

9th European Conference on Research Methodology for Business and Management Studies, IE Business School, ECRM, Madrid, Spain, 23-24 June 2010. (2/3 Presentations)

Grounded theory: from analysis of social practices to theory building – the ontological and epistemic grounding of four case studies in an Organisational Learning research project

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Abstract: There is a serious lack of sensitiveness and of basic information within management settings in relation to ontological and to epistemic concerns. Such deficiencies severely compromise organisational effectiveness. Grounded Theory methodologies are an essential instrument in the understanding of organisational contexts, in particular when we take into account the complexity of contemporary challenges and the reductive horizons of dominant thinking. Probably one of the most fertile ways to explain the critical role of Grounded Theory methodologies is to grasp the importance of ontological and of epistemic concerns within organisational settings. Ontology relates to how reality manifests itself, to questions of being and to how such reality and such being are interpreted and understood. From this fundamental and foundational quest, epistemological efforts emerge, that is, specific concepts, theories, elaborations and articulations are developed. Epistemology, the knowledge about knowledge philosophical discipline, maps and identifies different perspectives that are built onto different schools of thought, each based on specific ontological presuppositions. Consequently, ontology is concerned with the grounded basic assumptions that sustain such epistemic developments, the horizons and world views that enable such epistemological theory building. The present paper addresses the critical role of Grounded Theory research and presents four case studies that were developed in the context of an Organisational Learning project. The act of analysing case studies raises the question of the critical importance of context, that is, meaning-making is context specific. The purpose of conducting these four case studies was to ground in practice the analysis of organisational learning spontaneous processes. A fundamental concern among organisational learning researchers is how to improve organisational learning practices and applied initiatives. This motivation of addressing the practical aspects of organisational learning is central to the present paper. This broad goal leads to the use of qualitative research methods which address organisational practices. The interest in a social oriented perspective on organisational learning is justified on the grounds that it addresses key issues which are dismissed by other approaches. These issues are related to the central role of community level meaning creation processes as being constitutive of organisational learning. The concern with meaning-making processes implies addressing the signification and signifying, thus semiotic, fundamental dimensions of learning. The case study analysis enables the observation of organisational practices and the identification of difficulties as well as of positive aspects of organisational learning at a spontaneous level. These aspects are directly related to the degree in which organisational communities are strengthened, intensified, cherished and acknowledged as being relevant. Organisational communities in general, and the organisational community as a whole, are the privileged setting for the meaning creation processes which constitute organisational learning. The case study's analysis addresses

the community dimension and its corresponding meaning-making processes and aims at identifying specific needs at organisational level. These needs are addressed at theoretical level, and are answered through the proposal which constitutes the research project's end product.

Key words: ontology, epistemology, grounded theory, multigrounded theory, social semiotics, theory building.