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Pragmatism as a Basis for Grounded Theory

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Recently, there have been calls for renewed attention to the roots of Grounded Theory in pragmatism, and this article continues that effort at both the theoretical and the procedural level. From a theoretical perspective, it counters the claim that pragmatism is compatible with a relativist epistemology, as claimed by advocates of Constructivist Grounded Theory, and argues instead for a cyclical process of inquiry that moves from beliefs to actions to consequences. At the procedural level, the article demonstrates four concrete principles so that pragmatism: replaces induction with abduction; emphasizes the importance of prior beliefs as starting points; treats theoretical sampling as action following earlier inquiry; and, justifies the importance of verification in developing theory. Overall, it demonstrates the value of pursuing a more fully pragmatic version of Grounded Theory. Keywords: Grounded Theory, Pragmatism

Background

Although pragmatism has begun to receive attention in Grounded Theory (e.g., Bryant, 2009, 2017; Charmaz, 2014; Reichertz, 2010, 2019; Strübing, 2007), it still remains at best a minor voice in this research tradition. I will pursue two reasons for the further examination of pragmatism as it applies to Grounded Theory (GT). The first is to increase the visibility of pragmatism as a philosophical basis for GT. Even though Corbin and Strauss (2008) devoted the introduction to the third edition of *Basics of Qualitative Research* to establishing GT's pragmatist roots, there is still too little recognition of the important role that pragmatism plays in most versions of GT. This is ironic, given the prominence of pragmatism in other research areas, such as mixed methods (Biesta, 2010; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Morgan, 2007).

The second reason for highlighting the contribution of pragmatism in GT is to expand the range of those contributions. To date, most of the discussion of pragmatism in GT is devoted to using the concept of *abduction* as a replacement for induction. This article will continue the argument GT can benefit by emphasizing abduction, at the same time that it also has much to gain by moving beyond abduction and rooting itself more deeply in a pragmatist concept of inquiry.

My own interests in GT go back to using it as the basis for my dissertation (Morgan, 1982). Since then, I have emphasized it in my graduate seminars on qualitative methods. My concentration on pragmatism is considerably more recent, based on its application to mixed methods (Morgan, 2007) and to social science research more generally (Morgan, 2014). This paper represents the intersections of those two lines of interest.

The Philosophical Benefits of Relying on Pragmatism

Beyond Realism and Relativism

One of the chief advantages that pragmatism offers to GT is an alternative to realism and relativism as philosophical bases for research. This is particularly important for

Constructivist Grounded Theory in which it is common to assume that a constructivist stance inherently requires an acceptance of relativism since any other choice would require an approval of realism. Thus, the second edition of Charmaz's (2014) textbook, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, continues to rely on relativism as an underlying paradigm for her version of GT. This connection between constructivism and relativism is particularly evident in the work of Guba, who flatly asserts that "constructivists are relativists" (1990, p. 18), and "if there are always many interpretations that can be made in any inquiry and if there is no foundational process by which the ultimate truth or falsity of these social constructions can be determined, there is no alternative but to take a position of relativism" (1990, p. 26).

Charmaz (2009) summarizes her approach to Constructivist GT as having "pragmatist roots and relativist epistemology" (cf. Charmaz, Thornberg, & Keane, 2017). Unfortunately, this attempt at joining pragmatism and relativism conflicts strongly with classical pragmatism, which has no place for what Dewey (1941) called the "epistemological industry." Pragmatism refuses to locate itself in a traditional epistemological space and instead replaces the metaphysical dualism of realism and relativism with an entirely different worldview, which emphasizes the linkage between beliefs and action. Rather than arguing about whether something is true or not, pragmatists focus on the consequences of acting on a set of beliefs. In particular, Dewey's (1941) philosophy of knowledge replaces concerns about truth with the concept of *warranted assertions*, meaning that a belief has been put to the test through action. Overall, Starr (2007) offers a useful summary of this issue by saying that pragmatism is "orthogonal" (i.e., unrelated) to both realism and relativism.

Pragmatism also speaks to conceptions such as multiple realities. For pragmatists such as Dewey (1922), questions about the existence of reality only obscure the essential importance of experience by saddling it with unnecessary ontological baggage. Instead, it is the nature of experience itself that matters, and references to multiple realities only add an unnecessary element of complexity. Pragmatists recognize that no two people will ever have the same set of beliefs, because everyone has a unique set of experiences. Instead, the key issue is the range of joint actions in which people can engage, given the extent of their shared beliefs (Blumer, 1969). This emphasis on the ability to share experiences is very different from the relativist debate over whether every person has their own unique truth, let alone whether all such truths are equally valid. Just as an individual must put their preconceived beliefs to the test, so too must pairs of people or groups or communities.

Research as Pragmatic Inquiry

The key linkage between pragmatism and GT is through Anselm Strauss, but his acknowledgment of this linkage was late in coming. So, Bryant (2009) found it curious that Strauss readily acknowledged the importance of pragmatism for his theoretic work (e.g., Strauss, 1993), but did not give attention to it in his work on GT. This changed with the introduction to the third edition of *Basics of Qualitative Research* (Corbin & Strauss, 2008)—which was originally written by Strauss for inclusion in the second edition ten years earlier. Here Strauss explicitly acknowledges his debt to Dewey's action-oriented theory of knowledge, with its centrality of prior experience in guiding future practice.

Within Dewey's work, the concept of inquiry is especially relevant (1933, 1938). For Dewey, inquiry is a five-phase process (Biesta, 2010; Morgan, 2014; Strubing, 2017), that can be summarized as follows:

1. The inquirer encounters a problematic situation that cannot be explained by prior experience.
2. The inquirer reflects on and defines the nature of the problem.

3. The inquirer searches for potential solutions that could resolve the problem.
4. The inquirer reflects on the likely consequences of putting potential solutions into action.
5. The inquirer takes action to test what appears to be the best solution for resolving the problem.

Dewey's concept of inquiry involves a dual process of reflection, first on the nature of the problem itself, and then on the likely consequences of acting on the potential solution. This points to the importance of prior beliefs in this system because they are crucial for both the perception of the problem itself and the evaluation of the actions that might resolve the problem. Without such preconceptions, inquiry is impossible, and the world reverts to William James' 1890 description of the infant's experience as "blooming, buzzing confusion" (p. 462). Ultimately, however, the point of inquiry is to convert those reflections into action.

Once action takes place, this leads to an interpretation of the outcome of that action, creating a cycle that leads from existing beliefs through actions and consequences to revised beliefs (Morgan, 2014). Figure 1 expands Dewey's initial process of inquiry to show this sequence of connections between beliefs, actions, and consequences. In this point of view, all action both arises from prior beliefs and produces a set of consequences. Interpreting those consequences leads to revised beliefs, which generates new actions, which produce further consequences, and so on. The ultimate issue is thus not the truth or falsity of a belief but rather the consequences of acting upon that belief.

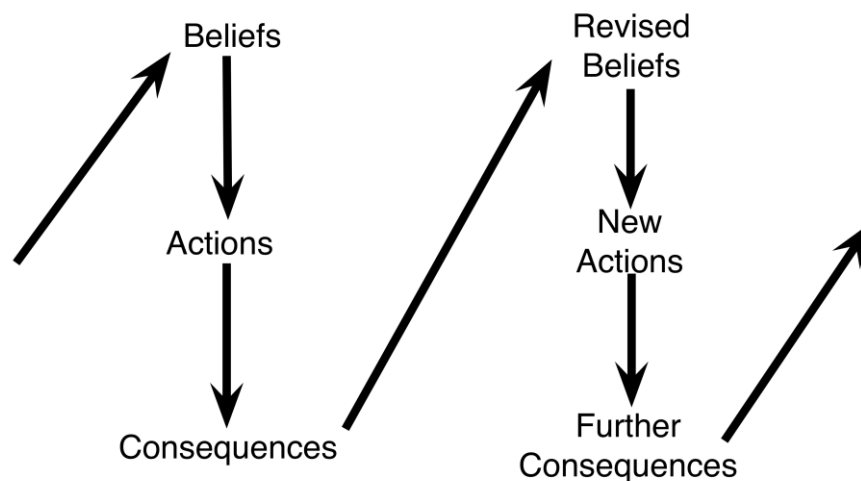


Figure 1: Pragmatism connects actions with beliefs and consequences.

Dewey (1933) treated inquiry as a general aspect of human experience that people use whenever their habitual forms of behavior are not sufficient to deal with a problematic situation. In addition, he argued that formal research is simply a more careful and self-aware refinement of inquiry as a common form of human experience. In Dewey's system, a specific inquiry must be tailored to both the nature of the original question and the range of actions that could possibly be taken in response. For example, within the social sciences, quantitative and qualitative research each pose different ways of formulating questions and different ways of acting in response to those questions. At a next level of specificity, GT is a version of qualitative research as a form of Deweyan/pragmatic inquiry. And more specifically still, within GT, techniques such as the alternation of data collection and data analysis are tools for pursuing inquiry. The next section presents four ways in which pragmatic inquiry can contribute to GT.

Pragmatic Inquiry Applied to Grounded Theory

Among the four contributions of pragmatism to GT considered here, the first and currently best developed, is the replacement of induction with abduction as the logic of GT. The second is the ongoing debate about the role of prior beliefs in GT. The third concerns the nature of theoretical sampling. Finally, there is what has become known the issue of *verification* in GT.

Pragmatism Replaces Induction with Abduction

Abduction is a form of reasoning that generates hypotheses that can account for observations. As such, abduction is particularly useful for creating potential resolutions to problematic situations. Pragmatism's reliance on abduction derives from the work of Charles S. Peirce (1903), who contrasted abduction with induction. For Peirce, induction is a form of logic based on the expectation that one's prior observations will be repeated in the future, and what distinguishes abduction is the production of new insights through the creation of a hypothesis that offers an explanation for one's observations. Abduction thus requires an element of inspiration that goes beyond the formal logic of induction. Peirce (1903/1958) claims that mistaking abduction for induction "as a great proportion of students do, is one of the greatest errors of reasoning that can be made" (pp. 67-68).

Although the precise term abduction may be relatively unfamiliar, the application of this form of reasoning is quite common. In particular, it has often been noted that abduction is the method of Arthur Conan Doyle's fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes (e.g., Eco & Sebeok, 1988). Although Conan Doyle frequently referred to Holmes' methods as deduction, the classic pattern of his investigations is to begin with an observation that provides a flash of insight, which serves as the source of further implications that point to the perpetrator. This is illustrated in the adventure of the Silver Blaze (Doyle, 1894), where Holmes draws attention to "the curious incident of the dog in the night-time" (p. 13). When the Scotland Yard inspector replies that the dog did nothing, Holmes replies, "That was the curious incident." Later Holmes describes how once he grasped "the significance of the silence of the dog," this led him to the answers for other questions related to the case, because: "one true inference invariably suggests others." This is exactly the pattern of abduction, which can be summarized as follows:

Observation: The dog at the scene of the crime did not bark at the criminal.

Insight: The criminal must have been known to the dog.

Further Implications: The criminal could be a member of the victim's household, etc.

Seen in this light, any form of qualitative research that pursues the goal of using observations to generate hypotheses or build theory is actually abductive rather than inductive. Strauss himself considered abduction to be the basis of GT (as recounted by Charmaz, 2014, p. 202), although he wrote little about it. One possible reason for this is that Strauss based much of his understanding of pragmatism on Dewey, who did not use the term abduction. Even so, the process of abduction is clearly located within the third of Dewey's five-step process of inquiry, when the inquirer searches for possible solutions that would resolve the problematic situation. In particular, the problematic situation that initiates inquiry cannot, by definition, be resolved solely through existing beliefs, so the suggested solution that emerges in the third step of inquiry must involve new insights.

It is important to recognize that Peirce developed the formal concept of abduction as a type of reasoning that produces hypotheses, followed by a step that depends on the expected

effects of acting on those hypotheses. The key issue is the implications of testing a hypothesis through action, when the outcomes of that action will modify expectations about future experiences. This is Peirce's (1903/1958) version of the connections between beliefs, actions, and consequences as shown in Figure 1.

Abduction helps to clarify the nature of *emergence* in GT. From this standpoint, researchers are responsible for creating their interpretations of the data. Abduction advances this approach by allowing for emergence to occur outside the conscious deliberative activities of the researcher, based on the flash of inspiration that is at the heart of abduction. Emergence through abduction, however, requires the explicit recognition that this process is still highly constrained by the prior beliefs of the observer (cf. Kelle, 2005).

In contrast, Glaser's Classic Grounded Theory (Glaser, 2014 Holton & Walsh, 2016) continues to argue for the direct induction of conclusions from observations. This also leads to a version of emergence that treats conclusions as arising solely from the data themselves, without any role for prior beliefs. This position is incompatible with pragmatism—despite the claim of Holton and Walsh (2016) that Classic Grounded Theory fits well with any inquiry paradigm. Thus, a move toward pragmatism is a much better match to Constructivist rather than Classic Grounded Theory.

Overall, the proper perspective is not that GT was originally inductive and that more recent approaches are abductive, but rather that GT has always been abductive. When Glaser and Strauss referred to induction, their point was not to stake a claim to a particular form of logic, but instead to draw a contrast with deduction in a way that emphasized using observations to generate rather than test theory. The core of GT has always been the abductive process of accounting for observations by generating theories that explain why those observations are the way they are.

Pragmatism Emphasizes the Importance of Prior Beliefs as Starting Points

As Figure 1 illustrates, prior beliefs play a central role in pragmatism, both for inquiry in general and in more formal research. For any form of inquiry, the starting point of encountering a problematic situation can only happen with regard to what is believed to be routine, versus situations that are interpreted as requiring further investigation. Translating Dewey's five step into a research-oriented framework, the initial encounter with a problematic situation amounts to the formulation of a research question that has no current answer. Reflecting on the nature of this question leads to a suggested solution in the form of a research design. After that, evaluating the likely consequences of acting on this solution requires further reflection on the kinds of results that would arise from pursuing this design. When this dual process of reflection is complete, the final step is to take action in the form of collecting and analyzing data.

As noted earlier, the dual process of reflection can only be accomplished through the application of pre-existing beliefs, and Mruck and Mey (2019) offer a useful summary of this decision making in the early portions of the research process:

As a potentially unlimited number of research questions and ways to work on them exist, preferences for theories and methods as well as the researcher's interests, competences, skills, and sensibilities, acquired during (professional) socialization within specific academic contexts and "schools," play a crucial role within this initial process. (p. 475)

This account of the beginning aspects of a research project differs considerably from Glaser and Strauss's (1967) original advice. In particular, Glaser and Strauss rejected any approach

that began by deriving hypotheses from abstract theory, which led to a concern that a directed literature search would limit observations in the field. More recently, Grounded Theorists have recognized that avoiding any knowledge of the existing literature is almost impossible (Bryant, 2017; Kelle, 2019; Thornberg, 2012; Thornberg & Dunne, 2019; Urquhart & Fernandez, 2013). For example, Thornberg (2012) argues for the necessity of doing a literature review, so that one can actively apply approaches such as theoretical agnosticism (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003) and theoretical pluralism (Kelle, 2007). This means that all prior theories and concepts should be treated as provisional and open to revision, and self-critical and reflexive reasoning requires conscious reflection on the ideas that the researcher is trying to reconsider. This acceptance of the potential value of the literature is a major step toward a more pragmatic version of GT.

Yet, the inevitable influence of prior knowledge goes well beyond the literature reviews that are typically a central aspect of graduate education. Even if it were possible to avoid doing literature reviews, it would still be necessary to consider the more general role of prior beliefs and ignoring the literature risks relying on personal and cultural conceptions instead. In Dey's (1999) well-known formulation, "there is a difference between an open mind and an empty head" (p. 251), but the literature is not the only source for the pre-existing beliefs that guide all forms of inquiry. Indeed, the pragmatists' insistence that current interpretations are always guided by prior experience is in line with the broad recognition that observations are always theory laden.

Although this stance means that prior beliefs are a central element of any inquiry, there remains a continuing emphasis on steering clear of "pre-conceptions" in both Classic and Constructivist GT. For Glaser (2014), avoiding any use of preconceptions is a defining feature of his approach, while Charmaz (2014), following Blumer (1969), argues for the value of "sensitizing concepts" "that can serve as points of departure for a research project" (p. 31). Although this is a step toward recognizing the importance of prior beliefs, the inevitable difficulty here is in determining what constitutes an acceptable sensitizing concept. As examples of acceptable sensitizing concepts, Charmaz (2014) points to her own reliance on identity and a general theoretical orientation drawn from symbolic interactionism, in contrast to negative examples of concepts such as "risk," "habitus," and "discourses of power" (p. 117). But it is not clear how a prior commitment to a concept of "risk" is any more restrictive than "identity," or how a standpoint based on either Bourdieu or critical theory is any more problematic than borrowing one's sensitizing concepts from symbolic interactionism. Apparently, what is a useful sensitizing concept for a researcher who advocates one theoretical orientation can be unacceptable to a researcher who follows a different point of departure.

The extent to which researchers in Constructivist GT can borrow from one rather than another theoretical orientation is not the only issue in determining the appropriate use of sensitizing concepts. A different problem concerns how to draw the line between an acceptable level of generality and an unacceptable level of specificity. Thus, Charmaz (2014) argues that sensitizing concepts are allowable as long as they avoid a deductive approach that requires "operationalizing established concepts" (p. 13), but she offers no guidance on how to tell when one has over-stepped this boundary. For all of these reasons, a pragmatist standpoint indicates that the attempt to deal with prior beliefs through sensitizing concepts in Constructivist GT only goes halfway.

Fortunately, there is an increasing recognition of the inevitability of pre-conceptions in all forms of qualitative research. Thornberg and Dunne (2019) point to this issue in their discussion of the role of the literature review in GT, which Kelle (2019) argues that the use of prior theory is not only unavoidable, but often desirable. Mruck and May (2019) probably go furthest in recognizing the importance of preconceptions when they review the range of individual, social, and cultural influence that come into play in any research project. All of this work represents steps in the right direction, which can be reinforced by an emphasis on the

pragmatic basis for inquiry.

Pragmatism Treats Theoretical Sampling as Action Following Earlier Inquiry

The link between pragmatic inquiry and GT methods is probably clearest in theoretical sampling, which was one of the core concepts of GT from the beginning (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theoretical sampling in GT takes the form: If my analyses of what I have observed so far make sense, then I can expand my understanding with the following new observations... Mapping this approach onto Dewey's five phases of inquiry, the researcher's prior theorizing is re-evaluated in light of the preliminary analyses, which makes it necessary to conceptualize what it is about the emerging theory that needs clarification. This process points to possible forms of new data that might supply the desired clarification, and further reflection leads to decisions about the types of observation that would be most useful. Finally, the new, theoretically driven sample provides additional data and analyses—which may confirm, expand, or challenge the existing, preliminary theory.

In essence, this process begins with a set of observations, followed by an abductive process that formulates an explanation for those observations, and a follow-up to pursue the implications of that abductive reasoning. In terms of Figure 1, the early stages of analysis have impacts on prior beliefs that require new action to assess and taking action in the form of new data collection has a further impact on beliefs about the developing theory. The sampling is “theoretical” in the sense that the choice of new data sources is motivated by the theory that has emerged from the analytic process so far.

Even though Glaser and Strauss (1967) did not consider any explicit match between theoretical sampling and Dewey's model of inquiry or Peirce's concept of abduction, there is a strong correspondence. First, a set of observations generate insights, then those insights are pursued in terms of their further implications. For theoretical sampling, this consists of choosing a new source of data that will either agree with or challenge the current set of beliefs. Within Dewey's (1941) philosophy of knowledge, this amounts to testing whether a series of tentative assertions are indeed *warranted*.

Pragmatism Justifies the Importance of Verification in Developing Theory

Another way to describe pragmatic inquiry is that it moves back and forth between induction and deduction (Morgan, 2014), so that what is inferred from observations is converted into working hypotheses for further testing, which leads to new observations, and so on. Strauss and Corbin (1990) argued for the importance of *verification* in these same terms:

While coding we are constantly moving between inductive and deductive thinking. That is, we deductively propose statements of relationships or suggest possible properties and their dimensions when working with data, then actually attempt to verify what we have deduced against data as we compare incident with incident. There is a constant interplay between proposing and checking. This back and forth movement is what makes our theory grounded! (p. 111)

It is important to note that the analyst in this version of GT is engaged in an *attempt to verify* that could lead to the modification or even outright rejection of the tentative lessons from earlier coding. Thus, this version of verification is a matter of “checking” earlier work, rather than seeking conclusive proof. Once again, it is a matter of producing warranted assertions—in this case during the coding process, using procedures that are directly analogous to those in theoretical sampling.

Strauss and Corbin's (1990) acceptance of verification is central to Glaser's (1992) critique of their work. In particular, he argues that verification is precisely what he and Strauss were originally trying to escape. But that escape was from the idea of basing research on the process of trying to verify "grand theory" through empirical research, as opposed to an emphasis on using careful observation to generate insights. For theory development, what Strauss and Corbin are pointing to is the need to improve on prior beliefs through further analytic actions. Overall, the process of generating new beliefs through observations and testing them through further actions is as central to GT as it is to pragmatism more generally.

Stating the issues in these pragmatic terms points to the likelihood that much of the controversy regarding verification is a matter of terminology. For example, Charmaz (2014) is explicitly unwilling to accept the idea of verification, yet she does approve of "checking hunches and confirming emergent ideas" (p. 237). It is hard to see how this kind of "confirmation" is meaningfully different from the sort of "verification" that Strauss and Corbin proposed. Instead, the confirmation of tentative beliefs provides greater certainty for applying those beliefs to future actions in the ongoing analysis process.

Conclusions

Anselm Strauss's long-held interest in pragmatism established the initial link between this philosophical approach and Grounded Theory, but it is not enough to rely solely on that connection if we are to pursue a pragmatic version of GT. In addition, it is necessary for pragmatism to earn its way by demonstrating its ability to contribute to the further development of GT.

Taken together, I have offered four basic claims about Grounded Theory: (1) that it uses abduction to create imaginative interpretations of observations; (2) that it inevitably relies on preconceptions and prior beliefs; (3) that it requires interpretations of tentative conclusions in order to do theoretical sampling; and (4) that it pursues knowledge claims through an ongoing process of verification.

All four of these claims point to the importance of the researcher's own subjectivity. This raises the age-old question of the extent to which our conclusions and even our observations originate from some external source or from our own beliefs and opinions. Fortunately, for pragmatism this is a side issue at best. Instead, the centerpiece of pragmatism lies in taking actions and experiencing the outcomes of those actions. Thus, regardless of whether we are considering everyday life, social research in general, or Grounded Theory in particular, what matters most is not the sources of our beliefs but the consequences of our actions.

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