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Tensions in Qualitative Research

The year 2007 marks a fitting point in time to reflect on current tensions in qualitative research. This year we celebrate the 40th anniversary of two major publications that have shaped how sociologists conduct qualitative research: Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss’s *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) and Harold Garfinkel’s, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Both books played a significant role in inspiring graduate students to conduct qualitative research and redirected the discourse about qualitative inquiry. Each book brought new vitality to methodological discussions, offered insights for how to look at empirical worlds, and suggested strategies for analyzing qualitative data. These texts challenged conventional methodological views and created new directions.

In speaking about methodological tensions, I mean ambiguous or contested perspectives and practices that result in conflict about standards for qualitative research. Forty years ago, methodological tensions in qualitative inquiry, perhaps particularly in the United States, reflected struggles to legitimize qualitative research and answer sharp criticisms of it as lacking objectivity, validity, reliability, and replicability (Bryant and Charmaz 2007). Both Glaser and Strauss’s and Garfinkel’s books sparked new debates that began to change tensions about legitimacy and to counter these criticisms. Through outlining a separate logic for qualitative research, Glaser and Strauss rejected such criticisms and Garfinkel attended to working out a new methodological framework. In effect, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* and *Studies in Ethnomethodology* redefined methodological discourse. In addition, grounded theory and ethnomethodology complemented and advanced North American and European theoretical currents and empirical inclinations of the day, including the second Chicago school (Becker 1964, 1965; Blumer 1969; Fine 1995; Glaser and Strauss 1965; Goffman 1959, 1961, 1963; Hughes 1958; Strauss 1959, 1961), phenomenological themes (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Schutz 1964) and in renewed interest in Simmel (Sellberg 1994; Simmel 1964; Wolff 1964).

Qualitative research has gained both respect and momentum throughout the social sciences and the professions over the past forty years. Yet the gains are not without

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1 I thank Katarina Sjöberg for inviting me to share my reflections and the following members of the Sonoma State University Faculty Writing Program for reviewing an earlier statement of them: Teresa Ciabatarrri, Robert Thomas Rosin, and Liz Thach.
tensions, that is tensions about what stands as legitimate qualitative research have changed although sometimes earlier tensions reoccur in altered form. I recognize that methodological tensions arise with new theoretical perspectives and alternative research frameworks. In the following discussion, however, I address four areas in which current major tensions arise that cut across varied types of qualitative inquiry:

1) data gathering strategies
2) the place of extant theory
3) the analytic level of the study, and
4) the writing process.

As both a former journal editor and specialist in grounded theory, tensions in the four areas have concerned me. These tensions cause knotty problems for both students and seasoned researchers and affect the quality – and completion – of their studies. Grounded theory strategies have been linked both to problems arising from certain tensions and to solutions for others. Nonetheless, the four tensions supersede grounded theory and permeate qualitative inquiry more generally.

How individual researchers resolve these tensions affects the originality, credibility, and usefulness of their work. When taken collectively, researchers’ individual actions are consequential, as are the practices of those who work under a shared methodological umbrella. These actions and practices shape the direction of qualitative methodologies and frame the content of qualitative inquiry. For clarity, I treat the four tensions as sets of oppositions. In practice, their boundaries overlap and particular modes.

Data Gathering Strategies: “Intimate Familiarity” vs. Early Closure

As qualitative research has gained popularity, earlier standards for the extent and depth of data have changed—and are contested. Data gathering strategies figure prominently here and affect the understanding researchers gain. Achieving “intimate familiarity” (Blumer 1969; Lofland and Lofland 1995) with the research problem and/or setting means that we understand the contexts of research participants’ lives as well as gain in-depth knowledge of their worlds, actions, and meanings, as best we can. The quest for intimate familiarity means gaining inside knowledge of the studied phenomenon, whether through one-time intensive interviews or sustained longitudinal study. Intimate familiarity typically requires sustained interaction and rapport with research participants such that they trust the researcher sufficiently to recount their experiences and, in ethnographic research, to share their daily life. Intimate familiarity in historical or textual research, however, means making a sustained study of as full an array of relevant documents as the researcher can find. It also means looking at these documents to the extent possible from the worldviews of people who constructed them and of those affected by them.

To achieve intimate familiarity, a researcher may use several approaches such as ethnographic observation, interviews, and analysis of relevant documents. Using mul-
tiple methods and gathering substantial amounts of data, however, does not assure in-
timate familiarity. Thin and unfocused data often result when researchers do not ask
analytic questions to guide their data collection.

Before publication of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, novice researchers some-
times found themselves overwhelmed by piles of directionless data and subsequently
never finished their projects. Glaser and Strauss’s prescription to conduct data collec-
tion and analysis simultaneously with each informing the other did much to correct
the problem of directionless data. However, they (see especially, Glaser 1978, 1998,
2003) also provided justifications for very small data samples. Since publication of
*Discovery*, early closure of data collection has become common and contributed to
thin or mundane, but perhaps focused, analyses. Early closure of data collection re-
duces the amount of data and typically the number of data collection methods.

Increasingly, studies rely on limited use of a single method such as interviewing,
conducting focus groups, or analyzing internet discussion posts. We need to weigh
the relative strengths and weaknesses of our data collection plans in relation to our re-
search problem. Favoring a particular data-gathering method can lead to the method
driving the research process, rather than the research problem.

Similarly, a narrow research question can compromise gaining intimate familiarity
with a research problem or setting. When we start with a narrow research question,
we risk losing contextual richness because relevant contexts may lie beyond the frame
of inquiry. We also risk asking a preconceived research question that does not fit the
empirical world. Choosing a manageable research problem differs from pursuing a
narrow, preconceived research question.

Early closure of data collection fosters analytic foreclosure. Researchers may not get
beyond what I call the public relations view offered by participants or a common sense
view shared between researchers and their participants. In either case, researchers do
not dig beneath the surface to explicate either participants’ or their own implicit mean-
ings and actions. Invoking analytic strategies can expedite inquiry but we still need to
pursue gaining intimate familiarity.

When mentors permit students to skimp on the quantity and quality of their
data, students are unlikely to grapple with implicit meanings and actions. As a result,
these students may lack the skills to establish themselves as competent, confident re-
searchers. In contrast, mentors can encourage students to gain solid data and perhaps
to use several data collection methods. Subsequently, mentors can help students de-
fine which data to take as “facts,” and which to treat as problematic.

The Place of Extant Theory: Seeking Inductive “Discoveries” vs.
Applying Existing Ideas

Qualitative studies commonly begin with the goal of developing inductive analyses
of social problems, issues, or settings. This goal may seem straightforward. Yet the
place of extant theory in qualitative research is unclear and contested. Tensions arise
between inductive discoveries of theory and deductive applications of it. What does
an inductive approach involve? To what extent should theoretical notions inform re-
search or be constructed from research?

It may help to view inductive theorizing at one end of a continuum with deduc-
tive theoretical applications at the end. In practice, qualitative researchers both con-
struct theoretical categories and apply extant concepts. Nonetheless, where their work
falls on the continuum and when they use one or the other approach differs. Earlier
readings of Glaser and Strauss’s *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) emphasized
their warnings that researchers should remain uncontaminated by earlier theory and
research about their topics (see, for example, Layder, 1998). Glaser and Strauss held a
somewhat ambiguous position on the role of earlier theory because they emphasized
the stifling effects of extant ideas on developing new theory. Yet they also assumed
that qualitative researchers were trained sociologists with theoretical and substantive
knowledge (see Bryant & Charmaz 2007; Glaser & Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978). De-
spite their ambiguous position, the notion stuck that grounded theory specifically and
qualitative research more generally entailed inductive inquiry aimed toward concep-
tual – if not theoretical – development.

A long history of qualitative research has supported pursuing emergent leads that
the researcher finds in the setting. Increasingly, qualitative researchers acknowledge
that they have perspectives, experiences, and often, substantial knowledge about and
interest in the topic that they choose for their research (Charmaz 2006; Clarke 2005,
2006; Dey 1999; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland, 2005). In my view, our re-
search needs to be theoretically informed, but not theoretically pre-formed. Hence,
we begin inquiry with sensitizing concepts that alert us to look at what occurs. Sen-
sitizing concepts offer an initial analytic handle rather than a permanent explanatory
tool. Researchers should consider a range of theoretical ideas to look at their material
and choose the theoretical direction that offers the best fit.

Another tension arises at this point. Whatever “fits” comprises a place to advance
analytic development rather than to end it. Unfortunately, new researchers often end
their theoretical quest at this point. They adopt extant concepts and paste them on
their research narratives. In the past, researchers applied concepts mainly from micro-
sociology such as identity, stigma, emotion work, and career to their studies. Now re-
searchers increasingly apply concepts from macro sociology and cultural studies such
as cultural capital, civil society, commodification, and globalization.

Current discussions of public sociology (Burawoy 2005) and the extended case
method (Burawoy 2000) have fuelled growing tensions about the place of theoreti-
cal starting and ending points. These discussions bring Marxist ideas into qualitative
research but uses them as starting and ending points. Marxist ideas can well serve as
sensitizing concepts and can take qualitative studies into significant new areas. Con-

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2 The view proscribing researchers’ engagement in the literature has waned over the years. Glaser (2003), however, still advocates lack of exposure to extant theory and research litera-
tures.
cepts such as social class, power, conflict, and ideology can usefully sensitize qualitative researchers to see actions and hear viewpoints in the empirical world – and to put their interpretations of them to test. Yet current efforts to bring the critical edge of Marxism into qualitative research take another form. Too often these efforts stop short of engaging in the iterative process of going back and forth between data and conceptualization to create fresh ideas about the data. Rather they offer preconceived interpretations of the data.

To what extent should researchers impose an overriding theoretical frame on their data? To what extent does claiming the mantle of science legitimize making theoretical leaps beyond the studied reality? In my view, such moves undermine the very social justice objectives that public sociologists purport to claim. Glaser (1978) argues against forcing extant concepts on the data and invokes an unabashed capitalist metaphor to make the point: extant concepts must earn their way into research narratives. In his view, such concepts must fit the empirical reality and further theoretical understanding of it. Perhaps unintentionally, Glaser’s view also points a way to resolving the tensions between inductive discoveries and deductive applications of theory.

The Analytic Level of the Study: Description vs. Generating Theory

To what analytic level should qualitative researchers aspire? Tensions have long been evident in qualitative research between writing descriptions of the empirical world and constructing theories of it. An emphasis on description favors naturalistic inquiry and narrative over generating theory, portrayals of specific situations and events over generalizations, and understanding of studied life over categorizations of it. In contrast, an emphasis on generating theory favors extracting abstract categories from the data, using data to support the theory, and cutting across empirical instances to establish abstract patterns. The researcher’s analytic insights remain embedded in the narrative and enrich the story in descriptive works whereas abstract categories and relationships between them take precedence in theoretical works. Here the researcher uses description in service of the theory.

Glaser and Strauss prescribed conducting simultaneous data collection and analysis to move qualitative research from description into theory construction. The principle of simultaneous data collection and analysis, however, may exist more as an abstract goal than as a concrete practice. Students may take refuge in gathering data and seasoned researchers’ competing time demands may result in delaying careful analysis. In each case, unguided data gathering results, with its attendant problems of unfocused data, ignored leads, and missed possibilities.

Grounded theory strategies prompt researchers to study their data, but to do so in a particular way that links concrete statements and events to theoretical ideas. Considering Glaser’s three deceptively simple analytic questions can do much to integrate data collection and analysis and thus permit each to inform the other.
What is happening? (Glaser 1978)
“What is this data a study of?” (Glaser 1978, p. 57; Glaser and Strauss 1967)
What theoretical category does this datum indicate? (Glaser 1978)

Glaser’s first question seems concrete. It takes into account the specific statement or incident but it implies more. The question also suggests that the data might tell a theoretical tale or indicate a possible fundamental process. David Karp (2003) discovered a resounding theme that shaped the relationships that caregivers had with their mentally ill family member. He states, “All caregivers must somehow negotiate the dialectic of closeness and distance with an ill person. They puzzle about how to best ‘draw the line’ between themselves and a sick person” (p. 26). Karp’s book then examines how caregivers negotiate drawing the line on their responsibilities to and for this individual.

In his second and third questions, Glaser advances the researcher’s analytic thinking through considering possible analytic areas that the specific piece of data might inform. Karp’s book is about the obligations of caregiving but also tells a tale of suffering, of lives curtailed by recurring crises and constant responsibilities. It is a story of family ties. By asking what a fragment of data suggests, Glaser asks the researcher to think theoretically. Researchers often discover that pursuing theoretical questions in the data leads them in unanticipated theoretical directions. A study of drug use turns out to be a theory of identity transformation (Biernacki 1986). A study of political extremists illuminates crafting culture (Mitchell 2002) and a study that began with the experience of illness generated a theory of moral status in suffering.

To make Glaser’s classic grounded theory questions more explicit I added the first question below. To make the emerging grounded theory more complex, I added the second.

What does the data suggest? Pronounce? (Charmaz 2006, p.47)
From whose point of view? (Charmaz 2006, p.47)

By grappling with both tacit and overt interpretations of their data, researchers can get beneath the surface and construct a frame for building nuanced analyses. By alerting researchers to define points of view, they can discover areas of convergence and divergence that can help them see hidden hierarchies of power, status, and meaning. Giving these five questions considered thought while engaging in initial coding enables researchers to move from description into analysis. Subsequently researchers can maintain their analytic momentum through writing memos that, in turn, become the content of the first draft of the report.
Writing Qualitative Research: Discovery vs. Reporting

Tensions between writing for discovery and writing as reporting arise when social scientists view writing as only reporting. Writing for discovery engages the writer with the material as a way of learning without constraints. Writing for reporting is public, accountable, and constrained by academic conventions, accepted forms, and imagined audiences. Treating writing as reporting assumes that authors provide clear arguments, strong evidence, and a logical organization because they have completed their analysis and have something to say. In short, this view of writing presupposes that researchers know what they are going to say before they say it. It also presupposes that writers know how they are going to say it and to whom they will say it.

A view of writing as reporting fosters treating “real” writing as only the last step in the research. Instead, we can view writing as a holistic process that occurs throughout qualitative inquiry. Writing takes distinct forms with divergent purposes during different phases. Certainly, reporting is one form of writing – and the last – but it follows and builds on a foundation constructed earlier. Presumably, qualitative researchers write field notes and memos throughout their research. But do they? Do their field notes move from behavioristic accounts to sociological descriptions? Do their memos grapple with analytic questions? Qualitative methodologies foster building progressive levels of analytic writing throughout the research process. Yet researchers who view their writing as reporting may omit building that progression. If so, the distance between thin data and final reports can become insurmountable.

Qualitative researchers can benefit from adopting professional writers’ strategies for conducting and writing their research. Writers treat writing as a two-step process: writing for discovery and writing for reporting. Writing for discovery engages writers in actions through which they learn what they are going say. Writing for discovery is active, emergent, and open-ended. Its very indeterminacy is its strength. Engaging in the process shapes the written product. The process of writing for discovery is subjective, private, and free. It means releasing internalized censors and editors, and just concentrating on expressing thoughts, deeds, and feelings about the topic.

By engaging in the process, writers know that they will ultimately have something to say. They trust in the process. They learn to tolerate the predictable ambiguity and uncertainty when they cannot yet articulate what it is that they need to say. For them, reporting comes later – much later. After putting together a sketchy or an awful first draft, they can begin to build on it and move toward reporting (see Lamott 1995). During the final stage of writing – not the first attempt – writers release their internalized editors. Writers know that focusing on reporting early in the writing process can result in writing blocks and inhibit learning. Writing for discovery allows researchers to explore their budding ideas without judgment or scrutiny. Graduate students, particularly, need to learn that they can stumble through early drafts and improve them, rather than be paralyzed by them.
A Final Word

My portrayal of the tensions speaks to common problems in qualitative research and writing that students face – often in silence. The problems are solvable. In articulating these tensions, I also suggest how to resolve them, one step at a time. The quality of a researcher’s data forms the foundation; the analytic questions asked of the data create the theoretical scaffolding for the analysis; and the researcher’s successive engagement in writing fosters discoveries and leads the way to effective reporting.

References


