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Lynch, J. and Egan, J.

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Introduction

Qualitative research thinking has had a profound effect upon marketing and the marketing research industry (Malhotra and Birks 2007) and one methodology in particular – grounded theory (GT) – is being treated with increased attention by marketing academics (Goulding, 2001, 2005). This paper seeks to review GT and debate/suggest its application to the field of consumer behaviour. The paper starts with a brief overview of GT, the surrounding methodological issues and finishes with suggestions for its applicability to consumer behaviour.

GT The approach

GT provides a systematic approach for data collection and analysis by following clear procedures and rules adhered to throughout the research process (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). It is, however, inherently subjective as the researcher is interpreting rather than measuring experiences (Dougherty 2004). Grounded theorists collect data and carry out analysis at the same time using constant comparative analysis which is iterative (Lansisalmi et al., 2004; Charmaz and Bryant, 2011). The next stage is the identification of links through concepts to explain the behaviour under investigation (Goulding 2005) and finally the construction of a core category offering theoretical significance which is traceable back through the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In doing so the approach tends to analyse actions and processes rather than themes and topics (Charmaz and Bryant, 2011). The data are carried out via theoretical sampling (new data collected to satisfy or confirm the properties of the theoretical category) until theoretical saturation of the properties of a category is achieved ((Lansisalmi et al., 2004; Charmaz and Bryant, 2011).

Conflicts in Approach

There are a number of variants of GT developed since Glaser and Strauss (1967) first origination. Glaser emphasizes immersion in the data for theory to ‘emerge’ and remain open and flexible to interpretation, whereas Strauss and Corbin have developed a complex system of coding designed to allow researchers to follow the method appropriately (Goulding, 2001). Glaser (1992) vehemently argued that this approach violated the “true path“ of grounded theory as the coding paradigms would “force “ categories instead of allowing the categories to “emerge”.

Another crucial difference which developed concerns the use of literature. It is well documented that the literature review should not take place prior to data collection and analysis (Stern 1994, Strauss and Corbin 1994). By reversing data collection and literature review, contamination of the analysis with preconceived theories is avoided leading to fresh insight (Locke, 1996). More recently, it has been advocated that researchers may have prior knowledge and bring expertise from the area under investigation (Pettigrew, 2000) and so it is appropriate to acknowledge prior knowledge using an iterative process of literature review, data collection and analysis (Goulding,1998).

A more contemporary approach is constructivist GT which views research as taking place within specific social conditions whereas traditional grounded theorists treat enquiry as separate from the social conditions (Charmaz and Bryant, 2011). Strauss and Corbin (1990) allow for variations in the interpretation taking account of researcher characteristics, whilst Glaser strives for interpretation independent of the researcher (Pettigrew, 2000), which stems from its positivist ontology (Kennedy and Lingard, 2006). As a consequence, constructivist grounded theorists

locate themselves as close to the phenomenon of investigation as possible i.e. inside enquiry, to understand how participants meaning and action may be linked to bigger social structures – something earlier grounded theorists rarely did (Charmaz and Bryant, 2011). In short, traditionalists looked for patterns to create abstract generalizations whereas constructivists aim to understand differences and variation to give richer insight. Whichever approach is adopted in GT it needs to be clear from the outset as differences in terminology, and language may lead to misinterpretation, misunderstanding and criticism (Goulding, 2005).

Methodological considerations

GT represents a hub around which to discuss contemporary issues in qualitative research (Henwood, 2003 cited in Charmaz and Bryant, 2011). Some of the issues surrounding GT are methodological claims, contested definitions of the method and unexamined epistemological assumptions which have led to misunderstandings of the methodology and in turn affected its credibility (Charmaz and Bryant, 2011). In comparison with other qualitative methodologies such as ethnography, semiotics and phenomenology it may be suffering due to the language of the method and its misaligned association with positivist practices (Goulding, 2000). The approach of GT has been debated on a number of issues. What follows is a review of five major issues – epistemology, use of literature, method mixing, theory development, and credibility and presentation of findings.

Epistemology

GT is more appropriate as a methodology for some research questions than others especially in trying to understand the process by which actors create meaning from inter-subjective experience (Suddaby, 2006). Indeed, there should be congruence between the research question, the researcher's assumptions about reality and how it is known and the methodology (Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006 p11; Suddaby, 2006). However, there are examples of “methodological slurring”, where researchers use interpretive methods to analyse “realist” assumptions (Goulding, 2002). This incoherence in understanding the method has persisted as a result of the rift between Glaser and Strauss in the 1990's and has detracted from the outcome of potentially valuable research (Charmaz and Bryant, 2011). Interestingly, the conflict is seen by some as positive because it reflects the diversity of applications of GT (Goulding, 1998; Pettigrew, 2000), and a healthy debate about methodology development (Suddaby, 2006). This flexibility of GT application offers an advantage to researchers to explain a wide range of behaviours and their determinants (Pettigrew, 2000).

Literature reviews in GT

The question of a literature review and when it takes place has been a bone of contention. Glaser and Strauss (1967) advocated that researchers ignore the literature and existing models and theories in formulating research questions. Hutchinson (1993) argues that a literature review prior to data collection is necessary as it identifies the gap in knowledge, whereas Stern's (1994) view is that the gap is already known about making the literature review inappropriate for GT utilization (Cutcliffe, 2000).

However, even Glaser and Strauss (1967) acknowledge that some reading is necessary to provide an initial understanding of the area but that this should not be extensive (Cutcliffe, 2000). The problem lies in the meaning of extensive! The tension is in developing GT and the need for clarity and focus (Miles, 1979). Later, Strauss and Corbin (1990) took a more liberal position regarding the literature review suggesting that selective sampling of literature should be

incorporated into the emerging theory (Cutliffe, 2000). Glaser (1978) asserts that the literature review should only take place once the theory has emerged from the data. As a result, the stage at which literature is integrated into the study depends on which version of GT is being followed (Cutliffe, 2000). Sadly, this has been misinterpreted as simply avoiding the completion of a literature review and crafting good research questions (Suddaby, 2006).

Method Mixing

The confusion over whether researchers are actually conducting GT research is evident and leads to lightweight conceptual development or theoretical insight (Charmaz and Bryant, 2011). Misinterpretation of the canons of GT can impact on process and the findings and is attributable to mixing methods which have different philosophical foundations (Baker et al., 1992). This “method slurring” can contribute to lack of rigour (Baker et al., 1992). However, according to Dick (2002), the methods too can be emergent. The overlap between GT, ethnography and phenomenology has been commented on (Goulding 2000; Pettigrew 2000) and indeed combining different methodologies to produce a more meaningful understanding of the phenomenon is advantageous (Stern, 1994). However, the critical issue is precision and that the researcher is clear that the resulting methodology is a combination and not simply GT (Cutliffe, 2000).

Theoretical development

A misassumption of GT is that researchers enter the field without any knowledge of prior research and in effect come with an empty head and no clear research question. Suddaby (2006) argues is a misreading of Glaser and Strauss intentions because they distinguished between substantive theory and GT as exemplified in the following quotation:

“Substantive theory is a strategic link in the formulation and generation of grounded formal theory. We believe that although formal theory can be generated directly from the data, it is more desirable and usually necessary to start the formal theory from a substantive one” (Glaser and Strauss 1967 p.79 cited in Suddaby, 2006).

GT methodologists suggest a number of strategies to overcome this issue. Firstly, draw from several substantive areas which are reflected in a given daily reality such as Barley’s (1986) study. Secondly, be aware of the influences of your subject area and finally not to be over ambitious with what GT can achieve (Suddaby, 2006).

Failing to abstract data to conceptual level is problematic in GT application and may indicate findings which are obvious (Suddaby, 2006). This may be simply because the researcher has not analysed the data completely or left the field too early (Suddaby, 2006, Goulding, 2005) and failed to provide understanding and explanation to behaviour (Goulding, 2001) or the researcher has failed to follow the canons of GT in collecting the data until no new evidence appears – category saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Formulaic application of the methodology tends to produce passable results but lacks creativity, whereas, GT which has been successfully executed has a clear creative element (Suddaby, 2006). In fact the tension between mechanical application and interpretive insight was referred to by Glaser (1978) as “theoretical sensitivity” and ultimately caused the rift between the two scholars. Glaser allowed openness and unanticipated interpretations whereas Corbin and Strauss advocated a more formal adherence to the approach. However, despite this seeming adherence to the

procedures, Corbin and Strauss (1990) still emphasise creativity through the use of imagination in what the data are reflecting.

Data collection and analysis carried out simultaneously is not easy and may take a long time. Even for experienced GT researchers the theory may not automatically emerge (Goulding, 2001). Researchers may get lost in the data because they lack theoretical sensitivity (Goulding, 2001). At this point they panic and give up and ‘force’ interpretations from the data. However, after intense reflection insights will start to occur (Langely, 1999; Goulding, 2001). GT is sometimes seen as “easy” (Suddaby, 2006). On the contrary, like other forms of method it requires that the researcher acknowledges their epistemological and ontological position and engages in reflexivity to avoid personal biases and assumptions when collecting and analysing the data (Suddaby, 2006).

Credibility and presentation of findings

Presentation of findings in journal publications for GT may lead to credibility issues. Researchers tend to follow the traditional pattern of presentation adopted in the positivist paradigm which is theory, data collection, data analysis and results which does not reflect the iterative process of GT nor does it happen sequentially. The consequence is that it creates a misleading situation of “methodological slurring” where GT is mixed with a positivist approach (Suddaby, 2006). It also lends itself to mixing GT with hypothesis testing which violates the canons of GT and tends towards “forcing” data (Glaser, 1992). The question should be asked whether this encourages journal editors to reject GT research and/or whether this attitude deters research using this approach. However, this uncertainty may be overcome if the researcher states their approach in detail and acknowledges the “messy, non linear reality of grounded theory research” and adopts a pragmatic strategy for presenting the findings clearly (Suddaby, 2006).

Grounded theory and Consumer behaviour

GT was initially associated with sociology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). It is Glaser’s (1992) view that GT can be used by researchers from different disciplines because it is a general methodology and therefore has application across disciplines. Since that time, GT has seen an increase in many areas and many disciplines such as nursing and health (e.g. Cutcliffe, 2000), and organisational studies (e.g. Parry, 1998; Eisenhardt 1989)). In particular, organisational research has seen a gain in the use of GT for example in organisational culture (Lansisalmi et al., 2000) and organisational change (Carrero et al., 2000). It is used in organisational research because it produces descriptions or organisational reality which makes sense to members of the organization and aid development trends (Cassell and Symon, 2004).

More recently GT has seen an emergence in marketing and in particular consumer behaviour research (Goulding 1999, 2000, 2001, 2005, Pettigrew, 2000). The notion that consumption is an integral part of human life has led to the investigation of different research topics with very different research methods (Holbrook, 1995). There is also concern that the managerial orientation to consumer research does not offer adequate understanding of consumers and their behaviours (Hill, 1992). Positivism and logical deduction theory building has dominated consumer behaviour research until quite recently as indicated in the methodology sections of consumer behaviour journals (Pettigrew, 2000). Inductive theory building in this area is relatively scarce despite recommendations suggested over 30 years ago (Calder, 1977). As a result researchers are calling for studies which concentrate on “the messy contextual details of consumer life” (Holt, 1997 p. 344). Couple this with a move towards theory generation rather

than theory validation and alternative research methods such as GT theory come into focus (Pettigrew, 2000). Despite GT not being new its application to consumer behaviour is more recent (e.g. Thompson, 1996 Goulding, 1999, 2000).

Pettigrew (2000) suggests three advantages of using GT method for consumer research. Firstly, the method was designed for use in sociology and therefore is highly applicable to the influence on consumer behavior. Secondly, it is appropriate for in situ analysis of behaviours which is highly relevant for consumer research and finally its purpose is to generate theory – in this case consumer behavior theory where other research has stopped with description. GT method provides the opportunity to generate substantive theories of behaviour which can only serve to add to the body of knowledge by adding to or validating existing consumer behaviour theories (Pettigrew, 2000).

Its application in consumer behavior studies include three which use the major objectives of the GT method - Mick and Fournier, (1998) the consumption of technological products, Kimle and Damhorst (1997) analysis of women's clothing in the workplace and Hirschman and Thompson (1997) the symbolic meaning found in advertisements (Pettigrew, 2000). More recent studies have seen a growth in the use of GT in the areas of brand experience and brand choice (Villani et al 2010), visitor experiences at heritage sites (Daengbuppha et al 2006) and in the area of tourism marketing (e.g. Decrop and Snelders 2005, Martin 2007).

Within the marketing discipline, despite its applicability research based on behavioural elements it is still in its infancy and restrained to experiential consumer behaviour (Goulding, 2005). A number of deterrents exist which are that studies stop at the substantive level rather than the general level because general theory development in different contexts takes time and resources often which the researcher does not have (Goulding, 2005). Additionally, timescales for GT research projects are difficult to predict due to the need for data saturation which makes applying for research grants problematic (Goulding, 2005). Perhaps one of the major criticisms of using GT in consumer behaviour is that it is often misrepresented. There is a degree of overlap between qualitative methods in terms of the sources of data used – interviews and observation for example (Goulding, 1999). The problem arises when research claims to have used GT but explanations of behaviour and constructs actually use an ethnographic framework (Stern, 1994). Unintentional muddling between methodologies occurs for example phenomenology and GT (Goulding, 1999) and ethnography (Pettigrew, 2000). However, this is not restricted to GT per se.

Conclusion

GT is a qualitative methodology which was developed for the study of behaviour and therefore offers considerable potential in the field of consumer research and is particularly useful in understanding the nature of consumption experiences (Goulding, 1998). As a result GT has had an increased attention by marketing academic researchers particularly the field of consumer behaviour due to the importance placed on theory development (Goulding, 2001). It offers a systematic method for collection and analysis of data which may suit some researchers and if applied well could produce new insights. However, as we have seen above it does carry with it a number of pitfalls. Perhaps this is the reason why, despite calls for more GT research the number of studies in marketing and management have been remarkably low (Geiger and Turley 2003).

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