

Grounded Theory Methodology as the Research Strategy for a Developing Country

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Key words:

grounded theory
methodology,
developing
country, Internet,
research initiative

Abstract: This contribution discusses an initiative for promoting Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) in a developing country. First, it will describe the current research activities as well as the common obstacles that researchers might encounter. Second, the methodology will be introduced. Last, it will introduce web pages of on-line articles, article references, mailing list, and other related issues.

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1. Introduction

This short essay briefly describes a research initiative in a developing country. A developing country will be loosely defined as a country that is still in its developing stage. It usually has many shortages such as lack of funding, less productivity, low effectively/efficiency, etc. The scope will be limited to the introduction of a research methodology called grounded theory. Although this is a case of a specific developing country, it may give a general idea about what is going on in developing countries as well as how to cope with emerged issues. [1]

This paper is divided into five sections. Following this introduction, several issues in regard of the research activities and the researchers' conditions will be described. Next, it will introduce the grounded theory methodology, as well as a brief explanation on why it could be applied to encourage research in a developing country. The next section will elaborate on on-line resources that are available on the web. Finally, a short conclusion section will close this article. [2]

2. Research Activities and Researchers in a Developing Country

This section will try to illustrate--but not exhaustively--several issues as well as assertions in regard to what a researcher could encounter while conducting research in a developing country. [3]

First, it will not be argued whether research activities exist or not. The concern will be more on the research quality itself, dissemination of the research result, as well as collaboration among researchers themselves. It is assumed that a higher education system (university) generates at least undergraduate and graduate research activities. Unfortunately, the culture of collaboration is not widely adapted yet. It is not easy to introduce "fresh ideas" either in research themes nor as the research methodology itself. Therefore, more attention should be paid for developing an attractive research methodology. Thus, finding a common ground among researchers should be a high priority. [4]

Second, GIBBS (1995) noted that "... researchers in developing countries find that some of the most frustrating problems they face are in the library, not the laboratory". The researchers have less access to the traditional channel of (paper) publications. Moreover, "publish or perish" has not become a norm. There is less pressure to publish; employment/ tenure is not so determined by this activity. It is not uncommon that the thesis/ final project becomes the only serious publication in the whole researcher's career. Whereas a researcher is usually under-paid, "survive or perish" becomes the way of life by juggling many unrelated activities at once. Therefore, there is too little incentive for conducting serious research as well as to publish its result. There is a need for an alternate knowledge dissemination mechanism. [5]

Third, research funding is a problem everywhere. However, it is even worse where funding is generally meager. Nonetheless, "less research funding" in a developing country should not be interpreted as "no research funding" at all. Thus, low cost research methodology might have a better chance to be adopted. [6]

Fourth, the relevance and importance of the research could be questionable. However, this is not an issue specifically for a developing country. As BRADEN in MALKIN (1992) argued:

"In an academically competitive world, you don't develop any (useful) protocols; you get 6 different protocols for the same objective, each with its research paper (which is the `real' output). This results in efficient production of research papers, but it may not result in the kind of intellectual consensus necessary to create good and useful communication protocols." [7]

Whether the research activities are the same as in developed countries is yet another issue. If they are similar, how similar are they? If they are not same, who should adjust its research focus with whom? Should the research community in the developing country follow their counterparts in the developed country? Why? Or, should they resolve the concerns of their own community? Moreover, how can

common ground between fellows in the developing and developed countries be found? Last, the relevant research should be applicable. It should fit in the researchers' own area such as Management Information Systems, Social Psychology, Health Management, etc. [8]

3. The Grounded Theory Methodology

To cope with the issues that have been described in the previous section, we are going to suggest the Grounded Theory Methodology (hereafter GTM). GTM is a "general method of comparative analysis" to discover theory with four central criteria, i.e. work (generality), relevance (understanding), fit (valid), and modifiability (control). This methodology can be applied to both qualitative as well as quantitative data (GLASER & STRAUSS 1967). It will answer the question of "What was going on in an area" by generating either a substantive or formal theory. STERN (1995), in an excellent brief introductory, argued that "the strongest case for the use of grounded theory is in investigations of relatively uncharted water, or to gain a fresh perspective in a familiar situation." [9]

GTM was discovered by two sociologist in the 1960s--Barney G. GLASER and Anselm L. STRAUSS--while they were conducting research on dying patients data (GLASER and STRAUSS, 1965). Both of them came from a different school of thought, which has resulted in a rich and fulfilling collaboration. Barney G. GLASER (Ph.D., Columbia University, 1961) was strongly influenced by Paul F. LAZARFELD's inductive methodology (qualitative and quantitative) whereas his inductive theory generating methodology was influenced by his thesis adviser Robert K. MERTON. Anselm L. STRAUSS (Ph.D., University of Chicago, 1945) was influenced by the interactionist and pragmatist writings of the Chicago School. [10]

However, GTM is just yet another method with its own merits and weaknesses. Thus, there is no claim that this methodology is the best. It is a "do-it-yourself methodology" where neither research-assistant nor research-grant is needed (GLASER & STRAUSS 1967; GLASER 1978). This application makes it especially suitable for research on the implementation of reform projects in the areas of technical, social, health, economic and ecological development, as well as citizens participation projects. Thus, these interesting features could encourage research activities in a developing country. [11]

4. Grounded Theory Methodology on the Web

This section will discuss the emergence of "The Memo Page of Grounded Theory" (hereafter the Memo Page) at: <http://gtm.vlsm.org>. Currently, these Memo Pages receive about 50-200 cumulative hits a week. [12]

The publication of the Memo Pages was based on several simple principles. First, its publishing cost should be as low as possible. Thus, the web page space is provided free of charge by either free public web space sites (i.e. Geocities) or by sponsorship (i.e. Arus Nawala, Regex, and Jad Advertisement). Second, it is

better to publish a rough/ unpolished version as soon as possible, then enhance/improve the pages with whatever emerges later. Third, the pages have to be useful, at least for the author himself who is currently conducting a GTM research. Fourth, some pages are published in two languages, whereas the English version is for "external" review. However, for easy web maintenance, both versions are kept in a single page. Fifth, there is no concern about ownership. In the cyberspace, nobody should care where and who you are. Sixth, there is a consideration to publish a CD-ROM version, as Internet bandwidth is still a problem in the developing world. Last, the web is rising even in developing countries and may be used for teaching and supervision of researchers. [13]

The Memo Page first started with a simple grounded theory reference list, which is currently known as "Memo #0" at:

<http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/6825/citations-gtm.html> [14]

Next, a simple page that explains Grounded Theory was added as "Memo #1" at <http://gtm.vlsm.org/>. This page size increased rapidly as the author got a better understanding of grounded theory. More memos were added and Memo #1 was split into three parts. The introductory part remained as Memo #1. A list of resources of online grounded-theory was renamed as "Grounded Theory Methodology on the Web" (Memo #19) at: <http://www.geocities.com/-ResearchTriangle/Lab/1491/gtm-i-gtmweb.html> [broken link, May 2002]. Whereas the "coding part" was renamed as "In Emergence We Trust" (Memo #23) at: <http://www.vlsm.org/gnm/gnm-gtm.html>. A complete memo list is available at <http://gtm.vlsm.org/gtm-i-30.html>. For example:

- a grounded theory index (Memo #25) is available at <http://gtm.vlsm.org/gtm-i-index.html>
- information of the grounded theory mailing list (Memo #28) is available at: <http://gtm.vlsm.org/gtm-i-28.html> [15]

5. Conclusion

This long term "research cultivating" project has just begun. Therefore, it is too early to judge whether it has succeeded or failed. There is a plan to start regular academic seminars of grounded theory in the early 2000s. Thus, real grounded theory activities are expected around 2010. Nevertheless, there are at least two encouraging points that will keep this project ongoing. First, the project is still on schedule. Second, there is at least one person who will keep this project ongoing with persistence. [16]

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Citation

Samik-Ibrahim, Rahmat M. (2000). Grounded Theory Methodology as the Research Strategy for a Developing Country [16 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1(1), Art. 19, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0001198>.

Revised 3/2007