Stream 14 Strategic Management
Competitive Session

Building Grounded Theory Methodology Constructs in Social Phenomena Research – A Theoretical Discussion

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ABSTRACT: *Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) is one of the most popular qualitative research approaches for theory generation. However, the original methodology design is too abstract and hard to follow. This paper argues that the choice among the three prevalent approaches (as described by Glaser, Strauss and Corbin, and Charmaz) should not be based on the level of difficulties encountered in implementing the procedures, but on the ontological impacts of the methodological design and its competency to cope with the phenomena relevant to the scope of the research question(s). The purpose of this paper is to clarify the ontological and epistemological stance through a more coherent paradigm foundation of a Weberian approach and to develop a formal grounded theory framework.*

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INTRODUCTION

From 1990 to 2013 in the ProQuest Online journal articles database, the three dominant software packages for qualitative research coding are ATLAS (commercialized in 1993) (ATLAS.ti, 2014), NUD*IST (predecessor of NVivo) since 1981, and NVivo since 1990 (QSR, 2014). The majority of initial researchers in qualitative data analysis (QDA) software development applied Grounded Theory. According to Figure 1 (ProQuest, 2013), 80% to 90% of QDA applying Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) are from the management research field, and management research accounts for between 40% and 50% of all GTM applications since 1990. The relationship among GT and management and QDA software indicates that management research is a key research area in GT and that management research leads the application of software in GT research.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Based on the increasing adoption of Grounded Theory by management researchers, arguments have arisen regarding how it should be conducted. The time has arrived for management scholars to provide a more defined direction for the future use of grounded theory in their research. We would argue that grounded theory cannot continue to be practiced as a free-for-all methodology in management research without risking a serious danger of becoming irrelevant (Jones and Noble, 2007). It appears that the GTM techniques associated with data collection and analysis are popular among management scholars; however, studies embracing a holistic approach to the methodology itself remain limited (Loonam, 2013). Åge (2011, p.1601) argues that 'the founders of particular scientific methodologies, including Grounded Theory, often fail to explore and explain the fundamental philosophical basis of their particular methodologies – even when the theoretical and conceptual principles of that methodology are ostensibly being presented'. Gustavsson (1998) further noted that GT has been subjected to criticism from both *subjectivists* and *objectivists.*

High quality GTM research in management is quite rare. In the entire history of the 10 management journals ranked among the 45 Financial Times Top Journals (Financial Times, 2012), only 31 articles employed GTM, and only 3 of these discussed the philosophical background of Grounded Theory (Hallier & Forbes, 2004; Shah & Corley, 2006; Suddaby, 2006).

In the historical philosophical discussion of GTM, there have been three waves. In the earliest stage of GTM development (see Figure 2), the debate was based on Grounded Theory and other qualitative research methods and also how Grounded Theory follows the positivist tradition in research logic (1967). The notion that GTM belongs to a positivist or post-positivist tradition arose during that time. In the first development stage, when Strauss and Corbin (1990) published *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*, separate Glaser and Strauss schools emerged. Glaser considered himself oriented more towards the original purpose of developing GTM while Strauss and Corbin's GTM development tended more towards a systematic procedure, rather than systematic thinking, resulting in Glaser's critique that Strauss had betrayed their original purpose for GTM and that he was attempting to force theories to emerge (Glaser, 1992) through a standard

procedure. In the current discussion of GTM schools, a new stream of GTM led by Charmaz (2000, 2004) has positioned a revised approach to GTM within the constructivist paradigm. Charmaz emphasized a constructivist version of GTM which indicates that the researcher's role in GTM is not only analysis of data, but also playing a more active role as a participant and a contributor to the theories that emerge from the application of GTM. Glaser strongly argued against the constructivist approach of Charmaz, stating point-blank that 'grounded theory is not constructivist' (Glaser, 2012, p. 28; also, 1998). Corbin and Strauss are more open to constructivism and seek its validity (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p.9). Nevertheless, Charmaz's approach has won the favor of GTM researchers as it is easier to manage and less critical of the position of constructivists. Thus, three schools of GTM have formed. The purpose of this paper is to cut through the mist of methodological discussion of GTM with the purpose of discovering a new approach (Weberian) to GTM which is highly consistent in terms of ontology, epistemology and methodology design, apart from the constructivist approach by Charmaz (2000), with the purpose of developing a coherent formal grounded theory framework. In the discussion section, the three GTM approaches are carefully compared through arguments from a group of journal articles and book chapters. The construction of this comparison is in two dimensions: research paradigm and methodological design (or research procedure). A new approach, termed a Weberian approach, is drawn after the discussion. Finally, Formal Grounded Theory is discussed as a methodology and research gap of GTM.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Discussion

Glaser (1998, p.41) commented, 'Grounded theory is a general method and it is only a methodological option… to try to wed it to another methodology dilutes and complexifies its rather simple inductive approach… it works with any data, because all is data for generating theory'. Wedding it to phenomenology, ethnography, concepts of hegemony and even positivism distorts true emergence for

theory generation. However, the discussion about which paradigm GTM belongs to continues unabated.

Positioning GTM in Research Paradigm

Researchers from different philosophical paradigms seek to determine whether GTM aligns or conflicts with their particular ontologies. How individual researchers perceive GTM differs widely (see Figure 3): To Åge (2011), Glaserian grounded theory could be related to hermeneutics (constructivism) and pragmatism as well as the positivism tradition. Charmaz (2000, 2006, 2014) and Hallier and Forbes (2004) consider the old schools of GTM to be positivist, following the tradition of GTM as established by Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) and Glaser (1978, 1992, 1998, 2001, 2003). Positivism, based on the work of Auguste Comte (Hacking, 1981 cited in Wikipedia 2014), focuses on science as a product – as a linguistic or numerical set of statements, a concern with axiomatization, and an insistence on at least some of these statements being testable. Positivists believe that science is markedly cumulative and predominantly transcultural, and rests on specific results. They believe that science contains theories or research traditions that are largely commensurable and sometimes incorporates new ideas that are discontinuous from old ones. They believe that science involves the idea of the unity of science, and that science is nature and nature is science.

In opposition to positivists, interpretive social scientists hold a variety of opinions that conflict with each other. Ponterotto (2005), Omar et al. (2012), Yeadon-Lee (2013), Brown (1995), Goulding (1998), Suddaby (2006), and Lowenberg (1993) consider GTM as belonging to the larger body of interpretivism. Goulding (1998, 1999), Kunchamboo and Lee (2012), Borgström (2012), Reiter et al. (2011), McKemmish et al. (2012), Carcary (2009), Tan and Hall (2007), Creswell (2007), Charmaz (2000), Corbin and Strauss (2008), and Creswell (2007) hold that GTM should or could be aligned with constructivism. Constructivists assume multiple realities and mutual construction of data through interaction. They also assume that the researcher constructs categories and view representation of data as problematic, relativistic, situational, and partial. They assume that the observer's values, priorities, positions, and actions affect the resulting views.

Strauss and Corbin (1990), Corbin (2009), Shah and Corley (2006), Clarke (2005), and Creswell (2007) position GTM under pragmatism or postmodernism. The pragmatic school was formed by the philosopher William James (McDermid, 2006), who claimed that an ideology or proposition is true if it works satisfactorily, a proposition is to be found in the practical consequences of accepting it, and unpractical ideas are to be rejected.

Stiles (2003) places GTM into realism in general, while Kempster and Parry (2011) argue that it actually belongs to critical realism. Locke (2001) considers it to be under objective realism. Although philosophical discussions can become quite convoluted, there is evidence that more qualitative and quantitative researchers are seeking to validate the use of GTM in their research and are attempting to find a way to match GTM with their ontological and philosophical preferences.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Is GTM really paradigm free? It is possible to be paradigm free? What is the philosophy behind the design of Grounded Theory? Charmaz (2014) considered her research to be strictly constructivist. Placing the GTM design aspects of Glaser's and Strauss's approaches under a microscope provides insights into their design logic and hidden philosophies (see Figure 4). Charmaz (2014) examined the ontological foundations of Glaser and Strauss according to where they gained their qualifications, based on Corbin (2009, pp. 36-37; Charmaz, 2014, p. 261), concluding that Glaser belongs to positivism and Strauss to the Chicago heritage of symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism by George Herbert Mead (Charon, 2004) holds that humans must be understood as both a social person and a thinking being. People tend to create a view or definition of their current situation, rather than directly examining or sensing their environment. Consequently, the course of action undertaken by people arises in response to their present situation within their environment.

Microscoping the GTM Research Design

The ontological framework of Glaserian GT belongs to positivism (Popper, 1963, 1972), while Straussian GT inclines more towards pragmatism (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). In terms of methodology, Glaser commented that GT is a perspective-based methodology and people's

perspectives vary (Glaser, 2002). In contrast, Strauss and Corbin's (1990) version of GTM is implemented through a rather systematic tool with procedures aligned with positivism (Locke, 2001). Glaser (1998) considered that 'all' is data, which is quite pragmatic, while Corbin considered their data collection to be more constructivist (2008, p.9). Douglas (2003), Rodon and Pastor (2007), and Hunter et al. (2005) argue that the use of literature in Glaser's approach is more pragmatic, while Strauss and Corbin's approach is constructivist. Åge (2011, p. 1601) considers the epistemology of Glaser to be pragmatic and that of Strauss and Corbin to be constructivist. Based on the discussion above, it is obvious that Glaser and Strauss's GTM design employs a mix of different philosophical schools. Glaser, in comparison, is more consistent than Strauss and Corbin. It is possible to define Glaser's approach as a pragmatic researcher using a positivist's logic, whereas Strauss and Corbin's is very hard to pinpoint.

Insert Figure 4 about here

In terms of using computerized analysis software, Glaser (2003) stated that he likes to think that GT is a complex, not so intuitive, procedural approach to conceptualizing patterns, and that computers not only block GT but by default remodel it to coerce research to match a software style that is not GT. He has come out in opposition to computer software and QDA in GT coding, despite his mathematics and sociology background. However, he accepted Fernandez' (2004) use of the Glaserian approach with computer software for coding, which is not consistent with what he said. The Straussian approach to GT is more systematic, with clearer instructions and procedures – characteristics normally associated with a positivism/post-positivism approach in design (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1998).

Introducing a Weberian Approach into GTM Research

Discussion and comparison among GTM approaches determined that neither the Glaserian nor the Straussian approaches clearly fall under a particular paradigm perceived by a group of GTM researchers. There is an opportunity to refine the theory to achieve better methodological coherence. The problem of inconsistencies within the GT philosophy could be resolved by choosing a research

paradigm and sticking with it thorough revision of the current GTM research procedure. In that context, Max Weber is one of the key contributors to sociology and an acknowledged great researcher in social economics. Ontologically, he is anti-positivist or post-positivist, a German idealist, and in the school of Neo-Kantianism. His approach is that of a qualitative researcher whose theory development arises solely from grounded data. Weber's typologies and research areas include: rationalism, secularisation, disenchantment, capitalism, modernism, economic sociology, ascetic Protestantism, social stratification, monopoly, bureaucracy, legal authority, economic history, objectivity vs. subjectivity, social behavior, social notion, historicism, comparative historical analysis, culture and religion (including China, India and Judaism), social responsibility, protestant ethics, and Calvinism (Wikipedia, 2014). Note that the research areas of Weber have close relationships with historical culture clusters as a macro economic phenomenon. In terms of methodology and philosophy, Weber influenced the development of interpretive method, phenomenological sociology, symbolic interactionism, anti-positivist, critical theory, non-reductionist approach, critical interpretivist, phenomenology, linguistic pragmatics, cultural ethnography, ethnomethodology, and cultural anthropology (Albrow, 1990; Brunn and Whimster, 2012; Coser, 1977; Holton & Turner, 1989; Kalberg, 1994; Schroeder, 1992; Swedberg, 1998).

A Weberian approach in Grounded Theory research is a brand new direction. Through the mist of ontological discussion in Grounded Theory (Borgström, 2012; Brown, 1995; Carcary, 2009; Charmaz, 2000, 2006, 2014; Clarke, 2005; Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2007; Douglas, 2003; Glaser, 1978, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2009; Goulding, 1998, 1999; Hallier and Forbes, 2004; Hunter et al., 2005; Janine, 2003; Kempster and Parry, 2011; Kunchamboo and Lee, 2012; Lars-Johan, 2011; Locke, 2001; McKemmish, 2012; Omar et al., 2012; Ponterotto, 2005; Reiter et al., 2011; Rodon & Pastor, 2007; Shah & Corley, 2006; Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1998; Suddaby, 2006; Tan and Hall, 2007; Yeadon-Lee, 2013), the conflicting ontological stances of Glaser (1967) and Strauss (1990, 2008) and even within Glaserian and Straussian schools have caused ontological fights amongst Grounded Theory researchers. Criticism arose from subjectivists and objectivists (Gustavsson, 1998). Max Weber, as a key founder of sociology, provided the theoretical foundation for interpretivists. He

has been widely studied and his ontological, epistemological, and methodological preferences lead to a Weberian approach in the social paradigm (Albrow, 1990, Coser, 1977; Schroeder, 1992; Wu, 1993). He discussed sociology from both a historical (Kalberg1994) and economic (Holton & Turner, 1989; Swedberg, 1998) perspective. Max Weber still matters today, as aregued by Chalcraft et al. (2008). The relevance of Weber to qualitative research as well as to historical cultural clusters (a social phenomenon) are leading to the development of a new approach to Grounded Theory research. The advantages of a Weberian approach include: 1. From an ontology perspective, there is a huge body of literature about Max Weber and the Weberian approach; people consider Weber to be consistent in research methodology (Wu, 1993), which is more advanced when compared to Glaser and Strauss; 2. Weber studied economics, culture, and history, which have a close relationship to the field of the present research; his publications provide more practical guidance in field data collection and data analysis, and may help in developing a framework of Formal Grounded Theory from a longitudinal researcher's perspective.

Developing Formal Grounded Theory

In their first publication, Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 79) mentioned that 'substantive theory (SGT) is a strategic link in the formulation and generation of grounded formal theory… It is most desirable, and usually necessary, to start the formal theory from a substantive one'. Current research projects in GTM are mostly substantive theories rather than formal grounded theory (FGT) or grounded formal theory (GFT). The FGTs that Glaser confirmed include: Awareness of Dying (Glaser and Strauss, 1965) and Outsiders (Becker, 1963). They argued that SGTs and FGTs are developed by different researchers most of the time. They also mentioned that the specific procedures of FGT are waiting for the contribution of sociologists and that most sociologists 'unquestionably tend to avoid the formulation of *grounded* formal theory' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 92). The need for an FGT construct and the fact that not enough researchers are passionate about developing it are conflicting and restrict GTM from advancing in theory generation. It is a hard work to conduct comparative investigation of different substantive areas, modified by other theories through the comparative

method (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). The involvement of Weber is taking a new lens and bringing new theories into comparison. There are many expectations and hypotheses about FGT in the GTM research community: The goal of FGT is to seek highly abstract categories that can fully represent the concepts within the conceptual systems (Wallis, 2014). It is entirely possible that identifying all the abstractions might result in a conceptual system that is much larger and more complex than the subject conceptual system upon which it is based (Wallis, 2014). Apprey (2005) suggests that FGT can be used to combine multiple theories and so gain more meaning and insight in an area of study. It is unclear if that extra step supports the creation of improved conceptual systems. It is entirely possible that identifying all the abstractions might result in a conceptual system that is much larger and more complex than the subject conceptual system upon which it is based (Glaser, 2007). All these hypotheses need confirmation through an FGT construct and also provide useful information for FGT construct development.

The difficulty in developing an FGT construct is explicit. Some complex concepts need to be fragmented into multiple simpler concepts before being combined into categories. It is unclear whether that extra step supports the creation of improved conceptual systems (Wallis, 2014). It is too easy to find oneself with a conceptual system that is a collection of ideas, rather than a set of interrelated propositions. Thus, one may end up with a construct that is hardly a theory (or a system) at all. The technical problems include: How to compare in parallel a number of substantive theories from GT studies? Are comparisons at the level of SGT or category? How well does this approach compare to substantive theories from other research methodologies? How can a construct for general application be developed? Additional aspects include the potential for limited valid projects using FGT, and limited examples of FGT theoretical frameworks.

Conclusion

Through a group of GTM researchers and literature, this paper discussed how current Grounded Theory Methodology is inconsistent in terms of ontology, epistemology and even methodology design. Through comparison of the three most popular GTM approaches, a Weberian approach is introduced

as a new approach, with the purpose of examining the current GTM design to reach a higher degree of coherence and consistency in methodological design. Thus, there is a possibility of developing a formal grounded theory framework in social phenomena research, such as business research.

The proposed research on FGT will be based on a previous project that resulted in 9 substantive theories. The grounded construct will be based on comparative studies of three substantive areas within the same social context – a historical culture cluster (producing china/porcelain, in Jingdezhen, China). The spirit of constant comparison will influence the entire coding procedure, both internal and external. The substantive areas include: Jingdezhen porcelain cluster 2008 dataset (Zhuang, 2011), Jingdezhen porcelain historiography (first-hand documentation from the Han Dynasty up to the Qing Dynasty) (Zhuang, 2008), Jingdezhen porcelain 2014 cluster dataset, Kyoto ceramic cluster 2014 dataset, and Dunedin heritage tourism cluster 2014 dataset. Comparison will be conducted within the Jingdezhen dataset with a historical comparative method; in a convergent culture comparison between Jingdezhen and Kyoto; and in a divergent culture comparison between Jingdezhen and Dunedin, and between Dunedin and Kyoto. The three comparison dimensions will be time (history), space (district and culture), and core category variances. The target model construct could probably be demonstrated in a three-dimensional (3D) model. International comparison across countries has several challenges to overcome: first, linguistic differences between modern Chinese and ancient Chinese, and among Japanese, Chinese, and English; second, culture sensibility and indigenous researchers; third, validity and reliability design and explanation, as Grounded Theory itself has many triangulation designs.

The potential contributions include: to generate a Formal Grounded Theory in the area of historical cultural clusters; to provide an example of a Formal Grounded Theory framework; and developing a new ontological approach with a Weberian perspective in Grounded Theory Methodology application.

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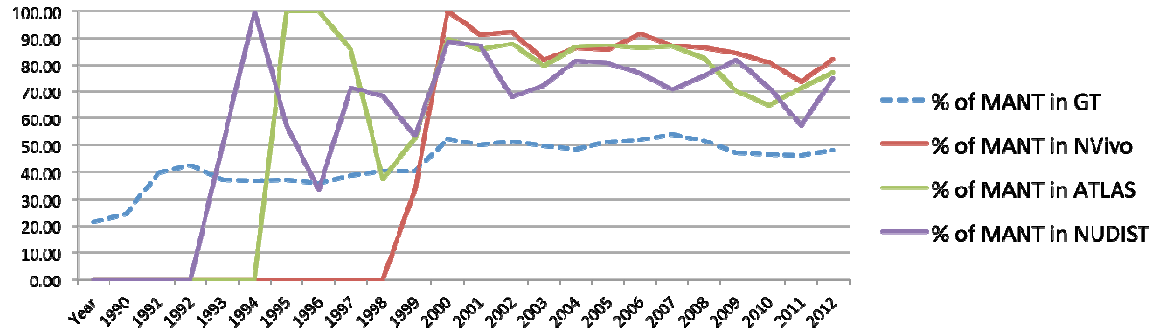
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Figure 1: Grounded Theory Statistics



Source: Chart developed using Microsoft Excel with data based on general research from proquest.com, retrieved October 2, 2013

Figure 2: Philosophical Discussion Waves in Grounded Theory Research

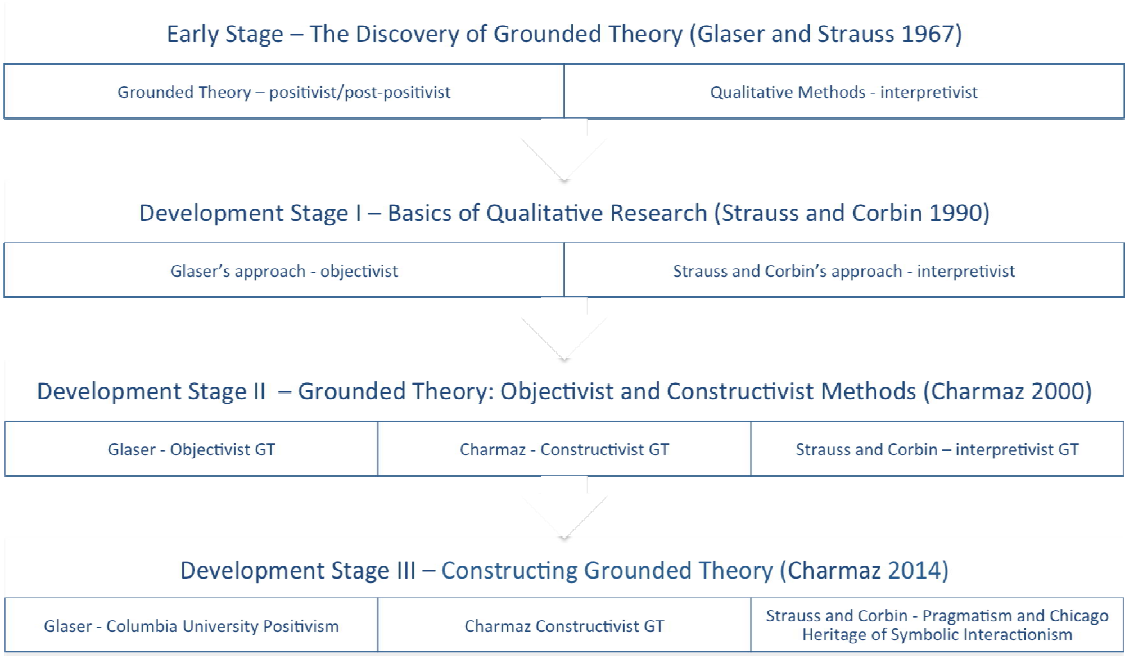


Figure 3: Philosophical Discussion Waves in Grounded Theory Research

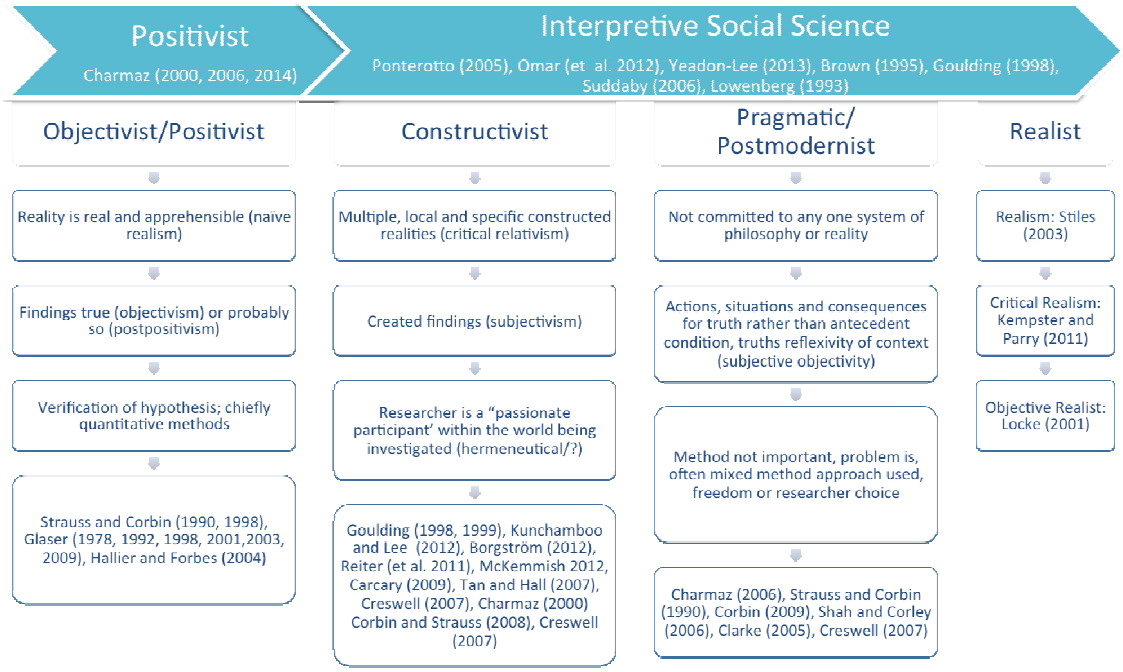


Figure 4: Micro-scoping Grounded Theory

