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Chapter V

An Encounter with Grounded Theory: Tackling the Practical and Philosophical Issues

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the practical and philosophical issues of applying the grounded theory approach to qualitative research in Information Systems. Over the past decade, we have seen a substantial increase in qualitative research in general (Klein, Nissen and Hirschheim, 1991; Walsham, 1995; Markus, 1997; Myers, 1997; Myers and Walsham, 1998; Klein and Myers, 1999; Walsham and Sahay, 1999; Trauth and Jessup, 2000; Schultze, 2000) and also an increase in the use of grounded theory (Toraskar, 1991, Orlikowski, 1993, Urquhart, 1997, 1998, 1999a, 1999b; Adams and Sasse, 1999, Baskerville and Pries-Heje, 1999, Trauth, 2000). Over the past three years, the most frequent request I have had from postgraduates is for some insight into the 'how-to' of coding and grounded theory.

Obviously these observations are not unconnected, as an increase in the use of qualitative methods in information systems results in a

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: interesting, meaningful and useful ways to analyse data. I rounded theory technique does provide precisely that—an interesting, meaningful and useful way to analyse data—but there are also a number of practical and philosophical issues associated with its application, which I propose to explore in this chapter.

My own experience of using grounded theory in practice raised a number of accompanying philosophical issues along the way, and it is only when we attempt to use grounded theory in practice that the philosophical issues become apparent. By philosophical issues I mean issues of ontology[1] and epistemology[2], and how the method itself might imply or confer a certain position of either interpretivism or positivism.

However, as grounded theory is primarily a method of data analysis, it is necessary to grapple with the 'how-to' issues first before understanding how the method in use might have ramifications for a particular research philosophy or approach. This chapter therefore addresses itself to two major aspects.

Firstly, there is a shortage of literature in the form of practical guidance on the 'how-to' of grounded theory technique, and this chapter proposes to remedy this by offering a detailed example of application. For instance, one issue with grounded theory technique that researchers seem to encounter is the difficulty of scaling up their analysis to larger themes. This is not surprising when one considers that, as a coding method, it is essentially a *bottom-up* technique in relation to the data, and begins at the word or sentence level.

It might well be that grounded theory technique has gained popularity in our field precisely because it does offer relatively well signposted procedures for data analysis and it is well known as a method. Those procedures *seem* well signposted—until the researchers end up wrestling with such practical issues as whether to see the data item in front of them as a property, dimension or category, or whether the core category or categories they have selected is the right one, or how to write up their analyses. Obviously each researcher has to find his or her own way with regard to their particular analysis, but clearer explications of coding methodologies in published work and specialised seminars are needed in our discipline if we are to get the best out of what grounded theory and other coding approaches can offer.

There are other approaches to coding, such as using predetermined codes or taking a 'middle order' approach (Dey, 1993), where some

A Systematic Review on Author Identification Methods

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