says: '...as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, it is necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given'. That is, researchers shouldn't just sneak the 'ought' in, but should move from is to ought mindfully and explicitly and set out clear reasons to explain how they connect the two.²

Hilary Putnam, the eminent late 20th-century American philosopher in the pragmatist tradition,³ argued both against dichotomizing facts versus values, and against using this dichotomy as a trump. 'The worst thing about the fact/value dichotomy' he argued, 'is that in practice it functions as a discussion-stopper, and not just a discussion-stopper but a thought stopper' (Putnam 2002: 44). Putnam saw the fact/value dichotomy and similar binaries as modernist dogma and argued that genuine 'post-modernism' requires their abandonment, and opens up 'a whole new field of intellectual possibilities in every important area of culture' (Putnam 2002: 9). Consistent with this, most writers who reject the fact/value dichotomy see values as problematic in social research only when they are held dogmatically and without insight (Gewirtz and Cribb 2006; Sayer 2011).

So far, our focus has been on the values held by researchers, and the evaluative implications of research. Some methodologists propose another way in which values matter: that researchers should form questions, collect data, and do analysis with particular attention to the values held by the social actors they are studying. Values, this argument goes, are an intrinsic part of social life, so if researchers want to understand social life, they need to pay attention to values. Sayer, for example, argues that social science has traditionally privileged 'bloodless' analysis, in which 'macho' interests (power, discourse and structure) are privileged, while morality, values, ethics and emotions are neglected (Sayer 2011: 14–15). Turning away from this bloodlessness requires paying attention to aspects of human existence that it can be too easy to ignore: our embodiment, our relations with others, the effect of these relations on the development and maintenance of our sense of self, our caring, neediness and vulnerability, our concern and empathy for others, our attachments and commitments, our judgments about virtues, vices, good and 'evil', the things people are ashamed of and the way they allocate responsibility and blame, and our conceptions of human wellbeing (Sayer 2011: Chapters 4 and 5). Grounded theorists, perhaps especially those in the constructivist tradition,

will immediately recognize these latter concerns as central to our work, suggesting a natural affinity with the project of foregrounding values.

Sayer goes further to contend not only that values are central to the social world, but that the objects of social research cannot be understood without their normative valence. To illustrate, he suggests that if a researcher or reader did not understand that suffering was bad, she could not fully understand suffering, or research about suffering. Suffering is one of those concepts – like oppression, racism, humiliation, cruelty, respect, vulnerability and many others – that require both conceptual depth and empirical detail to be fully understood. They are ‘thick’ ethical concepts, which, after Iris Murdoch, Sayer contrasts with labels such as good, bad or duty, thinner and more abstracted evaluative words that may lack the same depth and force (Sayer 2011: 42–43). As McMillan (2016: 27) has argued, thick ethical concepts belie any fact/value dichotomy: they are both factual, in that we can determine whether or not they are occurring, and evaluative or normative, in that they give us a reason to act. I am not suggesting a hard line between thin and thick concepts here, rather I am suggesting that engaging with the moral detail of everyday life is likely to land us in ‘thicker’ territory than simply theorizing in the abstract.

Thicker ethical concepts and the processes by which they are enacted, I contend, are the natural subject matter of grounded theory research, and provide an immediate point of connection between grounded theory traditions and normative work. The grounded theory tradition of focusing on concepts and exploring what they mean to people in the contexts of their lives can thus contribute significantly to ethical conceptual development. However, in my view, grounded theorists often have limited resources with which to engage these values, because they are not often the focus of social science disciplines. It is here that the ethics literature can help. Say, for example, that it becomes apparent that feelings of vulnerability or invulnerability are important to the way people evaluate a certain problem. These feelings can be interrogated by a researcher in an interview, and again in analysis. But if the researcher is aware of the way in which vulnerability is constructed in the ethics literature, they are likely to be in a better position to ask insightful questions and test the boundaries of the concept (Carter et al. 2010; Rogers, Mackenzie, and Dodds 2012). I am arguing here about concepts from the ethics literature but note the resonance with those grounded theorists who have made similar arguments about the need to understand the existing social science literature on a problem before they set out to create a new theory about it (Lempert 2007: 254).

For the remainder of this chapter I will take the position of contemporary scholars who see normativity as more or less inevitable in social science, and advocate its deliberate inclusion, with reflexivity and care. Gewirtz and Cribb (2006), for example, advocate ethical reflexivity in social research, which in their view entails:

1. Being explicit about the evaluative commitments and judgements that inform the research;
2. Being able to defend these;
3. Taking the values and moral dilemmas of participants seriously;
4. Acknowledging and responding to tensions between values; and
5. Taking responsibility for the moral and political implications of one’s research. (Gewirtz and Cribb 2006: 147–148)

This list provides some sense of what is required to work explicitly with normativity, and takes us to the question of how to integrate the methods of grounded theory with a normative theoretical sensitivity.

WAYS OF WORKING WITH IS AND OUGHT

I have already introduced empirical ethics, which has used social science methods to address normative questions since around the turn of the millennium. Researchers in this new form of practice have generated both methodology (e.g., Molewijk et al. 2003; De Vries 2004; Solomon 2005; Leget, Borry, and De Vries 2009; Rehmann-Sutter, Porz, and Scully 2012; Davies, Ives, and Dunn 2015) and practical research work (e.g., Ives et al. 2008; Molewijk et al. 2008; Scully et al. 2012; Brosnan et al. 2013; Haire and Jordens 2015; Williams, Carter, and Rychetnik 2016) that is likely to be of interest to grounded theorists.

Ethics is the reference discipline for empirical ethicists. While the majority of social scientists may have agreed to put Hume's Law out of its misery some time ago, for many ethicists it is not only alive and well but standing in the middle of the room shouting and making rude hand gestures. Thus, much empirical ethics methodology is focused on placating those within ethics and philosophy who continue to take the 'no ought from is' position seriously. Philosophers accustomed to having only to think for a living have reacted in a range of ways to the 'empirical turn' (Hurst 2010), as it is known, ranging from embracing its power and novelty to expressing outright hostility and disdain. And while many social researchers probably remain unaware of this nascent movement, some – perhaps those with prior training in ethics, or with a particular moral sensibility, or those who happen to be professionally co-located with ethicists – have embraced the opportunity to examine the ethical dimensions of the social worlds they are studying more explicitly.

The 'empirical turn' was inspired in part by the work of sociologists including Charles Bosk (1992, 2003, 2010), Renée Fox (Fox, Swazey, and Watkins 2008) and Barry Hoffmaster (1992), medical sociologists who tended to be critical of bioethicists (De Vries 2004). This history means that the empirical turn in bioethics is in part a dialogue between the discipline of sociology (or social science more broadly) and the discipline of bioethics. De Vries, for example, typologizes empirical bioethics research on a spectrum from 'sociology in bioethics' to 'sociology of bioethics' (De Vries 2004). Sociology in bioethics, in De Vries' typology, captures social science work that serves bioethics, for example studying how ethics interventions such as Institutional Review Boards work in practice. De Vries notes that this work can be done while still assuming a clear separation between facts and values: the philosophers remain in charge of the moral reasoning; the purpose of social science is to discover facts. At the 'sociology of bioethics' end of the spectrum, in contrast, facts and values are inseparable. Studies of the implicit normativity in medical work, for example (often in the Social Studies of Science tradition), or openly critical empirical study of the discipline of bioethics itself (such as the work of Bosk, Fox, and Hoffmaster referred to earlier), problematize the instantiation of values and the moral authority of bioethicists.

Hedgecoe characterizes the critique arising from such sociological analyses of bioethics as follows: that bioethics over-emphasizes rational and idealized modes of thinking; that bioethics over-individualizes, neglecting social and cultural influences on action; and that bioethics assumes that the theoretical categories defined in moral philosophy are all that is needed to understand the social world (that 'social reality cleaves down neat philosophical lines'), which leads bioethicists to miss much of what is important in everyday moral judgements and actions (Hedgecoe 2004). Astute readers will notice some parallels between this sociological critique of bioethics and the original grounded theory critique of deductive quantitative sociology (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In particular, Discovery was a rhetorical statement against over-reliance on deductive inquiry constrained by commitment to a particular sociological theory, on the grounds that such deductively-driven work

was likely to miss the meanings that explained people's actions from their perspectives. This parallel suggests that the five decades of work done in launching and then refining grounded theory could be informative for the development of empirical bioethics (Bryant and Charmaz 2007a). Grounded theorists have wrestled, for example, with issues including how to connect existing theory to the analysis of empirical data (Lempert 2007; Reichertz 2007), how to think about particularity and generality (Carter 2009; Charmaz 2014), and more generally how to make a case for finely-grained empirical work in the face of a discipline dominated by the exegesis and reproduction of existing grand theory: all of these conversations seem to have relevance for empirical ethics.

Later developments in empirical ethics have tended to focus on how to achieve a practical and productive enmeshing of philosophy and social science in such a way that neither partner is subservient to the other (Hedgecoe 2004). Various proposals for how to achieve this are currently in play in the developing methodological literature. Methodological principles again resonate with grounded theory traditions. Hedgecoe (2004), for example, proposes that this new discipline should be empirically grounded, theory-challenging as well as theory-informed, sceptical of authority and received ways of knowing, and reflexive, all values familiar to grounded theorists. A number of typologies have been proposed for empirical ethics. Molewijk and colleagues (2004), for example, contrasted five approaches, the distinction between them hinging on: (1) the relationship between moral theory and data; (2) the use of inductive, deductive or case-based reasoning with data; and (3) the degree to which moral authority is located in social practice or existing moral theory. They advocate an integrated empirical ethics, in which theorizing is seen as a social practice, moral authority is grounded in experience, and there is a strong interaction and co-constitution between moral theorizing and empirical work. A decade later, Davies and colleagues (2015) extended Molewijk's analysis by conducting a systematic review of integrated empirical ethics work. They found 32 distinct methodologies in use, which they arranged in a spectrum between dialogical approaches and consultative approaches. In dialogic approaches, stakeholders and researchers enter into dialogue to reach a shared understanding and pursue analysis and a conclusion together: the value of these methodologies is argued via something like democratic legitimacy.⁴ Qualitative approaches, such as action research and community-based participatory research, and deliberative democratic methods, such as community or citizens juries, are examples. In consultative approaches, an external 'thinker' undertakes data collection and then independently analyses that data and draws normative conclusions from it. The work practices in these latter consultative approaches are closer to the work practices traditional in grounded theory.⁵

How might grounded theory meet this much newer tradition of empirical bioethics? It is my contention that grounded theory has a lot to offer empirical bioethics, and that empirical bioethics can extend grounded theory research to more explicitly consider the important moral dimensions of social life. In the remaining sections, I make three points to support this view. The first is that, whether or not it is acknowledged, grounded theory arises from a philosophical and social tradition that is heavily normatively inflected. The second is that grounded theory researchers could learn to more explicitly attend to the normative dimensions of social life, and include these in our conceptual analyses. Finally, I will suggest that the relatively young empirical ethics movement could be enriched by a greater awareness of grounded theory traditions.

GROUNDING THEORY ARISES FROM A NORMATIVELY-INFLECTED THEORETICAL TRADITION

In this section I will take as given the common view that grounded theory is, at least in part, a way of putting symbolic interactionism into research practice: that grounded theory offers, in the words of Charmaz, Clarke, and others, a 'theory methods package' with symbolic interactionism and pragmatism (Clarke 2005; Star 2007; Bryant 2009; Charmaz 2014: Chapter 10). The focus in making this link tends to be two-fold. The first is epistemological, refuting 'view from nowhere' or 'spectator' views of knowledge, and instead – in keeping with pragmatist epistemologies – taking knowledge to be a fallible tool actively created for the practical purpose of coping with the world (Bryant 2009). The second focus is to introduce a particular social ontology, creating, in Blumer's terms, 'lines along which to look' in data collection and analysis (Blumer 1954). Interactionist theory, for example, might lead a researcher to: (1) see actions, interactions and relationality as central to human life; (2) see the social world as dynamic and processual, rather than as being deterministically caused by static traits or conditions; (3) understand all human action in the context of the situations in which it occurs; (4) see people as active, thinking, interpreting, meaning-making beings; and (5) understand actions and interactions as both constituting and being shaped by the meanings humans ascribe to objects (Blumer 1969; Charon 2010; Charmaz 2014). On the interactionist view, social reality is obdurate, but can be understood only through our interpretations and perspectives. Social groups share perspectives that shape individual group members' definitions of situations, and thus their actions; a recursive relationship exists between individual interpretations and actions and these shared perspectives. The symbolic objects animating our actions include our selves: we are simultaneously subject and object, acting on our self as an object, with an eye to the way we are viewed by others (Blumer 1969; Charon 2010; Charmaz 2014). Whether or not they are aware of their theoretical origins, grounded theorists (at least in the constructivist tradition) are likely to absorb these commitments via the methodology and method. Grounded theory will, for example, encourage them to approach the social world with curiosity about and openness to participants' meanings and perspectives, focus on action and process, and expect and study change (Charmaz 2014: 263–265).

What is often missed in this attention to the pragmatist and interactionist roots of grounded theory is the extent to which these are normatively inflected. American pragmatists, such as William James and John Dewey, provided the bedrock of interactionism. They were as likely to be theorizing ethics as epistemology, and saw the two as linked. Ruth Anna Putnam argues that 'James and Dewey developed their philosophies precisely in response to the passionate desire to make sense of our moral lives, of the importance of moral values as well as the anguish caused by moral conflict'. In her view, this moral impulse 'explains their metaphysical and epistemological positions as well as their account of value inquiry' (R. A. Putnam 2009: 279). Dewey advocated the application of an 'active, fallibilistic, experimental inquiry in moral questions', and held that understandings of the good needed to both respond to people's experience of particular consequences in situations and provide intelligent critique or evaluation of these, without dogmatism or appeals to authority (H. Putnam 2009: 270–272). Thus, a pragmatist philosophy relies on empirical work: its claims, including its moral claims, should be subjected to empirical examination. These strong moral-empirical threads in pragmatism suggest the possibility of a normative inflected grounded theory.

So too does the problem-orientation of pragmatism. As both pragmatist philosophers (R. A. Putnam 2009) and grounded theory methodologists (Strübing 2007) have noted, inquiry in pragmatism – particularly Dewey's pragmatism – was prompted by problems that interrupted habitual forms of action. This was carried forward into Mead's interactionism (Strübing 2007). On this view, inquiry of any kind 'is prompted when one finds oneself in a problematic or indeterminate situation ... when, for one reason or another, we cannot go on in habitual ways' (R. A. Putnam 2009: 286). It is commonly observed that grounded theory is centrally concerned with problems and their resolution,

and this can be traced back to these pragmatist roots: moral inquiry in pragmatism and social inquiry in grounded theory respectively become most necessary when such problems arise (R. A. Putnam 2009; Charmaz 2014). Charmaz's methodological writing gestures to this problem-orientation and its moral dimensions in grounded theory. Drawing on Shibutani, she notes that problems arise when people find themselves conflicted because of irreconcilable desires, demands or directions, their current practices cannot resolve this conflict, and 'the problem lies outside of their existing normative framework': it is in these problematic situations that Blumer's active, inquiring self is most likely to emerge (Charmaz 2014: 271).

These normative inflections can be observed not only in contemporary grounded theory studies, as observed at the outset of this chapter, but also in the roots and establishment of grounded theory. Chicago School teachers such as Everett C. Hughes and Robert Park encouraged their students to engage not only with the powerful but also with those socially constructed as deviant, and to demonstrate the ways in which, from their shared perspective, these peoples' social worlds made sense. Park famously exhorted his students to 'go sit on the lounges of the luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of the flophouses; sit on the gold coast settees and the slum shakedown; sit in the orchestra hall and in the Star and Garter burlesque ... get the seat of your pants dirty in real research (McKinney 1966: 71)'.⁶ And Hughes is perhaps best-known for his maxim 'humble the proud and elevate the humble' (Bosk 1992: x). These snippets of the past show a fundamental ethical impulse in Chicago-inspired traditions: to pay respectful attention to those whom society might systematically shun or oppress. Chicago School urban ethnography was a morally-inflected project mapping the ways in which the rapidly changing city became geographically and socially patterned, and the effect this had on the least well-off (Bulmer 1984). Many iconic interactionist studies (think here of *Boys in White*, or *Stigma*) dealt with subjects of direct relevance to bioethics (Becker et al. 1961; Goffman 1963; De Vries 2004). And as is well known, grounded theory itself began with an in-depth study of the process of dying, a theme that remains central in bioethics (Glaser and Strauss 1968; McMillan 2016). All of this suggests that issues of normative significance fall within the everyday territory of the grounded theorist, practically and theoretically.

EXPLICITLY INCORPORATING VALUES AND NORMATIVITY INTO GROUNDED THEORIZING

However, grounded theory studies, like much of social science (Sayer 2011), tend not to confront this normativity directly, preferring to focus on explaining how things happen and what things mean without explicitly theorizing the moral and values-oriented aspects of social life. In this section I want to argue that empirical ethics and value-rich social science can offer three things to grounded theory. The first is an additional depth to data collection, retaining openness but encouraging the presentation of counterfactuals and elicitation of moral reasoning. The second is a new kind of theoretical sensitivity: to normative concepts and questions, which will encourage greater attention to values as significant components in most social and psychological processes. The final benefit is to strengthen the sophisticated approach to the problem of epistemic authority already available in pragmatist traditions.

How can a normatively inflected grounded theory add depth to data collection? By encouraging active elicitation of moral reasoning. Much like the previously mentioned confusion of open minds with empty heads, in data collection it is easy to confuse openness with blankness. Being a sensitive and supportive interviewer does not require being a silent sponge. I find it helpful to ask explicitly about people's moral experience with questions such as: 'Who is the person you most admire [in this situation]? Tell me about them.' 'What are you most proud of in this program? What is it about

that that makes you proud?' 'Think about a time when you were asked to do something at work that you thought was wrong. Tell me about that.' Counterfactuals, a strong part of the philosophical tradition, can also be useful in qualitative data collection, as observed by Ives (2008), and can be introduced in a non-confrontational way that does not undermine the interviewing relationship. If an interviewee puts one of several possible conflicting moral positions, for example, the interviewer can recount a conflicting view that 'some people' take and invite a response to that view. This takes us to my second point: an interviewer can only put counterfactuals if they are theoretically sensitized to normative concepts and questions. It is impossible to do with an out-dated 'empty head' version of grounded theory, in which the literature is largely unknown. As Lempert suggests: 'in order to participate in the current theoretical conversation, [the researcher] needs to understand it' (2007: 254). I would contend that a values oriented grounded theorist needs to be familiar enough both with ethical theories and with empirical findings on the substantive topic under study that they can make and interrogate important connections, ideally during the initial interview, or alternatively during follow up interviews.⁷

Recall Davies and colleagues' contrast between consultative and dialogic methods in empirical bioethics (2015). The third benefit of normativity in grounded theory may be to foreground the strong connection between ethics and epistemology in the pragmatist tradition (H. Putnam 2009), and thus to begin to connect the consultative and dialogic. I contend that good grounded theory research will have elements of both: it will be dialogic enough that the final theory is credible to the community of practice it pertains to, but consultative in that a researcher or small team of researchers are likely to produce a theoretical 'whole' that is larger, and possibly more abstract, than the sum of the individual data sources that are its parts. It's possible that normative theorizing – perhaps more than social theorizing – does not allow the theorist to slip between the cracks of epistemic authority. A normative argument is an argument about what ought to be. Arguments about what ought to be – perhaps more than arguments about how the social world works – are part of everyday discourse. A reasonable and common response to such an argument is thus 'according to whom?' or 'on whose authority?' Rehmann-Sutter and colleagues, considering this problem for empirical bioethics, observed:

...it would be a shortcoming in the argument if we (as researchers) were to conclude that an argument Q is valid just because people in the interviews said so. If we make a validity claim about a moral argument, we need to argue for it. In other words, as researchers who have learned what might be valid excuses and arguments for the participants, we then need to reconstruct the argument in our own terms. We need to present it to ourselves and then to our readers in papers or talks in a form that is generally accessible to criticism. Here, then, the credibility of a normative conclusion depends on the quality of the ethical argument of the bioethicist. To be very clear: it is the researcher/bioethicist who explicitly produces the ethical argument. The information provided by qualitative empirical studies contributes to the conditions that make it possible to evaluate these arguments and the conclusions drawn from them, but as ethical researchers making normative claims, we cannot hide behind the interviewees or what they have said. We need to be clear that it is our normative argument, in the end. (Rehmann-Sutter, Porz, and Scully 2012: 440)

This echoes Putnam's account of Dewey on 'warranted valuation' (Putnam 2002: 103–109). The fact that something is valued, Dewey argued, did not make it valuable. Only criticism, intelligent reflection, can determine whether something we value is indeed valuable. This will be done on the background of all of the facts we know and the values we already hold, draws on all forms of knowledge (lay knowledge, scientific knowledge and philosophical knowledge), will be open to all possible hypotheses, and will be able to be responsibly defended, whether through empirical testing or close analysis. We should employ fallibilism, be willing to test different ways of resolving

problems, and democratize inquiry as best we can by observing something similar to discourse ethics, which was presaged by the pragmatist G. H. Mead, and most famously developed by the political philosopher Jürgen Habermas (Bohman and Rehg 2014). A values-oriented grounded theory, then, asks about values, interrogates value positions, resists suppression of competing value positions in developing an understanding. However, to return to our earlier discussion of the difference between criteria for evaluating grounded and normative theories respectively: as Rehmann-Sutter and colleagues argue above, the researcher herself is eventually required to arrive at a defensible normative position. And this position needs to have those qualities earlier described such as coherence and recourse to good reasons. A plurality of values may be relevant, and should be empirically described, but empirical ethics generally resists relativism. Values and valuations are taken to require justification: it accepted that some reasons and values may be better than others.

EXPLICITLY INCORPORATING GROUNDED THEORY METHODOLOGY INTO EMPIRICAL ETHICS

So far we have considered what empirical ethics can offer grounded theory. Grounded theory and its theoretical roots also have much to offer empirical bioethics. Many empirical ethicists are new to empirical work, and grounded theory offers them a flexible, systematic method with sound methodological underpinnings and considerable analytic power. Grounded theory, in its attention to agency and action, can also highlight the processual and situational nature of valuing and evaluating. Recall the two definitions of ‘values’ with which I began this chapter. Sayer (2011), the social scientist, emphasizes the place of the agent in valuing. Raz (2001), the philosopher, defines a value as an attribute of an entity. Pragmatic and interactionist theory guides us towards the more situated and processual version: towards valuing as a human activity. This helpfully orients us away from excessively deductive approaches to empirical ethics, and towards understanding how and why valuing varies in human reasoning and action, informed by intensive data collection and analysis.

This leads us to a considerable contribution that I believe grounded theory and its antecedents can make to empirical ethics. As discussed earlier, empirical ethics researchers – because of our disciplinary location – worry at length about deriving ought from is. Let us assume that social research can usefully inform normative reasoning. Bioethicists have strong and differing opinions, and endless debates, over the soundness and applicability of competing moral theories. Interestingly, though, they do not often trouble the social ontology underpinning their work, despite the fact that their research questions are questions about how valuing and moral judgement operates in the social world. Thus, their work frequently contains implicit social ontologies: conceptions of the self, of institutions, of relationships, and so on. To choose an easy target, much normative theorizing assumes the same vision of the self that qualitative researchers have railed against for decades: the independent, rational, implicitly male agent, uninhibited by the messiness of relationships and affect, always analytic and acting only on principle. It is not necessary to rehearse the arguments against this impoverished view here; suffice to say that interactionist notions of the self resonate with, and have much to add to, more contemporary views within bioethics, including those that emphasize that autonomy exists only in a network of conditions that arise from our social, institutional and relational positioning (Mackenzie 2014).

Just as empirical ethics can perhaps teach grounded theorists to be explicitly rather than implicitly normative, grounded theory could bring to empirical ethics a more reflexive and detailed view of the workings of the social world. And grounded theory, in its attention to detail, situations and meanings, is well placed to fulfil the many promises of empirical work for bioethics: to make

bioethics more effective by connecting it to practice, to test the claims of moral theory (such as whether consequences occur, and whether formal moral principles are relevant to situated actors), and to reveal previously undetected moral problems (Solomon 2005).

CONCLUSIONS

My goal in this chapter was to demonstrate that a relationship between empirical ethics and grounded theory could be mutually beneficial. Grounded theories often implicitly incorporate processes of moral evaluation; empirical ethics often implicitly incorporates a view of the social world. By thoughtfully connecting the two, a more complete and powerful analysis is possible. Any grounded theorist who advocates social change based on her findings takes a position on what ought to be done. Through collaboration or selfexpansion, the application of grounded theory methodology to empirical ethics research can provide both a foundation for and enrichment of our understanding of the moral dimensions of social life, and, in my view, can benefit grounded theorists, empirical ethicists, and those for whom their research has relevance.

Notes

1. Hume's Law was not expressed by Hume as a law – it is an almost throwaway remark in his *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*, published (anonymously) in 1739. In full, the 'law' reads as follows: I cannot forbear adding to these reasonings an observation, which may, perhaps, be found of some importance. In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprized to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, it is necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded, that this small attention would subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceived by reason (Hume 1739, Book III Section I Part I).
2. See McMillan (2016) for a more detailed argument about Hume's body of work, particularly that Hume's radical epistemology may remove any basis for making moral claims, and as such should be employed with caution.
3. Although Putnam made significant contributions to pragmatist thought, he refused to call himself a pragmatist. He was notable for his non-dogmatism, regularly changing his views on important matters and remaining open to challenge until the end of his career.
4. Legitimacy generally requires that certain ideal conditions be met that satisfy the requirements for due process: for example, that a wide range of – or even all – relevant stakeholders have been included and had a chance to participate, and that the conclusions are based on reasons that would be recognized by most or all stakeholders as relevant.
5. Importantly, although the work practices of consultative empirical ethics and usual grounded theory research look similar *prima facie* in that they involve the researcher taking responsibility for the analysis and conclusions, the criteria for evaluating the knowledge produced are different. An ethical argument is evaluated by the criteria common in the discipline of philosophy: for example, whether the argument provides a reasonable fit with considered moral intuitions, whether it is supported by a plausible rationale, whether it is coherent. It may be possible to produce sound ethical arguments on either side of the same question. A grounded theory, on the other hand, is evaluated according to its usefulness, completeness, reflection of variation in the social world and other such criteria. Although the theoretical and personal resources available to the researcher will always shape the theory produced, one would hope that two grounded theories about the same problem would not reach radically different conclusions.

6. Quotation unpublished by Park, recorded by Howard Becker while a graduate student at Chicago in the 1920s.
7. See Charmaz (2014: 210–212) for some examples of grounded theorists taking a more active or even challenging role in interviewing.

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