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Abstract

This paper offers practical advice to better leverage the potential of grounded theory for generating stronger and better empirically grounded information systems theory. Presenting and discussing five issues to keep in mind when doing grounded theory, the paper seeks to encourage more skilled, reflective, and appropriate use of grounded theory to meet this goal. The five issues are discussed in light of methods erosion, a lack of clarity about the distinct research strategies and goals of different research methods. The paper concludes with three practical suggestions for countering erosion of grounded theory in information systems research.

1. Introduction

Grounded theory (GT) has been part of the information system's (IS) research methods inventory over the past 25 years or so. Urquhart et al. [1] has recently characterized GT as a qualitative research method that seeks to develop theory through a joint process of data collection and analysis based on constant comparison. Combining the goal of theory construction with specific research strategies for achieving this goal differentiates GT from most other qualitative research methods used within IS research.

There is an ongoing debate over the need for a core IS theory. This debate is polarized. Proponents argue that a core IS theory is needed for the legitimacy of IS as a proper scientific discipline [2-5]. Without a proper core theory, the IS field will remain scientifically fragmented and weak. Opponents argue that the search for a core theory is detrimental to the development of the field [6-8]. The emergent character of our joint object of study – described by Lyytinen and King [7] as the design and management of ICTs and related technologies in organized human enterprise – calls for "flexibility to accommodate rapid change" [6]. A core theory may stymie "the need for fast cognitive change" (p. 547) as well as narrowing the scope of the field. This is at odds with the need to remain flexible to the emergent nature of our object of study. Both sides of the debate do, however, agree that there is a need for a stronger and better empirically grounded theoretical basis for the IS field.

GT is well positioned for contributing towards this goal. There are three main reasons for this. First, as observed by Orlikowski [9], GT is particularly appropriate for developing IS theory because of its dual focus on the organizational context as well as processes and change. Second, GT's approach to theory development, where concepts and their relations are considered provisional and guiding rather than definite, makes it well suited for empirically grounded theorizing while at the same time remaining flexible to the emergent character of the object of study. Third, Weick [10] observes that existing literature on theory construction "is sparse and uneven, and tends to focus on outcomes and products rather than processes" (p. 517). GT, however, "focuses on the process of generating theory rather than a particular theoretical content" [11]. It offers both a distinct set of research strategies for organizing the process of theory construction as well as a vocabulary for reflecting upon the process.

While being well positioned for making a contribution towards the goal of stronger and better empirically grounded IS theory, GT remains peripheral to mainstream methods use [12]. This, despite the fact that GT studies have made several strong contributions to the IS field. There may be many reasons for this. One may be that the appropriateness of the method for IS research has been repeatedly questioned. Walsham [13], for instance, argues that researchers "risk ignoring existing work" (p. 77) when following GT prescriptions of holding off a literature review until later stages of the process. Another reasons may be related to some confusion over the method itself. Baskerville and Pries-Heje [14] relays the warning that the procedural emphasis of GT may push "investigators towards a high degree of rigor in the handling and interpretation of data" (p. 7).

1 Baskerville and Pries-Heje attributes this warning to K. Lyytinen, "Different Perspectives on Information Systems:
[12], in contrast, argues that GT’s methodological flexibility may make it less applicable to IS research.

As GT has to a certain extent lacked legitimacy within IS field, it is my contention that the method remains underutilized as a practical approach for addressing the call for stronger and better empirically grounded IS theory. In this paper I seek to contribute towards better utilizing GT by advocating a more skilled, reflective, and appropriate use of GT within IS research, promoting what Robey [15] refers to as disciplined methodological pluralism within the field. I will do so by bringing attention to five issues worth keeping in mind when doing GT in order to better leverage its potential for stronger and better empirically grounded IS theory.

Greater awareness of the five issues can in itself contribute towards improving the use and usefulness of GT in IS research as they clarify the distinct goals and research strategies differentiating GT from other research methods. Bringing attention to these issues also lets us better see where GT interfaces with qualitative research methods. A lack of clarity about the distinct research strategies and goals of different research methods, referred to by Stern [16] as methods erosion, can pose a significant challenge to methodological pluralism within the IS field. With no explicit awareness of the distinct goals and research strategies of different research methods, researchers may fail to appreciate strengths and weaknesses in choosing the appropriate method for their study. As argued by Robey [15], countering methods erosion through skilled, reflective, and appropriate use of research methods also contributes towards preventing methodological pluralism from degenerating into methodological anarchy.

Some of the material presented as part of the five issues have already been addressed by different researchers as part of the ongoing debate on GT use in IS research. Through the five issues this paper summarizes and elaborates upon the existing material. This paper also supplements the ongoing debate by relating the five issues to the twin concern of methodological pluralism and methods erosion. In so doing, the paper seeks to contribute towards ongoing efforts to establish a stronger understanding of the applicability of GT for developing stronger and better empirically grounded IS theory. Urquhart et al.’s [1] theoretical explication of GT is central to these efforts. This paper supplements this theoretical explication by bringing attention to more practical issues of GT use that IS researchers would benefit from having a more reflective understanding of when doing GT.

The primary audience of this paper is therefore IS researchers doing, planning to do, or teaching GT. Novice grounded theorists can use the paper in planning and conducting their research. Teachers may draw upon it in research seminars to discuss and reflect upon GT use in IS research. The paper may also be used for evaluating GT papers.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents and discusses the five issues on GT use in IS research. Section 3 relates the five issues back to the problem of methods erosion. Section 4 concludes the paper by drawing implications of the above discussion by offering three practical suggestions for better leveraging the potential of GT to meet the goal of stronger and better empirically grounded IS theory.

2. Five issues on GT use in IS research

The purpose of this paper is to encourage and foster a more skilled, reflective, and appropriate use of GT to generate stronger and better empirically grounded IS theory. In this section I will therefore present and discuss five issues about GT use that I believe we would benefit from having a more reflective appreciation of. This is not intended as a critique of GT use within IS. Rather, I want to bring attention to a set of concerns that I think will improve the use and usefulness of GT to IS research.

This leaves me with a presentational challenge. The purpose of this section is to bring attention to issues of improvement in our collective understanding of GT. At the same time I want to avoid turning reproachful and judgmental of existing work. Coming into GT from a general qualitative background, I have myself struggled with the issues presented here. Indeed, some of my own publications suffer from a lack of reflective understanding of them. My goal here is to point out a set of concerns that are underdeveloped and sometimes overlooked in the papers we, as a collective of researchers, share among ourselves in conferences and through journals. As such, these issues express equally much the understanding editors, reviewers, and program chairs – as gatekeepers for the different publication outlets – hold about GT. In order to prevent turning unwanted focus on individual researchers’ works, I therefore chose to refrain from using concrete citations and quotes to exemplify the five issues below.

The five issues on GT use in IS research presented in this section are based upon my own personal experience as reader and reviewer of IS research over the past decade or so. This paper is, therefore, in no
way based on a systematic review of the IS literature. Nor are the five issues presented below intended to be conclusive or exhaustive. I am convinced that other researchers may offer other, complimentary classifications. Yet, qualitative research methods in general and GT in particular, have been a sustained interest of mine over the past decade. With basis in the experience from reading about GT in the IS literature, as well as the general literature on GT, coupled with my own experience from doing GT, I am sufficiently convinced that the issues capture central concerns about the method within IS research.

2.1 A method in movement

Many IS papers state that the researchers have used GT. This may seem like an innocuous statement. While an innocuous statement in itself, it implies that GT is a stable research methodology to be used and applied unproblematically. Yet, Morse [17] observes that a number of distinct GT variants exists. Tracing variations of GT along a genealogical tree back to the original explication of the method, Morse shows how GT has evolved over time. It is not a single, stable method. Rather, GT is continuously evolving in response to methodological developments among grounded theorists as well as within qualitative research in general. It is a method in movement [18].

Originating within medical sociology and nursing schools, GT has not merely diffused to other academic fields. Rather, it has both been adopted and adapted in the process. Locke [19], for instance, offers a rich description of how GT has not merely been adopted in management research, but also how it has been adapted to the particular concerns of the field. GT practiced within management research is, therefore, different from that practiced within medical sociology and nursing. Within IS research, Levina and Ross [20] show a sensitivity towards this issue within IS research in explaining how they have drawn upon a GT approach "similar to the way it was used by Orlikowski (1993) to develop theory from qualitative data" (p. 334, citation in original). IS researchers have also adopted GT for the theory development part of action research [14] and design science research [21].

The consequence of this is that GT is not a stable research methodology to be drawn upon unproblematically. Instead, it inhabits and interacts with a larger methodological landscape. The method has evolved and branched through this interaction. The implication of this is therefore that it is highly problematic to state that GT has been used. Such a labeling stand the danger of obscuring rather than revealing central methodological information that needs to be reported for the reader to evaluate the text. It does so in at least three ways.

First, by using GT to label research stands the danger of obscuring what the researchers have done in practice. This is more of a general methodological point, but still worth making. In stating that they have done GT, some researchers may offer perfunctory descriptions of how data has been collected and then coded. These descriptions are often abstract and offer little, if any, insight into the actual research process. They merely constitute a more fine-grained way of labeling the research. To evaluate the text, the reader needs to understand the process of developing the theory.

Second, the danger of labeling research as GT is therefore that the label obscures rather than reveals which variant of GT the researchers have used. Some IS paper using GT make deliberations on the difference between Straussian and Glaserian GT. The original explication of GT was the joint work of Glaser and Strauss [22]. After parting ways, the two followed different paths to clarify GT. In the early 1990s, however, Glaser [23] formulated a critique of Strauss' later explication of GT [24].

Much has been written about the controversy between the founding fathers, and there are distinct differences between their variants of GT. Yet, we should be aware that focusing too much on founding father's explications of the method stands the danger of obscuring other existing variants. Rather, it is important to keep in mind that GT is a method in movement, and to understand the difference between them.

Third, being specific on which variant of GT that has been used does not resolve the situation. Rather, it may merely constitute a more fine-grained way of making the mistaken assumption that GT is a stable methodology to be applied unproblematically. While acknowledging that different variants of GT exist, claiming to be using one or the other implies that these themselves stable research methodologies to be used more or less unproblematically. This is, in itself, problematic. Charmaz [18], for instance, observes that while Glaser has "maintained a remarkably consistent logic over the years" (p. 136, italics in original), even his explication of GT has evolved.

2.2 Emergent coding and GT

Analytical coding plays a central role in GT. Coding is a general strategy for analyzing data by labeling data segments. Assigning labels is a way of abstracting by summarizing and aggregating larger data segments. Emergent coding is an inductive form of analysis where the researcher generates labels from
the data [11]. This analytical technique stands in contrast to static coding, where the codes are more or less predefined and then applied to the data. While emergent coding is frequently ascribed to GT, it is really a generic technique independent of GT. Yet, the two are frequently confused. This typically happens in one of two ways within the IS literature.

First, by conflating GT with emergent coding. Several IS researchers have noted that many studies have been labeled as GT because the researchers have used emergent coding. Hughes and Howcroft [25], for instance, observes that IS researchers tend to use GT as a catchall term for labeling qualitative studies using emergent coding. Yet, GT is more than emergent coding.

Second, emergent coding and GT are also confused in the IS literature through variations upon the statement "we have used GT coding techniques". The way emergent coding is used in GT is indeed a particular form of coding. This is tied to the overall goal of conceptualization and theory development. Conceptualization differs from description. Whereas description seeks to capture the rich texture of concrete situations and incidents, conceptualization is the identification of emergent social patterns [26].

The function of the initial stage of coding in GT, what is often referred to as open coding, is therefore to fracture the data in order to free the analyst from "the empirical bond of the data" [27]. The function of later stages of coding is to successively integrate the early codes into more abstract categories and their relationships.

Coding strategies in GT are therefore a form of emergent coding. However, all emergent coding strategies are not the same as GT's strategy. Still, it is not surprising that researchers confuse emergent coding with doing GT. IS papers reporting on experiences from doing GT has a tendency of focusing on the coding techniques.

The implication of confusing the two, however, is that we loose the distinctiveness of GT compared to qualitative research methods in general. Instead, we need to foster greater awareness that emergent coding is only one of three analytic strategies shared by all variants of GT. Memo writing is another. The researcher records analytical insights that occur throughout the research process in theoretical memos. Memo writing, like analytic coding, is a generic analysis strategy. Like coding, the function of memo writing in GT is particular to the goal of conceptualization and theory construction. Memos are used to elaborate properties and dimensions of the analytical categories constructed through the research process.

Theoretical sampling is the third analytical strategy shared by all GT variants. Theoretical sampling is a form of the general strategy of emergent sampling [11]. Yet, it is a form of emergent sampling that is aimed at bringing out the properties and dimensions of concepts, rather than developing rich descriptions. Through theoretical sampling the researcher chooses what new data to collect in response to the codes, categories, and concepts emerging from the analysis.

As experience reports on using GT in IS research tend to focus mostly on coding process, the latter two analytical strategies remain somewhat underdeveloped in the IS literature. While theoretical sampling is often mentioned, few GT studies in IS mentions the use of theoretical memos. Yet, memos remain an important part of the analytical process. Even though the literature includes example memos, there is little guidance on the memo writing through the research process. The same applies to the method literature in general. One notable exception is Corbin's latest explication of GT [28]. Corbin illustrates the process of doing GT through a sample project, including a number of theoretical memos written as the research process progresses.

2.3 GT and qualitative inquiry

While the different research strategies constituting GT are also part of a general inventory of qualitative research methods, GT is not a general method of qualitative inquiry. Indeed, Glaser objects to GT being a qualitative method at all, arguing that it is a general method independent of research paradigm. Still, common to all variants of GT is that the configuration of research strategies is aimed at theory development. As such, GT can be viewed as a set of more or less coherent research strategies for collecting and analyzing data with the specific aim of conceptualizing a substantive area of inquiry.

This does not mean that GT cannot be used for doing descriptive qualitative research. A number of researchers claim to be GT-inspired. GT-inspired means that researchers use part of the configuration of research strategies, for instance combining emergent coding with simultaneous data collection and analysis without developing any concepts or theories. Rather than classifying this as shoddy GT research, this should be seen as an expression of how the boundary between GT and qualitative research in general is continuum. For many researchers, particularly novices, the field of qualitative inquiry is bewildering. Having to choose sampling strategies, data collection strategies, analysis strategies, and so on can be daunting task. GT offers a more or less coherent configuration of research strategies that is fair to draw upon to bootstrap the research process.
This does not mean that everyone drawing upon GT need to go the whole way and develop theory. There are several reasons why they may not do so. First of all, not all researchers are interested in developing concepts or theories. I think GT lends itself well to developing rich descriptions. Second, as Suddaby [29] observes, GT is not easy. Many GT texts warn about this. It is hard to learn GT. Learning to do GT may therefore be outside of the time limits of a research project. This does not mean that researchers should not draw upon GT to bootstrap their research. It simply means that there are sliding boundaries between GT and qualitative inquiry in general.

2.4 The role of existing theory

There is a prevalent misunderstanding that GT is independent of theory. This is expressed in two ways. One, as the view that the researcher is to approach as study as a clean slate and the literature review is postponed until the end of the research. This is Walsham's [13] concern when warning that GT risks ignore existing work (see Section 1). Two, this misunderstanding is expressed as the idea that GT studies develop micro theories that are incommensurable and leading to theoretical fragmentation.

Part of this misunderstanding can be traced back to the ambivalent role of existing literature in Glaser and Strauss' original book. This ambivalence is related to two central concerns. The first concern is that of retaining sensitivity to the particular issues and problems of those being studied. GT research seeks to conceptualize the insider perspective. The second concern is related to grand theories. GT is explicitly offered in response to what Glaser and Strauss saw as a division of concern between theoretical capitalists who develop theory from the armchair, and the mass of researchers who empirically test the theoretical capitalists' grand theories. Instead, GT was not to apply concepts to the empirical material, but rather to let the concepts emerge from the data.

The two concerns are related in that existing literature is seen as a source of pre-conceived views that may be imposed on the data. Still, this does not mean that theory plays no role when doing GT. Rather, that a balance needs to be struck to retain sensitivity to the substantive field being studied. Yet, to be able to identify relevant issues in the field, the researcher needs what Glaser [27] calls theoretical sensitivity. Theoretical sensitivity makes the researcher able to discern and identify issues that are relevant to his or her particular field. This is grounded in knowledge of existing literature, but also in personal experience.

The key issue is that the researcher is not to apply a preconceived theoretical framework on the collected data. This does not mean that researchers should not include concepts from existing theories. Rather, such concepts need to "earn their way" into the analysis. Orlikowski's [9] paper on case tools as organizational change is a good example. While building a GT bottom up, the concepts of incremental and radical organizational change earned their way into the analysis. They were not imposed on the data, but rather fitted in with the analysis.

As such, theory plays an important role in GT research, but it should never be imposed on the data. The researcher is to approach a GT study with an open mind, knowing that "an open mind is not an empty head" [30].

2.5 Differentiating between theorizing and categorization

Many papers reporting from GT studies offer basic categorizations of data. Categorization is a common product of qualitative research [11]. The purpose of doing GT, however, is to construct substantive or even formal theories. Categorizations and theories are not the same. A theory consists of properties with dimensions and relationships between these properties. It does, in other words, not suffice to identify properties or categories. To qualify as a theory, relationships between the properties also need to be specified. Langley [31] differentiates between variance and process theories. Variance theories explain phenomena as relationships between dependent and independent variables, while process theories explain phenomena in terms of events and their relationship. Explications of GT emphasize that the research strategies of GT is to develop process theories. Glaser [27], for instance, emphasize this with his focus on basic social processes. Categorization of data is therefore not theory, which is the intended output of a GT study.

That a GT study shall lead to a theory may seem daunting. Not only can it be forbiddingly time-consuming to clearly formulate theory, the strict criteria for evaluating theories may scare off even seasoned researchers. Furthermore, many may associate the term theory with grand theories like Giddens' [32] structuration theory, for instance. Yet, Runkel and Runkel [33] argue that theory is a continuum ranging from guesses, speculations, suppositions, conjectures, propositions, hypotheses, explanations, towards formal models. Drawing upon this, Weick [34] emphasizes that the process of "theory development starts with guesses and speculations and
ends with explanations and models” (p. 386). Along the way, researchers struggle with the data to formulate a theory. That the goal is theory, however, should not preclude researchers from publishing these interim struggles, argues Weick. These interim struggles may still be of value.

Returning to the issue that GT is not simply categorization of data, Weick's perspective offers a broader outlook on the output of a GT study. Rather seeing categorizations as shoddy GT research, categorization may indeed be the result of such interim struggles. While theories consist of both properties and their relations, categorizations can be viewed as a list of properties with no explicit relations. The relations may still be implicit. The ordering of categories, for instance, may imply the importance of the categories or perhaps that some of the latter categories are in reality dimensions of properties detailed earlier in the list. Similarly, poorly formulated theories need not be the result of shoddy research, but rather a stage in the process towards a fuller theory.

This means, then, that all reporting from GT studies need not necessarily present complete theories. Yet, authors need to be specific about what stage of the theory construction process they are reporting from, though.

3. Methodological pluralism and methods erosion in IS research

The section above presented and discussed five issues worth keeping in mind when doing GT in order to better leverage the method's potential for stronger and better empirically grounded IS theory. Similar observations have been made by other IS researchers. Urquhart and Fernandez [35], for instance, identify four myths about GT. One of these myths – that of the researcher as a blank slate – is part of the discussion on existing theory above. Similarly, Hughes and Howcroft [25] argue that GT is not properly understood within IS research. Emphasizing how researchers confuse emergent coding with GT, their observations are part of the discussion on emergent coding and grounded theory.

While there is overlap with existing material in the five issues above, this paper contributes towards the ongoing debate on GT use in IS by relating the five issues to the twin concern of methodological pluralism in and methods erosion. Methodological pluralism and methods erosion is the topic of this section.

Landry and Banville [36] define methodological pluralism as “a position that favors a diversity of methods, theories, even philosophies, in scientific inquiry” (p. 78). Benbasat and Weber [2] contextualizes the growth of methodological pluralism to the emergence of a distinct European strain of IS during the 1970s and 1980s. This strain of IS research was different from the positivistic scientism of its counterpart emerging out of American business schools during the same period. While early American IS to a large extent espoused scientific monism, European IS "advocated greater pluralism, more diversity, greater use of methods that allow researchers scope for interpretation, and adoption of theoretical perspectives that are not founded on a rational and mechanistic view of the world” (p. 391).

Benbasat and Weber argue that methodological pluralism poses a major threat to the vitality of IS research, leaving the field scientifically fragmented and disciplinary weak. Weber [4] propose the development of a core IS theory as a way of counteracting such fragmentation. Robey [15] acknowledges the threat of diversity, warning that methodological pluralism may lead to research results that are grounded in unskilled, unreflective, and inappropriate use of particular research methods. Yet, his remedy is not to avoid pluralism. Instead, the challenge is to "prevent methodological pluralism from becoming methodological anarchy" (p. 406). Robey therefore calls for disciplined methodological pluralism where skilled, reflective, and appropriate method is grounded in aligning method choice with specific research goals and appropriate theories.

The strength of methodological pluralism is to be found in the logic that different methods may shed light on different areas of our shared object of study. Yet, methodological pluralism becomes self-defeating when such an understanding of the distinct differences are lacking. With a lack of appreciation of research methods’ distinctly different underlying logic, methodological pluralism turns into methods erosion. Methods erosion prevents researchers from leveraging the different methods to their fullest potential.

Failing to acknowledge the particulars of grounded theory, the five issues discussed above can be seen as an expression of a least a certain extent of methods erosion within parts of qualitative IS research. Failing to recognize that grounded theory is not a general method of qualitative inquiry is particularly indicative of methods erosion. This, along with confusions over the difference between theorizing and categorization, fails to recognize GT’s particular emphasis on theory generation. Instead, qualitative inquiries are cast with the terminology of GT. Glaser [37] makes a similar observation, calling the tendency of qualitative researchers to cast their work in the GT terminology for jargonizing. Similarly, confusing GT’s use of emergent coding with emergent coding in general, fails
to recognize that GT uses this technique to fracture the data rather than for descriptive labeling.

The problem of methods erosion of GT is not an exclusive problem to IS research. Researchers within other fields have raised similar concerns. Stern [16], for instance, discusses how a lack of clarity about GT in healthcare research leads to methods erosion. Within management research, Jones and Noble [38] argue that GT has become synonymous with a methodological attitude of 'anything goes'. Within the same field, Suddaby [29] offers a description of what GT is not. The main thrust of his argument is that GT is confused with other research methods. Still, the particulars of methods erosion in IS research is different from other fields, and so are the implications of methods erosion particular to IS.

GT use in IS research is to a certain degree historically contingent. It is not surprising that early adoption of qualitative methods within IS during the 1980s mobilized GT to increase the legitimacy of qualitative research. Charmaz [39] observes that it is no accident that Glaser and Strauss [22] in the original GT text use terms such as rigorous and systematic to describe the method. With its early emphasis on procedural rigor, GT has therefore served the purpose of legitimizing qualitative research within predominantly quantitative research areas. Now that our collective understanding of qualitative research methods have matured and the use of qualitative methods in IS research has become widely accepted, such mislabeling is backfiring on the legitimacy of GT.

The implications of eroding GT, however, can be detrimental. First and foremost because we are loosing out on GT's strength in developing strong and empirically grounded theory. While GT is not the only method for developing empirically grounded theory [40], it offers researchers with a distinct set of strategies for organizing the research process and a vocabulary for reflecting upon this process. Furthermore, through a lack of appreciation of the multifaceted and evolving nature of GT, we as a field, stand the chance of loosing out on new developments within GT. Clarke's [41] diagramming techniques for mapping human and non-human actors in a situation, is an example of such new developments which may be of interest to IS researchers.

4. Countering methods erosion of GT in IS research

While the issues with GT use in IS research are expressed through individual research papers, it is too simple to attribute any misunderstandings to individual researchers. The research is published in peer-reviewed papers, indicating that even reviewers lack clarity about GT research. As such, the misunderstandings express our collective lack of understanding about the distinct research strategies and goals of GT within the IS field. This lack of clarity keeps us, as a research community, from making use of GT's fullest potential in developing a stronger and better empirically grounded IS theory.

Stern [16] attributes the erosion of GT in healthcare research to "mentoring that is either poor in quality or nonexistent" (p. 213), what she calls minus mentoring. This is a problem many of us doing or wanting to do GT in IS research also face. Most of us learn GT by studying books and papers, or from people who have learned GT by studying books and papers themselves. Some of this is connected to the historical origins of IS research. Many of us find ourselves located in predominantly technical departments with few, if any, faculty members trained in GT or even in qualitative research methods. This, however, is not a unique situation to IS research. Locke [19], for instance, makes a similar observation within management research. This, however, should not preclude researchers within these fields from doing GT research. Rather, we need to foster disciplined methodological pluralism to ensure skilled, reflective, and appropriate use of GT within IS research.

How should we proceed to foster skilled, reflective, and appropriate use of GT within the IS field? I offer three suggestions in this section.

One, by seeking ways of fostering transparency in accounting for the research process. This means that we as authors have to offer as transparent as possible accounts of the research process. Do not simply label the research as GT. Spend as little space as possible on explaining the principles of GT or justifying its appropriateness to IS. Instead, account for how the different research strategies have been used in the study and show how this has lead to the reported results. Reviewers want to be able to trace the reported results back to the conducted research to establish the authenticity and plausibility of the research [42].

Devoting an entire section stretching over two and a half pages to explicating the joint process of data collection, Jones and Kriflik [43] is a good example of how to this can be done in practice. After an initial paragraph summarizing the collected data, the remainder of the section alternates between explicating data collection procedures and the analytical insights following from the collected data. For instance, the first paragraph on data collection explicates the initial sampling strategy (who was interviewed and why), along with details on the interviewing technique used. Following is then a paragraph that describes how the authors' arrived at three broad topics that they choose
to pursue through theoretical sampling. The next paragraph describing how they do so, and so on.

By presenting the research process chronologically, Jones and Kriflik illustrate how broad topics with a low conceptual level are progressively refined throughout the study. They round the section off by explaining how they delimited the theory and achieved theoretical saturation of its concepts.

With basis in other researchers' account of the research process, reviewers should seek to answer the following questions:

- In what ways has the interplay between data collection and analysis lead to the presented results?
- How has the comparative logic guided the joint process of data collection and analysis?
- How does the paper make the dimensions of comparison relevant to the presented theory?

The second suggestion for fostering skilled, reflective, and appropriate use of GT within IS research, is to accept researchers' interim struggles on the way towards full theories (see discussion of Weick [34] in Section 2.5). This means that authors need to be up front when they are seeking to publish their interim results. Furthermore, authors need to explain why and in what way they believe their intermediate results may contribute to the IS literature.

It is, relatively speaking, simpler to formulate a set of criteria for evaluating fully-fledged theories, than to formulate such criteria for interim struggles. Evaluating interim struggles therefore requires more of readers and reviewers. It requires experience from struggling with theorization to see the potential in the direction the author is heading. This, in turn, requires an understanding of the substantive and theoretical area of the interim struggle.

Three, we can counter methods erosion by writing papers on doing GT in IS research. Several good textbooks on GT do exist. I personally think Charmaz' [39] explication of GT towards a constructivist epistemology is one of the better available at the moment. The latest edition of Corbin and Strauss' [28] explication of the method is also good, even though I think the second edition [44] works better as an introduction for novice researchers. For Glaserian GT, [22, 27, 45] offer a good introduction.

Although there are a number of introductions to research methods in IS research, there are no dedicated textbooks on GT within IS research. Such, dedicated textbooks exist within some other fields. Locke [19], for instance, offers an introduction to GT in management research. While this is a very good book that I recommend to anyone wanting to learn more about GT, I am not convinced that the management research field is so unique that it warrants its own introduction to GT. Furthermore, I am weary that such discipline-specific books fail to convey how GT is a method in movement. Locke's book unfortunately tends towards this.

Instead, I think students could learn GT from the more general introductory books. This can be supplemented with papers that deal with the specifics of doing GT within our field. This way, a stronger methodical understanding of GT within IS research can be established. Urquhart et al.'s [1] strong explication of GT within IS research is a good first step in establishing better awareness of the particulars of GT in our field. Yet, this is a fairly abstract paper, and difficult to translate into practical research for novices. As such, there is a need for papers offering practical advice for doing GT within IS research, something similar to what Walsham [46] offers for doing interpretive IS research. As such, this paper calls for IS researchers doing GT to follow up on their published theories with supplemental material that illuminate the research practice and experiences from working with the method.

5. Conclusion

This paper has presented and discussed five issues worth keeping in mind when doing GT in order to better leverage the method's potential for stronger and better empirically grounded IS theory. These five issues summarizes and elaborates ongoing debate on GT use in IS research. This paper supplements the ongoing debate by relating the five issues to the twin concern of methodological pluralism and methods erosion. With basis in this, I offered three suggestions to better leverage the potential of GT for generating stronger and better empirically grounded IS theory.

The argument pursued in this paper should not be construed as a call for more rigorous application of GT in IS research. Weick [10] likens theory construction to disciplined imagination. At some point, techniques have to be supplemented by the researcher's own imaginative powers. This is not something a method or set of techniques can give the researcher. That GT offers research strategies specifically aimed at theory construction should therefore not be confused with an argument that application of these strategies will lead to good concepts or theories.

What I do argue, however, is that we as a community of researchers need to better understand the particulars of GT to leverage its fullest potential of theory construction. This way, we can better leverage GT to make a modest contribution to the goal of
developing stronger and better empirically grounded IS theory.

References


