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## GROUNDED RESEARCH: A MODIFIED GROUNDED THEORY FOR THE BUSINESS SETTING

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# **Grounded Research: A Modified Grounded Theory for the Business Setting**

by

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## **Abstract**

The paper is about the use of grounded theory in the business setting. The paper reflects on Glaser's extreme and persistent criticism of his grounded theory co-author, Strauss's diversion from the pure grounded theory principles of emergence and theory generation. Grounded theory is last in line of the great, the grand and the grounded, the great being realist philosophy, the grand being scientism and sociological grand theories and the grounded representing interpretive theory grounded in respondent data. The philosophical antecedents of scientism and rational objectivism can be seen to persist in contemporary organizations. Historically, dualism of physical and metaphysical aspects of the world have allowed investigation of the concrete to flourish at the expense of the more intuitive and intangible. Sociological predicates of structural functionalism carried this into the social arena. The scientific research culture persisted due to institutionalization. The result is that organizations come equipped with supercategories of meaning embedded in their structures systems and processes. These impact on research more than simply as contextual phenomena. They constrain emergence and produce preconceptions. This is exacerbated by the need in business research to begin with a defined business problem or issue. Whilst it is possible to conduct generative qualitative research, and to fulfil many of the requirements of symbolic interactionism, the claim to grounded theory needs to be made on a case by case basis using researcher judgement. The term *grounded research* is presented as an alternative to grounded theory

# Grounded Research: A Modified Grounded Theory for the Business Setting

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## ***Introduction***

*All theories of organisation are based upon a philosophy of science and a theory of society... Whether they [theorists] are aware of it or not, they bring to their subject of study a frame of reference which reflects a whole series of assumptions about the social world and the way in which it may be investigated (Burrell, 1979:xii)*

Inspired by the symbolic interaction framework (Mead, 1963 (orig. 1934); Blumer, 1969), the idea of grounding and generating theory, letting it emerge from the attributed meanings of social actors was presented by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. Conveying meaning through symbols, objects, gestures, language and actions relied upon there being some meaning construction *between* people engaged in social interaction. The meaning needed to be discovered, emerged and allowed to formulate in such a way as to be provisional, capable of reforming and reshaping as interaction proceeded. Concepts of emerging, of provisional, of indeterminate were in direct contrast with the concepts of structural and functional determinism embedded in the positivist research of the day.

Grounded Theory is both an idea and a challenge. The authors, Glaser and Strauss (1967) described it as a method. A central idea is to discover the meaning as construed by social actors without bringing any preconceptions to the task. The task is to keep discovering and generating theory in a systematic yet emergent way figure 1

This paper argues that when researching business organizations, there are antecedents impinging on the method that affect the extent of emergence. In other words, some forcing of constructs will usually happen simply because of the existing meaning structures and functions operating as the organizational framework.

Figure 1: The Grounded Theory idea

Grounded Theory is for the discovery  
of concepts and hypotheses  
**not** for testing or replicating them

**THE RESEARCHER HAS TO BE  
CONTINUALLY  
CODING, COMPARING,  
ANALYSING, MEMOING**

while asking of the data what category  
or property of category is indicated?

To use an example, context, in grounded theory, using Glaser's definition (1992:65) "is a condition of overriding scope under which a set of related categories and properties occur".

The argument here is that considering the nature of the business context, some conditions occur in such a way to contaminate the grounded theory principle of emergence. Contamination is always a matter of degree. There will be some business contexts that fall within the remit of Glaser's interpretation of context, in other words that will still allow emergence. Conversely, there will be some business contexts that can not help but be conceptual in nature. This presents the researcher with a problem of judging or deciding the status of a particular research context in its ability to represent grounded theory principles. This need for judgement and justification is a theme running through the paper. The challenge of grounded theory as Glaser (1998:32) says, is an "attack on theoretical capitalism... [and] the ruling canons of quantitative research". Glaser and Strauss (1967) were challenging the positivist ontology with its scientific traditions.

They were not the only ones challenging the essentially scientific culture that pervaded the social science research world (Filstead, 1972; Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). However, it is only when one looks at the power and depth of the scientific mindset since classical Greek times (Tarnas, 1991) that the might and persistence of the challenge is appreciated. It is argued here that philosophical and sociological antecedents explain much about the persistence of the realist view of the social world as it is exhibited in present day business organizations. This is especially so through the process of institutionalization (Powell, 1990). It is argued later that institutionalization has prevented competing paradigms

such as interpretivism (Schwandt, 1994) from having such a systemic hold as the well anchored scientific positivism.

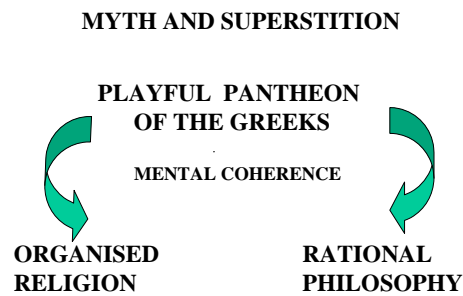
The almost uninterrupted descendance of scientism into the core of sociological theory is well documented. For example, when reading Burrell and Morgan's (1979) four sociological paradigms, radical humanism, interpretive sociology, radical structuralism and functionalist sociology one could easily argue that they were not on a par in terms of their legitimacy and respectability. The metaphor that comes to mind about the interpretive paradigm with its concern to understand the world as it appears in its subjectivist, emergent form is that it has been considered as the child of not always indulgent parents.

The parents are, of course, the natural or 'hard sciences'. Here, the world appears as externally real and objectified even when the subjectivity and intersubjectivity of human activities are recognized (Dilthey, 1976; Weber, 1946; Mead, 1963, orig. 1934). Within the scientific, objectivist framework there exists a single, stable, external reality that is totally independent of human perception. Mathematics and reason are primary in rendering valid knowledge. There is a sharp distinction between the subject and the object of knowledge with an emphasis on establishing knowledge independent of the knowing subject. The distinction between physical (spatio temporal) and non physical (or metaphysical) phenomena and processes (dualism) shows itself relative to the natural. True or valid knowledge about reality is ultimately rendered through rational interpretations of sensory experience (logical empiricism or positivism). Due to the assumptions above, desirable traits of generalizability and testability (through validity, reliability and, later, quantitative methodology) became *de rigeur* in the research community.

The realist framework is well exemplified in functionalist sociology which "in many respects has developed as a branch of the natural sciences and, to this day, in disciplines as avowedly 'social' as sociology, psychology, economics, anthropology and the like, natural science models and methods reign supreme in various areas of enquiry" (Burrell & Morgan G., 1979:40). How has this supremacy emerged? We look to philosophy (Tarnas, 1991) and the history of ideas (Mahoney, 1991) in early Greek times for some answers. Mahoney (1991) points to an important and early philosophical development. This was the transformation of the mystical and supernatural world of myth and superstition into two major and divergent paths of conceptualization. These were organized religion and rational philosophy figure 2.

## ***Philosophical antecedents (The Great)***

Figure 2: Two divergent paths



Since Greek times, soul and spiritual qualities were accommodated by two concepts, ‘other world’ and ‘eternal life’. These were eventually enfolded into the province of various religions for articulation and expression (Tarnas, 1991). The body (and intellect) was accommodated in the ‘real’ here and now world. Checkland (1999) and Mahoney (1991) discuss four of the many classical philosophers. These were Pythagorus (570-475 BC), founder of rationalism, Socrates (469-399 BC), Plato (427-347 BC) and Aristotle (384-322 BC). Building on the work of earlier scholars, they presented enduring conceptual traditions that still influence and permeate thinking and research methodologies today.

These included *rationalism*, where knowledge is based on reason and expressed through mathematics and logic, *dualism*, the divorce of the spiritual and the physical, *idealism* based on the ability of humans to abstract the essence of ideas and keep them for further use and *realism* with its external, stable and orderly world, independent of mentation (Mahoney, 1991:30). As Mahoney says, these four ‘isms’ have permeated our subsequent assumptions and assertions about the nature of the world, ontology, our choice of methods for knowing it, epistemology, and ways of studying it, methodology figure 3.



Figure 3: The four “isms”

<b>RATIONALISM</b>	<b>KNOWLEDGE THROUGH REASON MATHEMATICS LOGIC</b>
<b>DUALISM</b>	<b>DIVORCE OF THE SPIRITUAL AND PHYSICAL</b>
<b>IDEALISM</b>	<b>HUMAN ABILITY TO ABSTRACT - INSIGHT</b>
<b>REALISM</b>	<b>EXTERNAL STABLE ORDERLY WORLD</b>

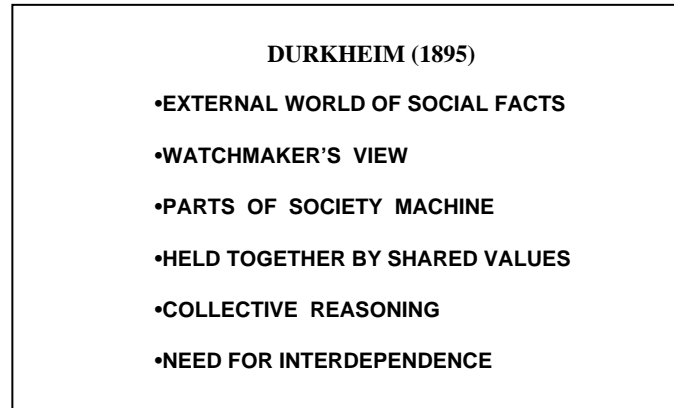
The spiritual world of meaning has an important quality. It is subjective. It is ‘*seen*’ from the inside and experienced as insight. Its banishment to the transcendental allowed things in the concrete world not to be contaminated by unreasonable, intangible and non mathematical phenomena. The way was clear for rational and empirical foundations to be laid for the pursuit of knowledge about the world. It seems that for several centuries there was no serious opposition to classical philosophies and the doctrines of rational and empirical supremacy were not seriously challenged at least outside of the spiritual setting.

By the 1500’s and the Scientific Revolution, the Age of Reason, rationalists and empiricists only needed to compete with each other. Calls to observation and experimentation coexisted alongside those for thinking (preferably logical, rational and mathematical). An assumption of determinism and certainty was at the heart of both perspectives (Mahoney, 1991). By this time almost a thousand years of certainty, objectification, external realism and independence of the knower and the known had created a firm and powerful base.

These were reinforced at a time when there was much scientific activity. Bacon (1600 (1620) with his ‘new instrument’ laid down the foundations of what has, today, become the most accepted and acceptable ways to conduct ‘respectable’ research. These included observation and experimentation. The rule was to keep the knower disconnected from the known. The epistemology was empirical observation coupled with logical inference, conceptualized as rational objectivism figure 4. From here developed the metaphors of the mechanistic universe of Newton (Zohar & Marshall, 1994) and the elegant mathematical universe of Descartes (Waldrop, 1992). Rational objectivism still appears to be the

dominant meta theory in science (Fjermestad & Hiltz, 1999) and, others suggest, social science as well (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Checkland, 1999).

Figure 4: Rational objectivism



It is easy to see that any effective counterpoint to prevailing theory would need to be powerful, confident and uncompromising. Such was the case with grounded theory and, indeed from the symbolic interaction school to which it is affiliated and which pioneered field study as an alternative to controlled research environments (Woods, 1992). Purism needed to be a central feature in the establishing of new research methods such as grounded theory. An argument here is that grounded theory, considered by many to be seminal in its theory, systems and procedures, seems to have taken on the form of a benchmark. When researchers quote grounded theory as the research method, they are quoting the principles, systems, procedures and methods of data collection and analysis.

The result, suffered by one of the grounded theory discoverers when the purism was perceived as jeopardized, was an enjoinder to either retain the purity or to stop using the term grounded theory. The bitter exchanges over the last ten years, between Glaser and Strauss (Glaser, 1992,1998) are basically about the use of the term. Strauss and Corbin's (1990) publication *Basics of Qualitative Research Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* drew such responses as "I demand that you withdraw the book pending a rewriting of it" (Glaser, 1992:1).

Glaser's argument is deep and complex, revolving around forcing, emerging and definitional issues. The argument, presented later, is that the 'emergent' that Glaser was trying to protect so vigorously could only be applied in business research in a delimited way. This is

largely because of the institutionalization of the structural functionalist sociological predicates that appear to be so replicated in modern organizations (Weisbord, 1987).

### ***Sociological Predicates***

A brief look at the founding figures of sociology reminds one that when competing with the realist mindset, one is competing with an orthodoxy. Continuity of the status quo is maintained through the structures and functions that go to make a stable society (or in this case business organization). Any data, whether collected to verify an existing theory or to generate new theory must first be fitted to the supercategories of meaning presented within the organizational design.

Referring to Burrell and Morgan's (1979) comprehensive analysis of sociological paradigms and their history, ghosts from the past emerge. Comte, (1798-1857) founded the discipline that became known as sociology (Erickson, 1986). This, as Burrell and Morgan describe, translated as the quest for knowledge about social order, implying of course that there was one to be found. Comte theorized that a new social order was required as society had passed from its theological or fictitious stage, through the metaphysical or abstract, and on to its (final) scientific or positive stage. This last was the definitive, valid social state. "In the final, the positive state, the mind has given over the vain search after absolute notions, the origin and destination of the universe and the causes of phenomena, and applies itself to the study of their laws, i.e. their invariable relations of succession and resemblance. Reason and observation combined are the means of this knowledge" (Comte, 1853:1).

In an almost unbroken line of thinking, the view of society as an objective reality flowed to the domain of the human as a social being. It was applied to the sense-making surrounding the activities that comprised the human world. One of the most influential sociologists of the day, Durkheim, based his work on the assumption of an external world and the existence of social facts (Durkheim, 1895/1958). Additionally there was an assumption of shared norms and values, a communal way of looking at society so that its systems could uphold the shared norms.

These assumptions underwrote the survey method, allowing social facts to be measured and compared with other social facts. Because these were stable and deterministic it was possible to generalize across social contexts. Durkheim was the first to conceptualize society as what Zohar (1994) called the watchmaker's view. In other words, society comprised of parts that fitted together and were interdependent with each other.

Within this framework was the functionalist assumption that there should be differentiation of roles and status and these would be accepted as legitimate needs of society. They have come to be perfectly replicated in organizations via differentiated status levels and roles, and formal structural hierarchies symbolizing informal hierarchies of meaning. Artifacts such as job titles, job or role descriptions, job evaluation methods and wage differentials help maintain the structures. The framework rests on an assumption that there should be a legitimate and consensual status quo. Further, it should strive for equilibrium and be amenable to regulation. Traditionally, in organizations there is assumed (in theory) to be a unified collective pattern for people to follow.

Thinking about the way that organizations use interconnected systems to keep a balance of regulation and order has proved to be enduring (Stacey, 1993). In many organizations these became organizing principles that governed social processes (Whiteley, 1995). The important aspect for thinking about the achievements of grounded theory is that it took root within the structures and functions of a socially ordered society. These were considered to be explicit, capable of objective classification and their role was to contribute to the status quo (Parsons, 1949). Epistemologically, for social theorists of the day there was only one search of relevance. It was for the underlying regularities and structural uniformities that characterized what was essentially a closed system model of society.

### ***Interpretive Challenge and Grounded Theory***

A little earlier than Comte was laying his foundations for a science of society, the German philosopher and idealist, Kant (1724-1803) was proposing a radical challenge to the notion of a world explained by rational empirical knowledge. His suggestion was that humans, in order to make sense of the knowledge they encountered, had in-born organizing capabilities. Each human mind contained interpretive processing abilities that processed factual, sensual and intuitive knowledge. Replacing the ideas of defining, describing and explaining were those of reaching an understanding. The picture of the human as a rational and objective being was broadened, (problematically) to one where indefinable qualities of spirit and values represented the internal as opposed to external processes.

Problems lay in the reluctance of theorists to let go of the scientific framework. For example, Dilthey, (1833-1911) writing at the time of the Industrial Revolution looked for a way to access understanding, conceptualized as *verstehen* by Weber to stand in contrast with *erklären* or explaining (Crotty, 1998:67). However, often this understanding was still

conceived within the scientific mindset. Weber recognized that there were two realms of meaning, natural and human/social, but both should come under the laws of science. The unique and individual could still be reduced to a basic (atomistic) behavior to be studied within sociological institutional categories.

Still struggling with the undeniable and inexplicable essence of human meaning, expressed through individual interpretation and intuition, theorists such as Weber, even when trying to reconcile them, grounded the quest for understanding in the prevailing views of society “Weber reduces all kinds of social relationships and structures, all cultural objectifications, all realms of objective mind to the most elementary forms of human behavior” (Schutz, 1967b)”. The causal explanations of subjective behavior were still being sought as sociology developed and matured. What was lost here was very important for those conducting social research. Essentially, the nuances, play and counterplay, suggestiveness and above all figurativeness of human interaction and speech were bypassed as deserving of intellectual attention. They were recognized but not catered for, other than in their concrete manifestations.

Perceptual and imaginative phenomena were not given the attention that would later result in such methodologies as symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1963 (1934),) (Blumer, 1969), ethnomethodology, (Garfinkel, 1967; Silverman, 1998) and phenomenology (Husserl, 1931; Schutz, 1967b). The notion of the interpretive paradigm and qualitative research was predicated on a model of the person as a constructor, creator and conductor of meaning, the raw material of which was human interaction. It is useful to contrast the sort of principles upon which perspectives such as symbolic interactionism were built with those that later became management predicates. Blumer (1984) the symbolic interactionist, argued for three basic principles: humans act towards events on the basis of the meanings these hold for them; the attribution of meaning is a continuous process; meaning attribution is a product of social interaction.

Scientific management principles were predicated on the concrete actions of workers and managers and only those that were visible and measurable (Taylor, 1911). Humans were to act according to precise instructions, the instructions representing a consensual meaning. Meaning was best observed in discrete acts of behavior. The scientific management principles fitted well with Parsonian sociology. Social action to Parsons was formally structured so that people could function appropriately in tune with common norms. This required a state of equilibrium. People would accept social devices such as differentiation,

social control and bureaucratization because (it was theorized), they believed that the status quo could and should be maintained.

Woods (1992) relates the idea, attributed to William James, that humans in their social interactions bring a personal secret. It is there to be discovered and indeed can only be discovered by going out amongst the social actors. The University of Chicago (the Chicago School) drew researchers who supported the ideas that came along with the symbolic interactionist and 'inside out' approach (Burgess, 1929). Field studies were designed to unlock meaning and to 'discover personal secrets'. Amongst the researchers who resisted the call of Parsonian sociology (Parsons, 1968) was Anselm Strauss, a 'co-discoverer' of grounded theory. To the Chicago School, there were common norms, translated as generalized rules (Mead, 1963 (1934)), but it was theorized that individuals produced a second order, personal construct of meaning about them (Schutz, 1967).

### ***Management Theory***

The influences of sociology, especially the role of theorists such as Parsons, in shaping the philosophies and ideas of the management theory that developed alongside industrialization are well documented (Burrell & Morgan G., 1979; Barley & Kunda, 1992; Hatch, 1997). Parsons shared Compté's vision of modern industrial society as the pinnacle of human achievement. This scientific/positive era of human development and the notions of rational and objective organisation in the workplace were to be seen in Taylor's (1911) Scientific Management Principles, Fayol's differentiated management responsibilities (1916) and Weber's (1947) theory of bureaucracy.

*[Scientific Management] would fully exploit the efficiencies of specialised labor through the close supervision of employees carrying out highly specified physical work. Efficiency was to be encouraged and supported by a piece rate incentive system in which workers were paid according to the amount of work of a prespecified nature that they performed in a given length of time. The new system permitted management to define the tasks that workers performed and also to determine how they approached these tasks. (Hatch, 1997:30).*

Viewed another way, what we see in the Taylorist, modernist, organization is a classical structural functionalist framework figure 5. The organisation operates as a set of interdependent functions as evidenced by the manager/worker, worker/task, supervisor/control types of functional relationship. Structural devices such as incentive systems and hierarchies of differentiated roles and tasks were often articulated through

artefacts such as the organizational chart. Differentiated rewards were used to make sure that the parts functioned in a particular way so as to uphold the whole organizational system.

Figure 5: Organizations built on societal model

**ORGANISATIONS**  
**Structures and functions**  
**within a socially ordered society**

**explicit**  
**capable of objective classification**  
**contribute to the status quo**  
**keep things in equilibrium**

**Epistemology**  
**to know regularities and structural**  
**uniformity**

At this juncture, one could argue that there have been many organizational theorists since the days of the classical thinkers. Some of these have departed from the realist tradition and have espoused designs predicated more on the social and subjective than the physical and objective. The seminal work of the 'Hawthorne Experiments', (although they were originally based on traditional empirical assumptions of causal relationships) was that the human at work was a socially activated being (Mayo, 1930; Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939). Burrell and Morgan (1979:144) make an interesting observation about the research that followed, suggesting that the basic premise of the human as predictable, rational and calculative has continued to emerge under various disguises.

*The research of Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939) Whyte's, study of the restaurant industry (1948), Walker and Guest's study of the assembly line (1952), Likert's work on leadership and supervision (1961 and 1967) and the work of Lewin et al on group dynamics (1939) among countless other studies have been interpreted as evidence in support of the view of man at work as a social being motivated by affective needs. In essence, the attempt to identify and test, through empirical research the validity of different models of man can be understood as a search for a substitute for Taylor's 'economic man'.*

Organizational research continued to surface varying aspects of social and psychological influences in the workplace. Trist and Bamforth (1951) developed the idea of social and psychological factors being a part of technology and work organization. Systems thinking and the importance of integrating the individual and the organization in more than a

functional way was developed (Argyris, 1964; Checkland 1999). Theorists such as Burns and Stalker (1961), Woodward (1965) Pugh (1976) and the Aston group provided contrasts and distinctions that challenged the somewhat singular and uncomplicated 'models of man' and bureaucracy theories.

Various evolutions of systems theory, especially open systems theory developed over a thirty year period (Checkland, 1999). Given the seemingly steady progression of systems theorists away from closed and equilibrium models and towards openness and far from equilibrium ones (Stacey, 1998) the strong adherence to closed research methodologies such as controlled experiments, statistical surveys and laboratory work still seen today is surprising.

This is most prevalent in business research and some would argue that respectability still resides in statistical and mathematical modeling, even of human activities. (Frost, 1989,1995). Even in the most recent of the systems theories (complex adaptive systems, *cas*) (Holland, 1995; Kauffman., 1995) there is still the charge that objectivist functionalist assumptions govern research methods (Griffin, Shaw, & Stacey, 1998). It seems that in spite of powerful schools of thought, particularly that of symbolic interactionism, there has been a persistence of the scientific research culture almost on a taken for granted level.

### ***Institutionalization***

We go once more to organizational theory to help explain the persistence of scientism even in the face of well developed interpretive methodologies. Zucker (1987), was interested in how social and cultural ideas and ideologies persisted over time. As Berger and Luckmann (1967) point out, institutionalized rules are classifications built in to society as reciprocal typifications or interpretations. In pragmatic terms, institutionalization is a device whereby people can understand the workings of a social system. Institutional lore tells 'how things are done'. Zucker, (1991) suggests that for cultural persistence, transmission from one generation to another is necessary, maintenance of the culture must occur and there must be a resistance to change. The more normative aspects, (as opposed to functional ones) require an individual to play a conforming role in maintaining the social institutions. The dominant norms need to be internalized and the individual's behavior is constrained by them "the social structure (macrolevel) determines the behavior of individuals and small groups (microlevel) and exists independently of them.



Meyer and Rowan (1991:41) argue that “ the formal structures of many organizations in post industrial society (Bell, 1973) dramatically reflect the myths of their institutional environment instead of the demand of their work activities” The authors plausibly argue that organizations are driven to incorporate the policies, practices and procedures defined by the traditional and rationalized concepts of work that have become institutionalized in the wider society. When there is a contest between institutionalized rules and efficiency or creativity, the institutionalized rules win out. The organization will recourse to the institutional ceremonies and myths provided by the integrated and consolidated ‘way of doing things around here’ for reinforcement. The authors go on to explain that as relational networks become dense and interconnected, increasing numbers of rationalized myths arise. Some will be almost universal in nature (Parsons, 1968; Durkheim, 1933; Weber 1947).

The aspect of institutionalization of interest to the grounded theory – forcing or emerging argument is that of Meyer and Rowan’s (1991:41) idea of formal structure as myth and ceremony. The notion is of the vital aspects of an organization’s internal workings becoming highly institutionalized (in both work and society). Practices and procedures are defined by prevailing rationalized concepts of organizational work. These function as organizational myths and are often adopted ceremonially with the goal of reinforcing and gaining support for the status quo. They are not necessarily helpful in addressing the ever changing and uncertain requirements of competitive practices.

In fact the very notion of uncertainty and turbulence that competitive organizations face is in contrast with the enduring nature of formal structures that institutionalized organizations practice. The questions begs itself, how can organizations survive and still retain their institutional characteristics? They do this through the activity of decoupling. “Because attempts to control and coordinate activities in institutionalized organizations lead to conflicts and loss of legitimacy, elements of structure are decoupled from activities and from each other (Meyer, 1991:57).

Decoupling is an important research consideration because where there is evidence of this (see Meyer, 1991) then sampling needs may be more complicated than the emergent theoretical sampling allowed in grounded theory. What decoupling does is to enable organizations to maintain standardized, legitimating formal structures while their reactions vary in response to practical considerations of competitive work requirements. Examples from Meyer and Rowan (1991) illustrate this.

Decoupling examples are where activities are performed beyond the purview of managers, where goals are made ambiguous or vacuous, where activities are delegated to professionals and those where categorical ends are substituted for technical ends. In particular, inspection and evaluation are ceremonialized. Such devices allow the organization to absorb uncertainty while preserving its formal structure and functions (March & Simon, 1958). The theory is that organizations decouple their institutional and efficient selves. They buffer one against the other. This has implications for the requirements of grounded theory research, especially those concerning preconceptions and the governing principle of emergence.

Putting the two ideas together of institutionalization in organizations and grounded theory, it seems clear that some of the ideals may be unachievable at least in the pure form of grounded theory as argued by Glaser. Although Glaser's argument with Strauss concerned a different sort of forcing, (mainly concerning devices such as the conditional matrix) the 1998 publication (Glaser, 1998), was a signal that any sort of forcing would endanger the grounded theory reputation. In particular and understandably, Glaser preferred either grounded theory to be done (and written about) true to the authors' original discovery principles or the method to be called something else. In the face of such looming impediments one could argue, why not forget the grounded theory method and place the research within the broader qualitative framework?

There is good reason to try to preserve grounded theory principles, sorting out what can and can not be claimed as grounded theory. The theory as well as the symbolic interactionist perspective was an important milestone in the development of interpretive thinking and research. We return to history and the context in which the interpretive theorists found themselves. There was an overwhelming weight of what Glaser and Strauss (1967) refer to as grand theorizing, theory verification and the well ensconced activity of generalizing. Purism can and should be used as a benchmark and grounded theory could well represent the benchmark for certain types of interpretive research. It is in this spirit that the idea of **grounded research** as a descriptor when the pure grounded theory conditions can not be met is presented. The case below, a four year study into waterfront reform serves to illustrate some of the voluntary forcing that can be necessary as an adjunct activity to the main one of emerging data.

Case Study: Waterfront reform: Enterprise Based Bargaining and Effective Strategies For Change *(with Margaret McCabe and Professor Lawson Savery)*

The research aim was to investigate the perceptions of key groups involved with the strategic change surrounding the life of the first Enterprise Based Agreement, EBA (1991-1996) on the Fremantle (Australian) waterfront. The aim was to emerge meaning about the working lives of workers (wharfies) and managers, on site, as they experienced and made sense of the EBA. The changes presaged by the EBA were in direct contrast with reported traditional waterfront 'reality' (Sheridan, 1994). Relations were reported as adversarial, war-like and culturally embedded. The major players were employers and the (then) Waterfront Workers Federation of Australia (WWF), union. Institutionalization of the industry was evident in the decoupling activities (Meyer & Rowan, 1991) reported by wharfies on both management and union fronts as well as the more obvious formal structures of meaning built in to the union and employer procedures and practices of interaction.

Sheridan's description of how wharfies were perceived by employers and others around the 1950's is graphic and evocative (1994:260).

*...[wharfies were seen] as overpaid, lazy, shiftless, insubordinate roughnecks, 'rorting' the system by organised 'spelling' (resting) of gang members by their mates; pilfering and sometimes vandalising cargo; drinking, playing cards and even fishing on the job; pulling strikes on trivial issues...*

Equally stark was the description of the wharfie's life

*...few outsiders considered what the stench and filth [of the wharfies' appearance] represented in terms of sapping toil in the rancid bowels of a ship. Even 'clean' jobs like loading the national wool clip meant manhandling bales of up to 300 pounds in confined spaces - including inches below metal decking exposed to an Australian heat wave*

The echoes of waterfront industry reporting since the 1890's were of almost continuous war between employers and unions, representing waterfront workers (wharfies). The ebb and flow of power had been arbitrated by the supply of and demand for labor since the turn of the century. Sometimes this favored employers "the 1930's were a bleak time for most wharfies. While men laid off in other industries queued at the dock gates in the hope of a half-day's work, the employers ruled the roost". Sometimes, it favored wharfies "When the Second World War brought full employment, the wharfies instinctively went on the offensive

[and little could] sway them from essaying their revenge on management" Sheridan 1994:260.

At the time, the research was presented as "qualitative, following the generative principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and Schwandt's (1994) interpretive paradigm of constructivism (Whiteley, McCabe, & Savery 1998). In a sense this was plausible as there was no attempt to contaminate the conversations and emerging meaning from the two respondent groups, managers and workers. Glaser's (1998) discussion about grounded theory issues, however, has given pause for reflection and a rethinking of the constraints that the business setting put on the grounded theory claim. Upon revisiting the waterfront research it was evident that there were three distinct overlays imposed by the organizational setting.

The first was the scientific management overlay. The waterfront could be considered closed off from more interpretive evolutions of organizational structures and cultures (such as Emery's (1973,1993) socio-technical and participative management structures). The management methodologies adhered almost perfectly to Taylor's, (1911) scientific management principles and procedures (Hatch, 1997). It was not possible to disregard this supercategory of meaning because of the more urgent need to employ symbolic language. For example, terms such as 'us' and 'them' could be used to generate free flowing conversation.

The second was the industry/organizational overlay. The formal structures of both the union who basically ran an organized industry and the employer who controlled the on site work activities, reflected the myths of the waterfront industry. The union depended upon its formalized structures to perpetuate its legitimacy and survival prospects as did the employer. Hitherto in the waterfront industry, external evaluation and inspection were avoided. Support for the formal structures of union and employer were gained by agreements rather than performance. Trades and professions within the industry were rationalized. These were subject to impersonal testing to formal trades or professional standards and classification/credential rules. Indisputably, the conditions for cultural persistence suggested by Zucker (1991) were met.

The third was the Enterprise Based Agreement (EBA) overlay. This was a structural reform device and was recognized as a strong symbol for the government's wider industrial reform agenda. The EBA attacked some of the institutional scaffolding that had served to prop up

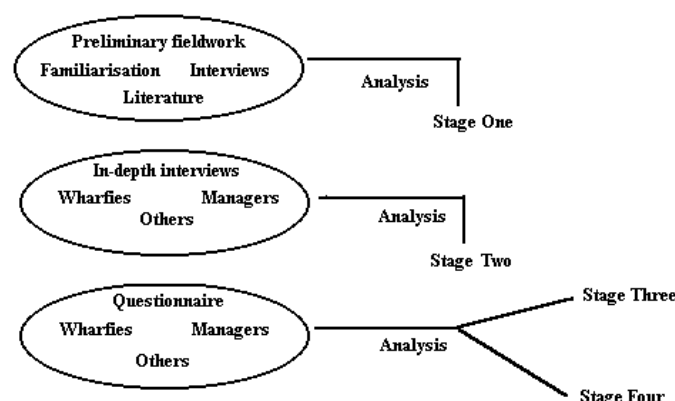
both union and employer decoupling and what Meyer and Rowan (1991) called the logic of confidence. Keeping these structural overlays in mind, our data collection and analysis really needed to be subjected to scrutiny especially the vulnerability to presubstantive coding. We needed to consider whether the theoretical codes suggested by the reform literature, in practice, produced pre-conceptions. (Glaser (1992:27) says that “Theoretical codes are the conceptual models of relationships that are discovered to relate the substantive codes to each other theoretically”.

### **Data Collection**

There were three major segments to the overall design: exploratory and preliminary activities; in-depth interviews and survey through structured questionnaires figure 6.

In order to have some idea of the symbols used in language, both verbal and non verbal we conducted exploratory and preliminary fieldwork. This entailed visiting the research site, talking to wharfies (who because of the new EBA arrangements were targeted in the place of union representatives), managers, ‘old timers’, senior managers from the parent organization and influential people such as national union leaders and the (then) past Prime Minister, Mr Hawke. We added literature on waterfront reform and the wider industrial reform to our informal data. We used the data to construct an interview schedule to elicit data on various aspects surrounding the EBA (the good old days, pre-EBA and post-EBA impressions and things to be learned from the EBA process).

Figure 6. Research Design



Source: Whiteley, A. M., McCabe, M., & Savery L. (1998). Human Resources on the Waterfront:

Managing History.

In Glaser (1998) terms this could be construed as forcing the data into fairly definitional categories of meaning. In symbolic interaction terms it could be construed as “situating the interaction” (Woods, 1992) that is being aware of perspectives present within different contexts.

### ***Socially stable constructs***

When certain categories of meaning derived from the in-depth interviewing appeared to be fairly robust, we considered them to be ‘socially stable’. We included the socially stable ‘facts’ in a scaled questionnaire. All survey questions were ultimately derived from respondent constructs. To add to the qualitative orientation, each question was followed by an additional question ‘how important is this?’ Here, respondents could use their judgement in determining for themselves the relative importance of issues. Analysis of the comments showed that some things were being done well but they were not too important. Others were not being done well yet they were very important, such as trust and communication. There were important issues that needed more explanation. A small ‘pay packet survey’ was administered. On the face of it, this research appeared to be moving further and further away from Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) pure grounded theory and towards Glaser’s (1998) forcing of data.

This would be more so, given the device conceptualized for this study, that of socially stable constructs. The idea was that where categories of meaning were judged to be robust to the point of resembling facts they were treated as quasi facts. An example of a quasi fact is time calibration. The wristwatch, commonly used in the West, is an indication that people have agreed to the twenty-four hour daily calibration of time. Such might not be the case in some populations, for example indigenous ones with a more holistic view of events and happenings. Studies concerning leverage of tools for their time advantage (Atkinson, 1996) assume this ‘fact’ about time. What we did in the waterfront study was to judge some of the qualitative categories as robust enough to be treated as facts and therefore able to be counted.

Contemplatively, the concept of socially stable categories of meaning counting as ‘facts’ would probably be rejected by purist quantitative researchers as well as grounded theorists . In good survey questionnaire design, there is a representational assumption that the word represents the world in an objectified way, not that this is unproblematic (Tsoukas, 1998).

This highlights another dimension of business research. Sometimes, in business research, as long as data is of a high quality, there is a pragmatic stance. A syndrome appears where the research might attract criticism in terms of representativeness, Hofstede (1980), data collection methods Herzberg (1966), or empirical verification Maslow (1970). Yet in the case of these and others, organizations use the theories and methodologies because they appear to work in practice.

Notwithstanding the use of pragmatic devices, organizational research such as the waterfront study may still have a strong generative component. Although forced categories of meaning were applied as questions, these were emerged from talking to and interacting with the social actors themselves. The question format and rhythm took into account the things that were presented by the respondents as making sense to them. Once into the formal questioning, especially in the interview (which was the main data collection device), care was taken to allow the respondents to present the world as they saw it. For example, questions like “what lessons do you think have been learned?” allowed unforced pieces of meaning to emerge.

Within the interviews, figurative language was adopted. Metaphors were a popular linguistic device and these allowed further investigation of perceptions. We recognized the benefits of some of the things we did to gain entry to wharfies’ and managers’ worlds of meaning. We consciously aimed for some of the symbolic interaction researcher skills presented by Woods (1992). These included interpersonal and facilitation skills – wharfies were understandably suspicious about us and it took around four years in total to complete the study. “In tune” skills were developed through activities such as having a presence in the mess room, on the docks and at the ports. Skills of discernment were developed over time. Theoretical sampling was done and data collection methods included ‘close to’ and ‘remote from’ activities.

### ***Data analysis***

From the outset, we realized that whilst we were fairly confident about keeping the faith with the generative rather than verification principle of grounded theory figure 7, when it came to coding the purity could not be upheld.

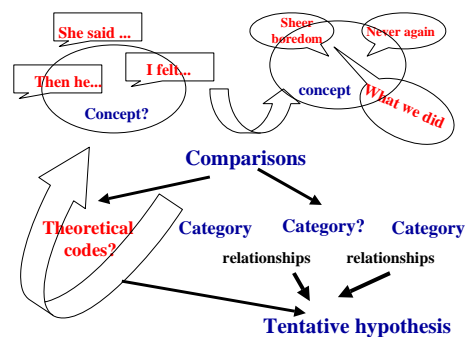
Glaser (1992:38) gave the following definitions of open coding. *Open coding* was defined by Glaser as the conceptualization of data through continuously comparing incident with



incident “the analyst starts with no preconceived codes. He remains entirely open”. *Concept* is the underlying meaning, uniformity and/or pattern within a set of descriptive incidents. **Listening**, for example was a concept in the waterfront study. *Category* is usually a higher level concept, sometimes used when several concepts ‘belong’ to a category. Giving a practical example from the waterfront study, **communication** was a category we derived.

**Listening**, together with several other concepts fitted here. A *property* is, in Glaser’s terms “a conceptual characteristic of a category”. Within our category of communication was **summarizing** and this was given as a property of active listening (active being a property of listening). Theoretical coding takes place as the substantive categories emerge. It is a property of both coding and constant comparative analysis in the sense that a relationship can be detected and connections made within and between categories, often resulting in a rearrangement of the former categories. In other words, as the concepts and categories emerge, connections are being made within the researcher’s own repository of theoretical, professional and experiential knowledge figure 7.

Figure 7: Grounded Theory Activities

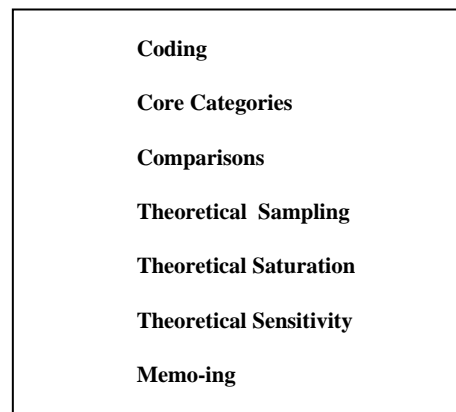


It is important to note that Glaser (1992:27) connects theoretical coding with *theoretical sensitivity* “theoretical sensitivity refers to the researcher’s knowledge, understanding and skill, which foster his generation of categories and properties and increases his ability to relate them into hypotheses, and to further integrate the hypotheses according to emergent theoretical codes... [it] is an ability to generate concepts from data and relate them according to the normal models of theory in general and theory development in sociology in particular”. The sociological theory of institutionalization, used earlier in this paper, was indeed related to the waterfront. It must be said though that institutional theory directed

rather than followed the substantive categories. Applying the theory when we did made us thus fail to meet the open coding mandate.

One of the reasons that grounded theory has changed the face of constructivist and interpretive research is that it has a robust set of systematic procedures. These are subject to the grounded theory principles of emergence and theory generation. As briefly outlined here figure 8, the activities are bound by grounded theory definitions.

Figure 8: Grounded Theory Activities



As suggested earlier, Axial coding is a vexed subject with Glaser (1992) and yet is often accepted as intuitively appealing by our business research students. Glaser's conclusion was that Strauss's version of grounded theory (and centrally, axial coding) was another method altogether. This resonates with the concern expressed in this paper that business research will often not fit the internal integrity of the original grounded theory. Strauss and Corbin (1990:96) define axial coding as "a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories".

This is done by utilizing a coding paradigm involving conditions, context, action/interactional strategies and consequences Figure 9. *Causal conditions* are events, happenings that lead to the occurrences or development of a phenomenon. By *phenomenon* they mean the central idea or event, happening, incident about which actions/interactions are directed, managed or handled. *Context* represents the particular conditions and location of events within which things are happening. *Intervening conditions* are the structural conditions bearing on the action/interaction strategies that pertain to a phenomenon. They facilitate or constrain the strategies taken within a specific context. *Action/Interaction* are strategies devised to manage, handle, carry out and respond to a phenomenon under a specific set of perceived conditions. The *consequences* would be the outcomes of these.

Figure 9: Axial coding

**When I have ... condition**  
**good supervision ... phenomenon (category)**  
**I think about the job more ... action strategy**  
**and usually I do better work ... consequence**

**With untrained bosses ... causal**  
**I receive ... condition**  
**ambiguous instructions ... phenomenon (category)**  
**I panic ... action strategy**  
**and my mind just goes ... consequence**

The waterfront study resembled the open coding of grounded theory in that emerging data were gathered and broken down into incidents, happenings, events. These, in turn were examined and compared with the purpose of formatting categories (or category properties). As concepts and categories emerged, we 'memo'd constantly, another grounded theory device for keeping written records and notes. We tended to use the mind map technique and added aspects such as color coding and symbols for meaning but essentially the idea was the same. We constantly compared as we emerged more data, interchanging and rearranging within and between categories, although probably a little less divorced from preconception than Glaser would have liked..

Given the waterfront research design, and the conceptual descriptions we brought to the first data collection phase, we could hardly be said to be starting from nothing when examining data. "the mandate of open coding is that the analyst starts with a conceptual nothing" (Glaser, 1992:39). Although we were true to our aim of gathering data from the inside out and grounding it in the responses of theoretically sampled respondents, there were certain aspects of the EBA and change strategies that we wanted the data to yield. Our research activities were very close to the rules of axial coding. The phenomenon in which we were interested was the Enterprise Based Agreement (EBA). The context was definable along several dimensions, political, waterfront industry, union and managers/workers. We identified many intervening conditions, see Whiteley McCabe and Savery, (1998). Major action/interaction strategies of trust and communication emerged. In this sense then, we appear to have departed from emergent theoretical coding by utilizing a more directive way of interrogating the data.

## Conclusion

The conclusion is really a question. Is there something about the business setting that renders the pure form of grounded theory unachievable? Business research is usually conducted in response to a business or organizational need. This is often presented as a perceived problem. One could argue that using the qualitative research nomenclature would bypass some of the problems that arise from using grounded theory in the business context. Qualitative research, particularly that within the phenomenological, (Husserl, 1931), (Schutz, 1967a), symbolic interactionist (Mead, 1963 (orig.1934); Woods, 1992), ethnomethodological (Garfinkel, 1967; Silverman, 1998), theoretical perspectives would still retain the emergence characteristic of grounded theory.

For example, it is not only grounded theory that often surfaces research problems other than the one with which the researcher started out. It is often the case that qualitative data does this as well. In one of our own examples, the organizational client perceived that persistent lateness was becoming a serious problem. Well conducted interpretive research methods could emerge other, more relevant problems and such was the case here. The original problem as presented emerged from the grounded data as more of a symptom than a problem. Organizational climate was overwhelmingly presented as the 'real' problem and lateness became a symptom (along with others) of the climate problem.

Well designed interpretive work would also employ a systematic, transparent and (process-wise) replicable approach, employing content analysis techniques appropriate to the theoretical perspective (Holsti, 1969; Denzin, 1994, 1998). Although somewhat different from grounded theory methods, the various authors above would claim rigor. Most of them require some sort of coding. Coding definitions might be different. However, many qualitative researchers, in engaging with specific types of analysis (such as, for example, conversation analysis (Silverman, 1998) would code and categorize. They would often engage in constant comparison. They would connect categories to existing theories and models. Why then, given the suggested constraints of both the history of business and management, the overlay on many business research settings of structural functional layers (such as the waterfront industry and the EBA) and the 'business problem' context, is it necessary at all to refer to grounded theory?

First, we refer to the brief history of ideas and foundations research respectability outlined earlier in the paper. The scientific edifice was powerful and monolithic. Those utilizing symbolic interactionism need to be reminded that the grounded theorist Strauss worked with

members of the 'second generation' Chicago School. They provided a counterpoint to the strong resurgence of rational objectivism in Parsonian sociology (Woods, 1992). Mead, the symbolic interactionist, and others, together with Strauss, took respectable research into the arena of interpretive work and field studies. The factory, the street, the coalmine and virtually every other field of study was held as bona fide. The 'discovery' of the grounded theory method by Glaser and Strauss paved the way for generations of constructivist researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Silverman, 1997; Morse, 1994) to strengthen defenses against criticisms.

The persistence of the authors in promoting the generative principle and developing the systematic, emergent and generative procedures which give grounded theory its special qualities was largely instrumental in combating claims that qualitative research was inferior. Quite apart from acknowledging the debt to grounded theory, there is the foundation laid by the theory itself.

As Glaser so eloquently puts it, there is a joy to be had from letting data emerge in the full sense of grounded theory. Bringing no preconceptions to analysis activities makes the danger of researchers validating their own version of reality that much more remote. Glaser's exhortation to trust that data will emerge and that it will tell respondents' stories reminds us how easy it is to jump to early categorization and once there, cling to the categories. The reminder that theoretical sensitivity comes with hard work, deep eclectic reading and constant reflection keeps the sense of humility in the minds of even the most published and acclaimed researchers. There is a particular discipline to be borne in mind in the principles of grounded theory that acts as a benchmark even when circumstances make it uncertain whether the needs of the pure method can be fulfilled.

The outcome of this discussion (which in true grounded theory style will be ongoing) is that when research is contemplated within the business setting, some researcher issues need to be dealt with. Amongst these the impact of a structural functionalist framework, if it exists in the research context, needs to be examined in terms of the research problem. It may be necessary, for example, to design the study in such a way that the tacit knowledge implicit in institutionalization becomes a precursor to, or even part of, the formulation of the research problem and the data collection strategy (Powell & DiMaggio, 1990).

Within the structural framework there may be categories of meaning (such as 'them and us') that act as a lens for respondents (Whiteley, 1995). Will taking these into account effectively

cause preconception in data analysis? If the research is responding to a business problem or issue, delimiting needs to be taken into account. Just how far is the business problem forcing the research perspective? This question needs to be addressed even in the knowledge that qualitative work allows the emergence of competing problems. Downgrading or upgrading of other categories to become symptoms rather than problems (or symptoms rather than problems) is a feature of both grounded theory and qualitative research.

The issue of theoretical coding needs to be looked at for its positioning in the study to make sure that it is directed by emergent concepts and categories and not the other way around. What addressing such issues can do, and such is the case in this paper, is to make any references to grounded theory a matter of judgement rather than convenience. If the principles, such as emergence and generation can be met without compromise then these can be referred to specifically.

If the principles and procedures can only be met partially then judgement has to be made, with reference to Glaser (1978; 1992; 1998), and Strauss (1987; 1990) about whether it is reasonable to refer to the theory. A solution suggested here is that if the judgement is that the conditions are not met then an alternative term such as **grounded research** might be in order. Even where this is the case, any aspects of grounded theory used, and therefore referred to (especially its principles) allow the opportunity to acknowledge the seminal work of the two authors Glaser and Strauss (1967, 1978).

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