

Grounded Theory Method: Sociology's Quest for Exclusive Items of Inquiry

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Abstract: The genesis and development of grounded theory method (GTM) is evaluated with reference to sociology's attempt to demarcate exclusive referents of inquiry. The links of objectivist GTM to positivistic terminology and to the natural scientific distinction from "common sense" are explored. It is then considered how the biological sciences have prompted reorientation towards constructivist GTM, underpinned by the metaphysics of social constructionism. GTM has been shaped by the endeavor to attain the sense of exactitude associated with positivism, whilst also seeking exclusive referents of inquiry that are distinct from the empirical realm of the natural sciences. This has generated complex research techniques underpinned by tortuous methodological debate: eschewing the perceived requirement to define and defend an academic niche could help to facilitate the development of a more useful and pragmatic orientation to qualitative social research.

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1. Introduction

Grounded theory method (GTM) holds a position of high esteem within sociology. This paper will analyze aspects of GTM's socio-historical basis. It will evaluate whether factors extraneous to the pursuit of valid social scientific knowledge, in particular GTM's relationship with the natural sciences, have contributed to this exalted status. This analysis sets out to provide insights into the manner in which sociology constructs its disciplinary boundaries in response to potential encroachments. This paper is not intended to be a critique of the specific techniques or methods of GTM. Rather, the focus is on the legitimating role of GTM and how its orientation and terminology are co-opted by sociologists to reinforce disciplinary boundaries and the apparent rigor of qualitative research. [1]

A perceived requirement to defend an academic niche is likely to orient sociology towards disciplinary legitimation rather than the explication of social reality. The

goal of this article is thus to critically evaluate whether ongoing adherence to the GTM label will enhance or hinder the progress of qualitative social research and sociology. [2]

GTM is an approach to research which sets out to *discover* theory from data (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967, p.1). In this sense it inverts the principles of inquiries which aim to collect data to *verify* theory. GTM expounds an inductive approach under which rigorous research practices, unencumbered with prior theoretical orientations, can illuminate social phenomena. Theory is accordingly grounded in data and developed through the research process, rather than occupying a more rarefied position over and above research methods. GTM presents a set of techniques, addressing *inter alia* the processes of sampling and data analysis, which provide the researcher with the opportunity to develop theories from their empirical findings. [3]

2. Grounded Theory's Relationship to Positivism

GTM was first posited as an approach by sociologists Barney GLASER and Anselm STRAUSS in their text "The Discovery of Grounded Theory" (1967). The authors suggested a set of procedures that would enable qualitative research to become more systematic and rigorous. Whilst they address quantitative research (Chapter 8), their approach is most readily associated with qualitative research. The aim was to enhance the reliability and validity of qualitative sociology so that it could provide a meaningful challenge to quantitative approaches which were informed by positivist ideas and the logico-deductive method. Through engaging directly with the domain of human action and following the principles of grounded theory, sociologists could develop theories that fitted empirical phenomena, rather than testing and verifying pre-existing perspectives that had been produced by "great men" theoretical forefathers (p.10). [4]

Whilst shaped by a complex range of philosophies and practices, it can be argued that from the post-war period to the 1960s positivism had been the key philosophy underpinning science. Positivists considered logic and mathematics to be the most certain route to truth, and were impressed with mathematical sciences such as physics which had made great advances early in the twentieth century. Science was viewed as the rational analysis of the observable world through experiment and empirical study; metaphysics is therefore eliminated from academic endeavor. [5]

This position began to be challenged in earnest in the 1960s, with Thomas KUHN's text "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" (1996 [1962]) encapsulating the challenge to idealized notions of scientific practice. Writing later in the decade, GLASER and STRAUSS were thus operating within a social context under which logical positivism was under threat from alternative perspectives of scientific practice. However, whilst under challenge, positivism still had great influence and this permeated the social sciences: qualitative research was seen as the poor relation to numerical quantitative approaches that more closely resembled the natural sciences (as exemplified by physics). Unsystematic and

non-rigorous qualitative research had meant that "work based on qualitative data was either not theoretical enough or the theories were too 'impressionistic'" (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967, p.15). [6]

GLASER and STRAUSS recognized the nature of qualitative study and that it requires a distinctive set of methods, but when devising these procedures, in response to the prevailing context of unsystematic qualitative research, they were heavily influenced by the illustrious standing of sciences that were underpinned by quantitative methods. In setting out the principles of GTM, it appears that GLASER and STRAUSS are simultaneously resistant, and in thrall, to positivism. They "simultaneously positioned themselves against the quantitative orthodoxy and, whether or not they were aware of it, offered a way of mimicking this orthodoxy" (BRYANT & CHARMAZ, 2007, p.33). Although it resists positivism, sociology tends to seek equivalence by retaining its tone and orientation rather than developing processes with a more distinctive cast, which could arguably offer a more appropriate means for understanding the subjects of qualitative inquiry: "although it is constantly at war with the enemy of positivism, in the very battle it reveals what ultimately matters to it" (PLUMMER, 2001, p.8). [7]

GLASER and STRAUSS thus devised an objectivist GTM which posited that objective features of the social world could be uncovered by the qualitative social researcher. "An objectivist grounded theorist assumes that data represent objective facts about a knowable world. The data already exist in the world; the researcher finds them and 'discovers' theory from them" (CHARMAZ, 2006, p.131). The basis of GTM thus provides the qualitative social researcher with a method harnessed to notions of scientific rigor. Although qualitative social scientists set out to subjectively interpret a complex social domain, GTM provides the sense that clear objective facts can be obtained if the correct procedures are followed. "From this perspective, reality is unitary, knowable, and waiting to be discovered" (BRYANT & CHARMAZ, 2007a, p.34). [8]

3. Scientific Procedures and Terminology

Science enjoys a high degree of esteem as a result of its appeal to complex aspects of reality which only an elite can access courtesy of training in complex theories and methods. A distinction between this trained elite and a lay public is required for this status to be maintained. Knowledge "is naturally a positional good: Its value is directly tied to its scarcity, such that the more people who possess it, the less valuable it is" (FULLER, 2002, p.6). Thereby, a disciplinary boundary has to be erected and enforced within which arcane and complicated procedures can be undertaken in the pursuit of knowledge. The positivistic orientation of GLASER and STRAUSS has arguably bequeathed to GTM a set of techniques and terms which aim to encapsulate the tone of the natural sciences. GTM is also underpinned by a complex terminology which frames its status as an endeavor to be undertaken by experts.

"Grounded theory was originally developed in order to offer researchers a clear, systematic and sequential guide to qualitative fieldwork and analysis (e.g. see Glaser

& Strauss 1967). This was operationalized via a rather technical sounding vocabulary (e.g. 'co-axial coding') and a highly structured procedure for the development of theory. Taken together, these features probably account for its great success in making a space for qualitative research in social scientific disciplines which were largely dominated by positivism" (SMITH, FLOWERS & LARKIN, 2009, p.201). [9]

The title itself, "grounded theory," provides a highly appealing title to apply to a qualitative study. The outcomes of qualitative social research may not appear to have the solid rigor of the natural sciences or quantitative social science, but "grounding" theory lends the impression that findings are embedded in a palpable objective world. "Theory" can generate a sense of something that is vague and nebulous: its semantic flexibility leaves any approach incorporating the term (such as the "theory of evolution") open to the charge that it is "only a theory" (BRYANT, 2009, p.74). A similar concern may have contributed to the popularity of GTM. A qualitative study is an inexact process based upon the subjective interpretation of human discourse; but framing the process with the "grounded theory" label ensures that it is tethered to a scientific tone. Theory, then, is not predicated upon the speculative and ethereal, but upon the systematic and immanent. [10]

Within the processes and procedures of GTM feature a number of techniques and terms that provide research with a veneer of scientific respectability. For example, "codes" and "coding" are key terms within GTM: the process of coding sets out to break down materials obtained from the study into meaningful units. For example, an interview transcript will be analyzed for key patterns and themes with the researcher applying codes to sections of text which may be relevant to the development of these themes. Coding is defined as: "The analytic processes through which data are fractured, conceptualized and integrated to form theory" (STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1998, p.3). Coding "stems from the quantitative tradition of social research: there it means that predefined codes are used to qualify certain bits of data" (KELLE, 2007, p.193). This again demonstrates the desire for GTM to be different from, but the same as, quantitative approaches. Coding means something different under qualitative research in comparison with quantitative research: the codes emerge from data to build theory rather than being predefined. Yet despite this distinction the term is retained. Codes suggest something complex, objective and precise; for example, a complex code which requires the intelligence and devotion of experts to decipher. Mathematics itself seems to present an arcane code which can unlock nature's secrets via its application within science. The practice of "coding" in qualitative research thereby imbues an intrinsically mutable and unstandardized practice with the tone of scientific classification. The process of qualitative data analysis must vary a great deal between researchers and research projects, as a result of divergent subjective interpretations of both practical approaches and research materials. The process of breaking down research materials into discrete tangible codes provides an antidote to this absence of a sense of quantitative precision. [11]

"Theoretical saturation" and "constant comparison" are also appealing terms which relate to the scientific quest for certitude. Theoretical saturation relates to

the point when research into an incident is concluded, as sufficient insights have already been obtained and further data collection is unlikely to alter the theory that is being generated from the research (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967, p.111). The term "saturation" however implies an objective marker which applies across research studies, thereby offering a qualitative study the same degree of certainty as a theory-testing study which can more definitely state whether or not the hypothesis has been confirmed. Saturation creates a feeling of incontrovertible completeness (perhaps even *beyond* complete) which, in turn, generates a sense of definiteness and objectivity: if something reaches saturation point then this suggests there is no scope for maneuver with regard to a definition of its physical status. [12]

The constant comparative method in GTM refers to the requirement to compare different aspects of the analytical framework as concepts are generated through the process of the research. Comparisons will include "data with data, data with category, category with category, and category with concept" (CHARMAZ, 2006, p.187). GLASER and STRAUSS stated that the constant comparative method did not set out to replicate the nature of quantitative studies, whereby independent analysts should arrive at the same results; instead "it is designed to allow, with discipline, for some of the vagueness and flexibility that aid the creative generation of theory" (1967, p.103). However, the use of "constant" as a term implies a relentless ongoing process: a process must surely have systematic rigor when one of its key tools rhetorically promulgates an unremitting analytical procedure. If something is undertaken constantly then the process is unbroken; there are no gaps available for the idiosyncratic vagaries of researcher subjectivity to punctuate the process. Whereas theoretical saturation implies absolute completeness with regard to the *conclusion* of analysis, "constant comparison" implies absolute completeness of the analytical *process*. The use of the terms "saturation" and "constant" thereby bequeath to qualitative research the tone of scientific objectivity. If a process continues until it is full to an unquestionable limit, and its practice is shaped by unbroken constancy, then this precludes troublesome aspects of indeterminacy and subjectivity from infiltrating a GTM study. Whilst the application of numbers is eschewed, the feeling of clarity that quantity provides is hard to relinquish; therefore, even under an approach which advocates non-numerical methods, terms are deployed which imply an objective quantitative maximum. If something is at a maximum then this suggests a reliable marker which would not vary according to the subjective perceptions of researchers. [13]

Although GLASER and STRAUSS aimed to facilitate a flexible and creative approach to qualitative research, the terminology of coding, theoretical saturation and constant comparison means that GTM's key appeal is co-opting the allure of scientific rigor and certitude. Whilst it is probably an unintended consequence of their work, the founding fathers of GTM devised an appealing positivistic lexicon for qualitative social scientists to draw upon and this has been expanded by subsequent grounded theorists. As GTM has been developed and modified since its inception this has led "to a variety of different, new and complex concepts like theoretical coding, coding families, axial coding, coding paradigm, and many

others, which supplemented and sometimes displaced the concepts of constant comparison and theoretical sampling from the early days" (KELLE, 2007, pp.191-192). Moreover, it can be argued that the early writings on GTM were successful in becoming associated with rigor and exactitude despite any express attempts to align this terminology with clear criteria for precision and clarity (BRYANT, 2009, p.60). [14]

4. Common Sense

It can perhaps be queried why such a contrived lexicon has been developed in response to a task which is likely to be highly explicable to the layperson. With regard to a qualitative method such as semi-structured interviews, the process involves a researcher speaking to research subjects and then attempting to make sense of what has been said by reviewing the transcript of the conversation. The explicability of this process does not mean that it is easy and that it does not require substantial skill. However, it could be argued that the fact it can be perceived as a fairly simplistic process means that it is necessary to invest the approach with the tone of the natural sciences, for example, via the complex terminology outlined above. [15]

It can be argued that a defining characteristic of the natural sciences is that it subverts "common sense" and challenges natural thinking: "I would almost contend that if something fits in with common sense it almost certainly isn't science" (WOLPERT, 1992, p.11). A key feature of science is that it often addresses the very small-scale and very large-scale, for example molecular interactions or the construction of planetary landscapes over geologic time. This moves science beyond the realms of everyday existence and understanding: conceiving such small-scale or large-scale events requires a suspension of natural thought, which is equipped to help us address the more immediate day-to-day realm of human social concerns. [16]

As phenomena analyzed by natural scientists (such as physicists) are often inaccessible to human senses, scientists devise models which help us to apprehend these phenomena. These models are underpinned by mathematics and, as a corollary, it is numbers which underpin much of natural science. "Because so much of science is based on mathematics, it is not easy to explain scientific ideas in ordinary language" (p.7). Whilst positivism may have provided the initial social framework within which GTM was "discovered," the ongoing reverence for "unnatural" natural sciences such as physics provides a context within which other disciplines feel compelled to retain a scientific tone. In fact the notion of unnaturalness and intangibility underpinning physical phenomena to some extent contradicts the stance of positivism which claimed that science could develop a universal language based on empirical study of observable phenomena. The desire for the objectivity and rigor associated with positivism, which GLASER and STRAUSS endeavored to incorporate into nascent GTM, only presents part of the impact that science makes upon academic discourse. Contemporary notions of science are also shaped by atomism—that is, the world is comprised of entities which to some extent exist underneath human experience

(FULLER, 2006, pp.140-141). Therefore, in physics the aim of string theory is to unite all physical forces within eleven-dimensional space-time, whilst in biology genes are key ontological elements of the world. The search for an infra-human level to reality arguably demonstrates a more metaphysical orientation to science than that extolled by positivism. [17]

Whether or not this is considered an accurate portrayal of natural science, it certainly shapes public views of scientific practice: if something is readily understandable it belongs to the realm of common sense and the everyday; if something is complex and counterintuitive then it belongs to the realm of science. If a university subject was readily explicable to a layperson then this would render the nature of the subject precarious: a demarcation in knowledge between the expert and the layperson is required, otherwise the perception of this expertise would be eroded. It is the natural sciences which are best reinforced against the dissolution of this distinction. Other subjects may therefore mimic the natural sciences in the endeavor to establish a similar degree of incontrovertible esteem. Whilst a subject like English Literature may deal with highly complex and counterintuitive themes a contemporary cliché is that "everyone has a novel inside them." Regardless of the validity of this statement, a similar cliché is unlikely to develop around everyone having the capacity to understand quantum mechanics (or clone a sheep). Indeed it has been stated that "nobody understands quantum mechanics" (FEYNMAN, 1965, p.129). This explains some of the reverence accorded to the natural sciences—that is, the notion of its subject matter transcending everyday understanding. [18]

However, qualitative social research is very much based in the explicable and day-to-day. Communicating with other human beings and interpreting the meanings underlying what they say is very much a natural experience. Humans become sophisticated at uncovering nuances in complex communication at an early age, for example, recognizing that there might be incommensurability between a speaker's statement and the intentions of the speaker via irony (RECCHIA, HOWE, ROSS & ALEXANDER, 2010). Qualitative social science does not, therefore, fit the definition of unnatural science discussed by WOLPERT: it does not focus on inhuman small-scale or large-scale processes but is explicitly focused on the interpersonal conduct and experience of human beings. For example, when undertaking a study of lifeguards at a swimming pool, the qualitative social researcher may explore the practical dangers and symbolic meanings that the water presents to the lifeguard. Although this study may reveal intriguing insights, the water is being considered in its palpable day-to-day form as a continuous substance within which people can swim or drown. Alternatively, a physicist studying the water will view it as a substance comprising discrete molecules, themselves formed from two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom (H₂O): this is clearly beyond immediate human sensory experience. Both the sociologist and the physicist are broaching an understanding of a complex reality, but from different angles. A key distinction between these types of complexity is that the first is more explicable to the layperson as a result of its day-to-day basis: even if a respondent presents an intriguing or even absurd account of their apprehension of the water, then a layperson has sufficient knowledge of our

everyday conception of water and swimming pools to evaluate the statement. However, the well-known assertion that an apparently continuous body of water actually comprises discrete molecules of H₂O is counterintuitive and beyond our immediate comprehension. [19]

The human experiential order has a highly complex ontology; it just so happens to be the ontological domain that we inhabit during our day-to-day lives. Although it may attempt to uncover subjective meanings and experiences which have hitherto been unexamined, the process of seeking new knowledge via qualitative social research is firmly embedded in the familiar processes of human existence; that is, communicating with other humans and interpreting their narratives. In contrast to science, the findings of qualitative research are unlikely to be valid if they seem unnatural or completely subvert common sense. Therefore, neither should the methods that seek these findings seem unnatural or too divorced from our commonsensical apprehension of the world. [20]

The difficulty that this presents is that qualitative research does not provide a sufficient delineation of a robust professional boundary which demarcates experts from the laity. Qualitative researchers might seek solace from the inapplicability of numbers as a signifier of scientific status by constructing a hermetic set of techniques which, if followed correctly, can unearth an objective perspective of the social world (as is consistent with objectivist GTM). The procedures, terminology and tone of the logico-deductive method are thus adjusted to apply to the qualitative social scientific realm rather than eschewed. This demonstrates a professional attempt to render the immediate and everyday in terms of the complex abstractions of science. For example, the process of coding under GTM (breaking down a person's narrative into discrete chunks of text) renders human communication less natural. The use of computer packages to undertake the coding process also provides technological reinforcement to help obscure any notion that qualitative data analysis inheres in the familiar, day-to-day world. This mimics the situation in the natural sciences where technology provides the special data which fortify the practices of the prevailing paradigm (KUHN, 1996, p.31). With its technical procedures and complex terminology, GTM demonstrates an attempt to stretch the exalted position of science beyond that of numerical disciplines. GLASER and STRAUSS stated (1967, p.11) that "it does not take a 'genius' to generate a useful grounded theory" and also hoped that theories generated by their approach would be "understandable to sociologists and layman [sic] alike" (1967, p.1); but the foundations they provided, allied to GTM's tortuous development, now means that a newcomer to its procedures is presented with quite a task in discerning its practical application. [21]

5. Constructivist GTM and Other Proliferation

A notable attempt to update GTM, shedding some of its positivistic baggage and arguably making it more applicable to the distinctive requirements of qualitative study, is provided by Kathy CHARMAZ. Resisting the objectivist approach which sees data as having an existence separate from the research process, constructivist GTM "sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data" (CHARMAZ, 2006, p.130). CHARMAZ's approach clearly takes into account how social scientific inquiry differs from natural scientific inquiry. Constructivist GTM therefore presents a more pragmatic epistemology which shows how meanings are actively constructed between researchers and participants throughout a research process. Objectivist GTM with its positivistic outlook retains the natural scientific distinction between researcher and researched, which is much less readily accommodated within social science. When studying human experience, the researcher is an intrinsic part of the domain that they are seeking to understand. The "discovered" reality arises from the interactive process: researcher and subjects frame this interaction and confer meaning upon it (CHARMAZ, 2000, p.524). [22]

CHARMAZ recognizes the connection between GTM and symbolic interactionism and sets out to embed her version of GTM in this tradition. Symbolic interactionism states that the focus of analysis should be upon "the marginal, local, everyday, heterogeneous and indeterminate" (SHALIN, 1993, p.304). Constructivist GTM certainly aligns GTM methods more in this direction; for example, it is recognized that excessive layers of coding may cast a technological overlay on the data (CHARMAZ, 2006, p.63). Adhering to a dense set of technical procedures to build a coding framework means that data analysis may distort the intrinsically processual and inchoate nature of the social world. A less contrived system of coding may therefore attend more effectively to the explication of lived experience, which is the focus of empirical social research. [23]

Despite the resistance to objectivism, it is felt that constructivist researchers should persist with GTM as: "Ultimately GTM is far too valuable a method to leave to the objectivists" (BRYANT, 2003, p.14). BRYANT might be correct to believe that objectivist approaches present an illegitimate perspective of a detached, neutral observer gathering facts about a separable external world. However, whilst constructivism may offer a more appropriate social scientific epistemological basis, a constructivist methodology should perhaps have made a clearer break with GTM and therefore avoided trying to build upon its positivistic foundations. Despite reorienting the approach of qualitative research suggested by GLASER and STRAUSS, constructivist GTM is still eager to retain the "grounded theory" title. While GLASER and STRAUSS could not fully resist the tone of positivism, constructivist approaches choose not to uncouple from the terminology of objectivist GTM, even though the constructivist version aims to embed data analysis methods within a more pragmatic epistemology. GTM arose in response to positivism, and its objectivist model has now been recast to apply to more interpretively-oriented qualitative social research. An approach that has a

clear allegiance to symbolic interactionism thus remains uneasily coupled with a set of research techniques that have their origins in positivism and objectivism. However, the perception of the natural sciences transcending "common sense" and providing definite conclusions from complex calculations provides a framework of social validation which is difficult for a scientist of any orientation to resist. Therefore, even when the distinctiveness of social scientific subject matter is acknowledged, the logic of sociology still sides with science (PLUMMER, 2001, p.9). Furthermore, the endeavor to construct a "simplified, constructivist version of grounded theory" (CHARMAZ, 2000, p.514), adds a further strand to an already dense GTM literature, generating additional complexity for the researcher to navigate as they seek to discern the approach's key practical principles. [24]

An alternative development of GTM is offered by Adele CLARKE: "situational analysis" addresses the postmodern turn in social thought, accounting for the uncertainty and fragmentation that exemplify the contemporary world. As a result, this version of GTM is congruent with constructivist tendencies and also sets out to reclaim GTM from its positivist roots (CLARKE, 2003, p.559). However, situational analysis also seeks to extend inquiry beyond the parameters of constructivism: whilst the aim to represent human action is considered laudable, it is argued that researchers must be more sensitive to the conditions of social action. "Action is not enough. Our analytic focus needs to be fully on the situation of inquiry broadly conceived" (p.556). The conditions of this situated action, such as spatial elements or cultural discourses, must therefore be incorporated into research whilst also retaining awareness of how these conditions are tenuous and revisable. These conditions do not comprise separable elements of analysis, but are constitutive of the situation: any human or nonhuman element of the situation both constitutes and affects almost everything else in the situation in some way (CLARKE & FRIESE, 2007, p.365). [25]

CLARKE's situational analysis therefore provides some valuable tools to qualitative researchers beyond those offered by GLASER and STRAUSS's objectivist version of GTM. In particular, insights from postmodernism on the nature of the social world underscore the complexities and uncertainties of the domain under scrutiny, and accordingly the appropriateness of generating sensitizing concepts via research rather than seeking to discover formal theories. Furthermore, recognition of how situations comprise more than just human action, and guidance on how these complex situations might be mapped, are usefully demonstrated. However, following the critique of constructivist approaches above, it can be argued that situational analysis, with its postmodern orientation, did not need to be built upon the positivistic foundations of GTM. CLARKE acknowledges "the stunning messiness of social life" (CLARKE & FRIESE, 2007, p.370). It can be argued that appending situational analysis to GTM does not necessarily enable greater apprehension of this social life, but rather adds to the messiness of an approach that should aid this understanding. [26]

In addition to constructivist and postmodern versions, GTM has further diversified since GLASER and STRAUSS's original monograph with the two authors themselves diverging on what underpins the approach. There is, therefore, no

clear consensus on what constitutes genuine GTM. For example, STRAUSS developed the notion of "axial coding" which was rejected by GLASER who, in turn, developed the notion of "theoretical coding" which was ignored by STRAUSS (KELLE, 2005). BRYANT and CHARMAZ (2007a, p.50) acknowledge the difficulty of establishing GTM's core elements as opposed to those aspects that could be dispensed with. As a result, the question over what constitutes the essence of GTM is something which is debated by grounded theorists with territorial disputes underpinning these debates. For example, GLASER (2004) sets out to underscore the fundamental principles of GTM that are unsullied by extraneous debates on the nature of qualitative data analysis, such as those undertaken by those with a constructivist orientation. However, in response it is argued that GLASER "is more intent on establishing "The One True Church of GTM," than he is in clarifying the conceptual foundations of the method" (BRYANT, 2003, p.24). [27]

GTM therefore has strongly policed boundaries; however, it can be argued that this policing is ineffective as "a great many people claiming to be using GT methods are not doing anything that would be recognizable as such even when using the most inclusive definition of the term" (HOOD, 2007, pp.151-152). The incommensurability between the intense philosophical focus on GTM and its meaningful empirical application lends further weight to the argument that its primary role is more concerned with legitimation than the generation of knowledge: whilst the GTM brand bolsters particular qualitative studies by offering them a badge of rigor, it also reinforces the standing of its parent discipline, sociology. The focus is on the worship of methodology as an end in itself, which generates a "tendency to confuse whatever is to be studied with the set of methods suggested for its study" (WRIGHT-MILLS, 1959, p.51). [28]

The marshaling of GTM is therefore more concerned with defining in-group/out-group parameters than ensuring any consistency of quality across studies. GTM is a fragmented approach open to multiple methodological interpretations, but nevertheless requiring adherence to a professionally-defined (and contested) set of complex procedures. Grounded theorists are often eager to highlight that it provides a flexible set of resources to the researcher (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967, p.224; STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1998, p.14; CHARMAZ, 2000, p.513; GLASER, 2004, p.7). But as a result of its development and proliferation a researcher embarking on their first study is more likely to find that the flexibility of GTM is based more on uncertainty than fluidity—and that this accordingly exerts protean normative tyranny rather than facilitative anchoring. [29]

6. Resisting the Encroachment of Biology

GTM sets out to present a framework which can facilitate an understanding of the social world, and to some extent it has taken over from more distinctly theoretical debates that used to define the sociological tradition. In the Durkheimian tradition, social theory frames the parameters of sociology and stakes a claim to exclusive items of inquiry by marking out the terrain that was distinct from other academic subjects such as philosophy and psychology. The main challenge to sociology's

territory in the twenty-first century is coming from biology. It can be argued that biology, like sociology, represents a set of overlapping fields rather than a coherent disciplinary presence (FULLER, 2006, p.92); however, it is unified behind the neo-Darwinian paradigm. This neo-Darwinian unification allied to its empirical successes means that the biological sciences have developed a high degree of professional and public esteem. The rise of neo-liberalism politically since the 1970s also provides a context within which the biological sciences' focus on individuals competing for resources (DAWKINS, 2006, p.67) appears to present an increasingly salient description of our contemporaneous social world. The triumphalism of biology means that it presents a significant threat to sociology, with approaches such as evolutionary psychology providing biologically-oriented explanations for human social behavior. [30]

The vividness of society as an entity has thus disappeared (FULLER, 2006, p.4) and the distinctive empirical referents of sociology (structural aspects of the social world that exist over and above the individual) have lost their resonance. Collectivist projects such as the welfare state which aligned the political sphere with the societal orientation of sociology have diminished in both practical and rhetorical impact since the 1970s. Instead the political focus is more on the locus of the individual as they negotiate a pluralistic, individualistic, market-driven world. This provides a context that is less conducive to the totalizing pretensions of sociology and its accompanying theoretical endeavor to reconcile such dualisms as micro-macro and structure-agency. Under such conditions, the present social world seems to present a flatter and less hierarchical ontology, comprised of networks of individuals. This therefore provides a socio-political platform upon which biology is the academic field best placed to proffer a description of the social world. [31]

Social theory in the structural-functionalist tradition asserted that social systems or structures have a real existence that to some extent transcends (biologically constituted) individual agents. Talcott PARSONS set out to place his theory on a metaphysical platform that was distinct from positivistic sciences, recognizing the voluntaristic character of social existence (PARSONS, 1935, p.285). In this manner, sociology demarcates referents of inquiry which are not reducible to the domain of biology. However, it can be argued that the aim to resist biology from a rarefied theoretical position, which aims to conceptually reconcile different levels of the social system, was always going to present insufficient defense. Contemporary social theory, which has taken forward the Parsonian endeavor to reconcile creative human action with emergent social structures, sets out to be "useful and usable" (ARCHER, 1995, p.135). However, apart from providing a broad orientation for the researcher via a labyrinthine sketch of the social world's ontology, it is difficult to conceive how social theory offers guidance for empirical study. The sociological focus on the reconciliation of structure and agency is a rather nebulous and insubstantial means by which to resist the empirically-based theoretical assertions of the biological sciences. Structure-agency was once the most eagerly debated theoretical framework; this intellectual energy now seems to have been redirected to the bolstering of GTM as normative ballast. The number of theoretical texts focused on the reconciliation of structure with agency

perhaps peaked in the last decade of the twentieth century, with it even referred to as a "craze" (FULLER, 1998). (Although interest appears to have declined, it has not entirely dissipated e.g. ELDER-VASS, 2010.) In the intervening period, an interest in reinforcing the epistemological foundations of qualitative research via GTM has increased (e.g. CLARKE, 2005; CHARMAZ, 2006; BRYANT & CHARMAZ, 2007b; STRAUSS & CORBIN, 2008; BIRKS & MILLS, 2011). [32]

Faced with the empirical success of biology which addresses the palpable world of organic beings, resistance has been channeled behind a more empirically-grounded theoretical orientation. Theory is now *grounded* in real world data, rather than providing an overarching and abstract set of guiding concepts. GTM thereby sets out to provide more tangible and robust foundations for sociology by marginalizing extant theory and ensuring that concepts are linked to the more tangible corporeal domain of the human agent. However, in a somewhat contradictory fashion GTM has arguably become more metaphysical in orientation in response to the rise of the biological sciences. GLASER and STRAUSS resisted the logico-deductive model, but adhered to a similar notion of an observable external world open to detached rational analysis. GLASER in particular has continued to promote method as the means by which grounded theorists can obtain theories that are abstracted from subjective or misinterpreted data (GLASER, 2002, p.2). The focus on method, as a process which allegedly overrides epistemological concerns of accuracy and validity, places the qualitative researcher in a similar position to the physicist who can obtain a transcendental vantage point removed from the insensate objects of their inquiry. However, with the biological sciences now providing the key challenge to sociology, the threat comes from a discipline that addresses a realm which is closer to that of human experience. With the biological sciences in the ascendancy a more atomistic and infra-human worldview, as applied to the domain of social reality, must now be resisted. Sociology attempted to resist positivism by co-opting its approaches in quantitative methods and even retaining this tone within qualitative approaches (the genesis of GTM). However, resistance to biology requires much sterner opposition as a result of the overlapping orientation of sociology and biology towards the world i.e. a mutual interest in biologically-constituted social human beings. If social sciences co-opted the epistemological orientation and tone of the biological sciences then this would substantially erode the division between them. When resisting positivism, it is sufficient to focus on *method* as disciplinary reinforcement. With biology now presenting the principal challenge it is the underpinning epistemology which must be bolstered: a distinctive social scientific knowledge-base is thus asserted rather than simply the elucidation of method. [33]

Objectivist GTM contributes only some of the basis for this resistance, with its focus on the study of human action and opposition to structural functionalism, but it fails to undergird its methods with a distinctive social scientific methodology. Emergent social structures lack sufficient grounding in empirical reality to protect sociology but, on the other hand, approaches shaped by positivistic method are insufficiently metaphysical to thwart the encroachment of the biological sciences. Biological notions of human behavior such as those promulgated by evolutionary psychology state that present-day activity is shaped by our distant ancestry, and

that this influence has been conveyed through the passage of time by a physical substrate—genes. Conceiving of an agential unit of life-force, which permeates all life forms throughout time, arguably advances the discipline of biology beyond the realm of positivism. Furthermore, clear attempts to impinge upon the social scientific domain are demonstrated with related fields such as memetics: this theory claims that a unit of culture, which replicates according to Darwinian principles, can provide a totalizing causal and explanatory framework for human social behavior (BLACKMORE, 1999). The postulation of an actual "science of memetics" demonstrates the confidence and bombast of thinkers aligned with the biological sciences. Although it tends to focus on a level of existence beneath human agency (units of genes or memes), neo-Darwinism still complements and reinforces an altered worldview in which the individual is the orienting aspect of analysis more than collective notions such as communities or societies. "Even though the individual organism has lost its theoretical centrality as the unit of evolution and selfishness, it retains its privileged position as the main empirical focus of study, because it is after all the behavior of individual organisms that constitutes the original phenomenon of interest" (NIELSEN, 1994, p.269). [34]

Appeals to social structure fail to offer direct opposition to these philosophical developments; but "social constructionism" provides a resource with which sociologists can still define a world which transcends nature. (This perspective is accordingly subject to criticism from writers of a neo-Darwinist persuasion, e.g. PINKER, 2002). Social constructionism enables sociology to establish and buttress a more tangible segment of empirical terrain: the focus is on the methodological defense of action, rather than the theoretical defense of overarching structures. As human action has an intrinsically social basis it cannot be understood via the metaphysical articles invoked under other disciplines.

"If action is the unit, some unknown interiority (perhaps the brain, perhaps the gene, perhaps memory or history) cannot form the antecedent basis for action. An action always ramifies and continues, at least those sorts of action of importance for sociological analysis. Actions traverse the skin. They do not originate in individuals, but rather as a result of relations, the 'between-ness' of the world" (STAR, 2007, p.90). [35]

Whilst constructivist GTM orients itself towards the individual agent, it adopts a perspective of human relations that is appropriate to the resistance of the biological sciences: as the fabric of the human world is comprised of people's relational properties (rather than simply their individual properties) then this delineates a reduced range of impacts that can be made by molecular biology. The domain under examination is not a genetic component, nor the impact of our distant ancestry, but the world which emerges through its social construction by human agents. The external social reality of objectivist GTM is also rejected as a locus of inquiry in favor of the meanings constructed by interacting human beings. The metaphysics of symbolic interactionism, with its focus on how the self is formed in the joint activities of group life (BLUMER, 1969, p.21), thereby helps to enrich the empirical immanence of GTM. It should also be noted that approaches associated with more of an objectivist orientation have also been

updated recently to relate GTM to a clearer methodological position underpinned by Pragmatism and symbolic interactionism (STRAUSS & CORBIN, 2008, Chapter 1). STRAUSS's position was always open to being reconciled with Pragmatism (BRYANT, 2009) but it is only in the most recent edition of the aforementioned STRAUSS and CORBIN text that this alignment has been elaborated. This offers reinforcement to the view that, in the present academic environment, it is increasingly perceived that GTM is best consolidated with a constructivist/interactionist epistemology. GLASER (2002) persists with the notion of GTM as a method distinct from such epistemological concerns, but in addition to presenting a discredited and outmoded notion of the neutral observer analyzing an external world (BRYANT, 2003, p.7) his focus on the sovereignty of pure research technique means that it offers fewer resources to those seeking metaphysical defense against the encroachment of biology. GLASER, however, would perhaps find this latter point of some comfort (GLASER, 2004, p.16). [36]

Even if there is no such thing as society left to be mapped by abstract structure-agency debates, social constructionism ensures that the social world is still an irreducible emergent domain which provides exclusive items of inquiry for GTM research. Sociological theory occupies too rarefied a position to resist the biological sciences, whilst objectivist GTM is too focused on immanent method. Constructionist GTM offers a means by which the distinctive human element, which PARSONS sought to embed within his theory, can be redirected from the theorization of overarching social systems to the more tangible realm of human interaction. By unifying empirical theorizing and method, constructivist GTM appeals to the palpable reality of interacting embodied agents, and also the properties of the social world which exist over and above the biological domain. It can also be argued that CLARKE's situational analysis addresses the concern to place GTM on a footing that is commensurate with a more resilient social scientific position. By focusing on the situatedness of human action, CLARKE promotes the importance of social conditions, but she also argues that these are not independent features of the world: "the conditions *of* the situation are *in* the situation" (CLARKE & FRIESE, 2007, p.364). This approach therefore transcends a direct focus on the individual agent, but also resists theoretical debates that appeal to abstract and external features of society which exist beyond situated action. The appeal to "situation" places the key ontological referent outside the reach of the biological sciences, whilst also avoiding the invocation of social scientific dualisms that would push the debate beyond palpable empirical concerns. [37]

Whilst correlation may not imply causation, there may be a causal as well as a broad correlative link between the rise of the biological sciences and the move in sociology to a focus on constructivist GTM and away from objectivist GTM (as well as more abstract concerns such as the reconciliation of structure and agency). The biological sciences had obviously been highly influential earlier in the twentieth century, but breakthroughs with cloning and mapping the genome presented high profile indicators of biology's potency in the 1990s. Additionally, the general Western trend towards a more neo-liberal political context commenced in earnest in the 1980s, but in the 1990s social democratic

governments had come to power in the US and UK but did not break significantly from the neo-liberal consensus. With nominally social democratic governments embracing a more individualistic perspective, and biology making palpable and high-profile discoveries at the level of the individual organism (and below), the notion of society having an existence *sui generis* was in terminal retreat. The causal link between these developments and the rise of grounded theory will not be linear and direct, but it seems plausible that this context could prompt an academic shift away from holistic theoretical endeavors, such as the structure-agency debate, towards the more empirically and interactionally-focused constructivist GTM. [38]

Even if the causal link between the rise of the biological sciences and constructivist GTM is indirect and diffuse, under current socio-political conditions, it is constructivist GTM that is best placed to reinforce the sociological discipline. It is argued that GTM has become an "uneasy orthodoxy" (BRYANT, 2009, p.64) and constructivist versions of the approach might be best placed to consolidate this orthodoxy. Constructivist GTM holds considerable appeal as it achieves the task of co-opting the rhetoric of natural scientific method, whilst also asserting the existence of a socially constructed empirical realm that is inaccessible to the natural sciences. Therefore, despite a move towards constructivism and interactionism, GTM, like its parent discipline sociology, is unable to uncouple completely from the principles of science to pursue a model that is more inspired by the humanities (PLUMMER, 2001, p.9). In terms of disciplinary consolidation, constructivist GTM artfully aligns itself with the rigor of science whilst also claiming ontological referents that extend beyond the reach of the science. It is this Janus-faced basis to constructivist GTM which means that it will remain the most durable presence within sociology in the face of political and academic erosions to society as an entity *sui generis*. [39]

7. The Map and the Territory

Whilst a science like physics is protected from challenges to its claims to authority by its mathematical methods, sociology's social referents are very close to the regular commonsensical understanding of the laity. Whilst it might be socially perceived that a physicist with an understanding of quantum mechanics or relativity might have a deeper understanding of physical reality than an untrained member of the public, it is much less likely to be perceived that a sociologist steeped in an understanding of the structure-agency debate or the principles of GTM has unique or privileged insights into social reality. A possible disciplinary response to threats to its empirical entitlements and professional esteem is to appeal to an impenetrable and complicated set of theoretical and methodological arguments underpinned by scientific terminology. GTM's proliferation, underpinned by a complex lexicon and tortuous debates over its principles, provides an example of this process. An author endeavoring to write about GTM must first assimilate all of the diverse writing about GTM before offering their own ameliorations which, in turn, add to the complexity of the approach. The focus is thus on coming to terms with the complexity of sociologists' constructs rather than the empirical applicability of any method or

technique. This does, however, provide some disciplinary defense: if an outsider criticizes a sociological tradition such as structure-agency or GTM then this is because this person has failed to immerse themselves in the relevant literature and grasp the subtlety and sophistication of the debate. An in-depth knowledge of GTM's context, including an ability to explicate the complex interrelations between different theorists, means that potentially critical outsiders lacking this knowledge can be repelled. This is also underpinned by a form of self-serving bias under which it is perceived that sociology advances incrementally solely with reference to its own internal dynamics. This process of legitimation diverts recognition from the fact that extraneous forces, such as the influence of the more publicly esteemed natural sciences, have any impact upon the shape of the sociological discipline. [40]

The principal critique of this article does not therefore pertain to the efficacy of GTM as a set of techniques or the relevance of its underpinning epistemology. The main concern of this paper is that the legitimating orientation of GTM and the heated proprietorial wrangles over its ultimate essence mean that it is oriented towards self-referential debate rather than the explication of the social world. In this sense GTM focuses more on method as an end in itself than the social referents this method is supposed to illuminate. That is, GTM is concerned more with the map than the territory. In his short aperçu "On Exactitude in Science," Jorge Luis BORGES (1998) postulated the existence and uselessness of a map to a 1:1 scale. Faced with a complex ontology and perceived requirement for the exactitude and rigor associated with the natural sciences, it might appear that grounded theorists are trying to devise their own precise 1:1 map of the social world before applying it to the territory that they wish to investigate. When immersed in literature on GTM it could be forgotten that it is an approach that aims to enhance an understanding of lived experience. After being delivered to the inclemencies of the elements, BORGES's vast map ends up in tattered fragments. A novice qualitative social researcher, faced with the troublesome task of grasping the territory of the social world, may hope that a similar fate befalls GTM. [41]

8. Conclusion

This paper has considered GTM with reference to sociology's relationship with the natural sciences. Whilst the factors shaping the genesis and development of GTM will be complex, this paper suggests that sociology's requirement to define and protect its disciplinary boundaries have impacted upon this process. Initially GLASER and STRAUSS devised a model of GTM that set out to resist positivistic quantitative approaches, but also ended up to some extent replicating the orthodoxy with their objectivist GTM. Positivism represents only one aspect and approach to science, and science's esteem is also conferred by its complexity and appeals to an arcane reality which exists beyond immediate human experience. The rise of the biological sciences relates to this metaphysical quest to provide an explanation of human behavior underpinned by an infra-human molecular biology. With public esteem accorded to natural science and a political context that is more conducive to individualistic explanations of social

phenomena, it is perhaps understandable that sociology may be increasingly defensive with regard to its disciplinary boundaries. [42]

However, the development of GTM, as it redefines itself in relation to the natural sciences, means that it presents more obfuscation than clarity with regard to qualitative research and data analysis. It consequently appears that disciplinary legitimation is a more central feature of GTM than the facilitation of discovery. The methodological basis of qualitative research procedures thus expands via academic debate and disagreement to alter the parameters of what could be a more clearly outlined set of procedures for the social scientist. CHARMAZ (2006) and BRYANT (2003) may be correct in their assertion that qualitative research should be predicated on more constructivist foundations than those offered by GLASER and STRAUSS (1967). However, this paper has demonstrated that persisting with the "grounded theory" label is counterproductive: the positivistic foundations of GTM mean that it presents a warped scientific cast to an ever-expanding self-referential debate. Constructivist GTM will continue to occupy a central position within qualitative research and sociology, but this is due more to its efficacy as a legitimating tool (in the face of the ascendant biological sciences) than its ability to guide research in a clear and helpful fashion. [43]

GTM's tortuous development even means that monographs which set out to offer clear, practical guidance for those unfamiliar with the approach (e.g. BIRKS & MILLS, 2011) are prone to generating even more confusion (GYNNILD, 2011, p.63). An excessive focus on the attempt to bolster disciplinary boundaries thus diminishes sociology's efficacy as a discipline, with its focus diverted from endeavors to pragmatically illuminate a complex social reality and pushed towards distinguishing its body of knowledge from other disciplines and the laity. Although the weighty legacy of GTM makes its direction difficult to predict or influence, recognition of its socio-historical basis might prompt the development of a more pragmatic and genuinely flexible style of research, one that is guided by sociology's humanistic foundations and eschews the GTM label: there must be "an undercurrent of sociological work that strains against the dominant tendencies and persistently reminds the scientific sociologist that for all his or her neat abstractions, concrete human beings may not tidily bend before them" (PLUMMER, 2001, p.9). This approach can be oriented towards the enhancement of qualitative research, rather than intra-disciplinary requirements to define and defend an academic niche whilst seeking the professional esteem enjoyed by the natural scientist. The focus may then shift positively towards studying the territory and away from such fraught speculation on the utility of the map. [44]

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