Chapter 3

Developing Organisational Stories through Grounded Theory Data Analysis: A Case Example for Studying IS Phenomena

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a concrete example of a technique or tool that may improve intensive case research and understanding, especially when considering explanatory case study research. It is argued that researchers must work hard and be creative to provide robust methodological tools so that their work is accepted in the Information Systems field (in particular), as it is traditionally skeptical about qualitative studies. This paper argues that story-telling grounded in the data through the use of the Grounded Theory methodology and its associated methods provide a way of identifying the causal conditions in any case where the underlying dynamics for any type of organisational change are unknown. Although this research and method of presentation is relevant to the IS field, it has applications in any social science research where it is necessary to present the causal conditions for the phenomena under study.

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INTRODUCTION

One type of research endeavour calls upon the researcher to examine a specific case or instance of a social phenomenon and an attempt to describe and explain what happened. In this paper we discuss the process of story-telling, grounded in the research data, as a tool to achieve such an endeavour and explain the antecedents and origins of organisational change and its component decision-making. The research intends to explain, and not to ignore, these contextual and causal factors. The principal research method for this type of enquiry is therefore an explanatory case study base – the problem being discussed here is not to represent the world at large but to represent the case under investigation.

The method described in this paper was used to develop theories about the reasons behind Strategic Planning for Information Systems (SPIS) failures in large organisations, but this is not the story (sic) that this paper concerns itself with. In Coakes (2003) a theory of SPIS failure (or success) is derived and discussed fully, here we just extract elements of the organisational data to illustrate how the concepts from Grounded Theory (GT) data analysis provide the basis for the narratives from which an organisational story can be drawn. These elements are not intended here to illustrate SPIS failure, but rather to demonstrate how the data analysis method described can be generalised to any story of an organisation undergoing (strategic) change.

The question arises in any research study as to how to analyse and present the data so that the aim ‘to explain’ is achieved successfully for the reader of that explanation.

In this paper we argue that story-telling is a coherent and logical way of presenting the results of an explanatory case study. The form of story-telling utilised is that devised by Davis (1993). We show that grounded theory gives a discipline (or methodology) for extracting the story from the data. Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990), argue that grounded theory provides a discipline where theory is derived inductively from the study of the phenomenon it represents. Only that which is relevant is permitted to emerge. We do point out in a later section however, how the view of these authors has diverged over time as to the outcome and intention, as well as the utilisation of the GT methods or methodology.

Additionally, we present a short extract of the UoB story from our previous study (Coakes, 2003), through a narrative, demonstrating the type of elements that are surfaced through this story telling approach that other approaches to analysis and case description might miss.

Finally we review the value of grounded theory and story-telling in case-study research and consider other areas where it could be used. We provide insights into the many choices that a researcher must make when adopting this methodological approach, however we do not cover in depth the method by which the Grounded Theory (GT) discussed here was generated. The concern of this paper is how to present the theory generated in such a way that it can be easily understood by the audience and thus can be more easily generalised to similar situations or contexts. The article provides a concrete example of a technique or tool that may improve intensive case research and understanding.

THE METHODOLOGY

When investigating systems and organisational change within an organisational environment, one is, perforce, investigating social systems. It is therefore necessary to make assumptions about the social world being investigated – the human element in these systems.

Ontological assumptions concern the nature of the social world being investigated; whether it is internal or external to the individuals concerned, or alternatively whether it is objective or subjective.