Methodology Corner

Inductive Praxis and Management Research: Towards a Reflexive Framework

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This paper examines how induction legitimately varies according to the impact of different knowledge constituting philosophical assumptions. As a result of its prevalence in qualitative management research, the paper focuses on grounded theory and uses this as a vehicle to explore the key parameters of the philosophical diversity articulated in judgements around neutrality, description and theorization. A reflexive framework of inductive praxis is offered as a heuristic device for interrogating the choices evidently at play in the variable constitution of inductive management research. We indicate how there are multiple modes of engagement, each of which is legitimate within its own philosophical commitments. This implies the need for a more tolerant pluralistic stance in the evaluation of qualitative management research.

Introduction

Various forms of induction have long underpinned naturalistic, interpretive modes of engagement and the deployment of various qualitative methodologies (see Cressey, 1950; Denzin, 1971; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Lindesmith, 1947; Van Maanen, 1979). As several management researchers have recently observed (e.g. Gephart, 2004, p. 457; Suddaby, 2006, p. 635), this association sharply contrasts with Popper's (1959) hypothetico-deductive methodology, which tends to predominate in many Anglophone cultural milieux (see Bengtsson, Elg and Lind, 1997; Denzin, 2010; Pratt, 2008). Here an *a priori* researcher-derived predictive conceptual and theoretical structure is rigorously tested through the operationalization, measurement and statistical analysis of the causal relationships between variables (see Donaldson, Qui and Luo, 2013; Edwards, 2010). For some critics (e.g. Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 106), such deployment of what Outhwaite (1975) has defined as erklaren has on epistemological grounds served to deterministically exclude the focus of interpretive research through its analysis of the external antecedent conditions that are presumed to cause the behaviours under investigation. In contrast, any interpretive focus is necessarily inductive as it entails verstehen (Outhwaite, 1975) through aiming to access actors' meaningful inter-subjective worlds, in their everyday 'natural' context, and render them 'understandable from the standpoint of a theory that is grounded in the behaviours, languages, definitions, attitudes, and feelings of those studied' (Denzin, 1971, p.166).

The possible dangers of deductive methodological parochialism discriminating against the publication of inductive management research in prestigious management journals have been regularly articulated (Amis and Silk, 2008; Johnson *et al.*, 2006; Pratt, 2008). Moreover qualitative researchers are sometimes deemed to collude in their

Table 1. Positions on inter-subjectivity and neutrality

	Rejection of actors' inter-subjectivity as a focus of social science research	Acceptance of actors' inter-subjectivity as a focus of social science research
Epistemic acceptance of a neutral observational language	(1) Promulgation of methodological monism, e.g. contemporary mainstream positivism	(2) Rejection of methodological monism and the promulgation of induction as a means of neutrally accessing other actors' inter-subjectivity, e.g. neo-positivism
Epistemic rejection of a neutral observational language	(4) Philosophically incoherent position as rejection of a neutral observation language recognizes the inevitable role of inter-subjective processes in research processes and the articulation of research outcomes	(3) Rejection of methodological monism and the reformulation of induction as inevitably influenced by a range of inter-subjective processes that affect both the researcher and the researched, e.g. critical theory; critical realism; American Pragmatism

own downfall by showing a perceived lack of inductive rigour. These possibilities have encouraged several criteriological commentaries (e.g. Bansal and Corley, 2011; Bluhm *et al.*, 2011; Gephart, 2004; Pratt, 2009; Suddaby, 2006; Tracy, 2010, 2012) aimed at promoting and disciplining qualitative management research. The result is the articulation of benchmarks, or 'boiler plates' (Pratt, 2009), that specify the 'critical attributes of good qualitative research' (Bansal and Corley, 2011, p. 233). For example, Suddaby (2006) draws primarily upon Glaser and Strauss (1967) to guide induction by defining what 'grounded theory is not'. In doing so he ignores alternative renditions of grounded theory (GT) (see for example Burr, 1995; Charmaz, 2000, 2009; March, 2005; Welch *et al.*, 2013) that draw upon different philosophical agendas to that tacitly articulated by Glaser and Strauss. In contrast, philosophical diversity in qualitative research is overtly noted by both Gephart (2004) and Bluhm *et al.* (2011). Nevertheless, they purposefully restrict their generic criteriological specifications for inductive processes to what, for instance, Bluhm *et al.* (2011) call 'positivist and interpretivist approaches' which they see follow the principles of GT (2011, p. 1868) and purposefully exclude alternative philosophical traditions. We shall argue in this paper that despite a tacit and sometimes explicit awareness of the philosophical heterogeneity evidently articulated by qualitative researchers and their laudable desire to endorse methodological pluralism, these specifications for qualitative research generally, and GT in particular, seem to be derived primarily from only one possible philosophical position. This particular position has been variously labelled 'soft' positivism (Madill, Jordan and Shirley, 2000, p. 4), 'qualitative' positivism (Prasad and Prasad, 2002,

p. 6) or 'neo' positivism (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013, p. 149; Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 46). A key characteristic of this position is that the notion of interpretation is only considered in relation to the inter-subjectivities of those actors being researched and is not recursively applied by researchers to themselves. From here on we shall use the term 'neo-positivism' to refer to this philosophical position.

Represented by cell 1 in Table 1, many positivists (e.g. Abel, 1958) emphasized the need to exclude inter-subjectivity from scientific explanations of behaviour because such inner causes were deemed to be unobservable in a neutral manner and approaches such as verstehen were dismissed as unscientific because they lacked objectivity (see Ross, 1991). For Laing (1967) this exclusion of human subjectivity also served to bolster the monistic desire for one methodology (ostensibly derived from physics) to be used in both the social and natural sciences since it removed any ontological differentiation between the natural and the social domains.

Couched in an overt rejection of such methodological monism, the neo-positivist dispute with mainstream positivism is largely limited to whether inter-subjectivity is open to neutral observation by researchers and the consequent appropriateness of verstehen and induction to social science research (see Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000; Markus, 1994) (see cell 2 in Table 1). Hence a shared concern of recent criteriological commentaries has been to encourage qualitative management researchers to systematically demonstrate rigour and objectivity in their pursuit of isomorphic representations of actors' inter-subjectivities as a basis for inductive theorizing usually in the form of GT (e.g. Bluhm *et al.*, 2011; Gephart, 2004; Pratt, 2009; Suddaby,

2006). Alternative epistemological stances that reject the possibility of such a neutral observation language and thereby reframe induction, since our engagements as researchers are seen to be always mediated by our culturally derived interpretations, may become marginalized by default. These alternative ways of undertaking induction, initially represented by cell 3 of Table 1, remain at best under-explored or at worst delegitimized *ab initio*, thereby possibly encouraging the very monological processes that these criteriological commentators seem to challenge in their initial espousal of a form of methodological pluralism. Meanwhile cell 4 of Table 1 represents a philosophically incoherent position. Here the notion that actors' inter-subjective processes should play no role in social science research cannot sit conformably with the simultaneous rejection of a neutral observational language. This is because the latter epistemic stance is usually justified by recognition of the role those same inter-subjective processes play in research processes themselves thereby justifying the rejection of a neutral observational language.

The inadvertent, yet contradictory, philosophical and methodological parochialism articulated in the recent criteriological commentaries noted above has the potential for stimulating exclusionary processes of criteriological commensuration. Indeed it seems to be another example of the 'extended controversy' (Guba and Lincoln, 2005, p. 205) that persists where static standards, that unreflexively express particular philosophical assumptions, gain indiscriminate epistemological jurisdiction (see also Easterby-Smith, Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2008; Grey, 2010; Johnson *et al.*, 2006).

However, as Burrell and Morgan (1979) demonstrated, there are always choices with regard to these matters that need to be considered. If we accept their notion that any account is conditioned by an underlying philosophical sub-text, then reflexivity, which holds 'research structures and logics as themselves researchable and not immutable' (Steier, 1991, p. 7), is crucial to our understanding of our own and others' methodological praxis. Therefore, in the originally reflexive and permissively contingent spirit of methodological pluralism (see McLennan, 1995), it would seem timely to consider and extend our understandings of induction by examining how varying *a priori* philosophical commitments may lead to induction's methodological differentiation. Here, for several reasons, our primary focus will be GT: first, because of GT's

ubiquity as a qualitative methodology generally in the social sciences (see Strauss and Corbin, 1997) and because of its significant profile in management research (see Locke, 2001; Welch *et al.*, 2013); second, because GT's longstanding influence upon the format of software programmes widely used in qualitative data analysis may be acting as a Trojan horse in the emergence of a 'new orthodoxy' for induction (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 595); third, because its recent specification by management researchers' criteriological commentary (see Bluhm *et al.*, 2011; Suddaby, 2006) raises questions as to why one should try to epistemologically and criteriologically constrain GT despite its often being regarded as an 'umbrella covering several different variants' (Charmaz, 2009, p. 128) deriving from a range of philosophical stances; fourth, because there are alternative forms of induction which could be considered, such as analytical induction. However, despite a longer pedigree, analytical induction is rarely deployed in the management field and, when it is, this is often as a helpful and commensurable elaboration that is combined with GT to improve causal analysis (e.g. Johnson, 2004). Finally, given GT's popularity as a form of induction, its standardization to the confines of neo-positivism may serve as a conduit to further undermine the current philosophical diversity evident in qualitative management research (see Duberley, Johnson and Cassell, 2012; Grey, 2010) by influencing the implicit and explicit criteria deployed during research evaluation (see Amis and Silk, 2008; Savall *et al.*, 2008).

To pursue these aims we shall structure this paper as follows. First we trace the empiricist origins of induction through to its present-day methodological justification. Second we explore how rival epistemological views (initially represented by cells 2 and 3 in Table 1) about the viability of a neutral observational language impact upon the conduct of induction. Here we give specific reference to neo-positivist prescriptions for GT and the 'second generation's' (see Morse *et al.*, 2009) challenge which has applied social constructionism to those inductive processes via various epistemological stances. In doing so, we identify the key parameters of the philosophical diversity articulated in choices around neutrality, description and theorization. We conclude by offering a reflexive framework of such inductive praxis as a heuristic device for interrogating the different philosophical choices at play in

the variable constitution of inductive management research.

Empiricism and induction

Induction's philosophical pedigree precedes the deployment of hypothetico-deductivism (e.g. Bacon, 1620; Comte, 1853; Hume, 1739, 1748; Locke, 1690; Mill, 1874). Nevertheless, it is the latter which has become the mainstream methodology, especially in US management research, under the aegis of Popper's (1959) falsificationism. Popper rejected the possibility of the inductive verification of theories by revitalizing, and attempting to resolve, Hume's (1739) 'problem of induction'. The latter arose because of the intimate relationship between induction and empiricism in his secular desire to 'commit to the flames ... [the] ... sophistry and illusion' (Hume, 1748, sec. vii, pt iii) of received metaphysical speculation. Hume's advocacy of Locke's (1690) empiricism in this epistemological purge led him to reject all ideas that could not be traced to corresponding sense impressions. But the empirical problem for Hume was that causation is in itself not directly observable and thereby could not be validated by experience. Rather the causal associations we anticipate lie in our customs or 'force of habit' − ideas which have developed from our past observation of repeated resembling, chronologically ordered, spatially related, 'constant conjunctions'. For Hume, it was impossible to verify any proposed causal relationship through logical inference from past experience to a suppositional future, regardless of the number of accumulated empirical confirmations, without engaging in the anathema of metaphysical speculation through deploying ampliative assumptions. This epistemological contradiction led Hume to doubt the possibility of induction: a scepticism that was down-played in the subsequent development of positivism (Comte, 1853) and the deployment of induction by logical positivists (e.g. Ayer, 1971.

By the twentieth century certain philosophical commitments were established which guided the application of inductive analysis and were maintained by logical positivists to defend Enlightenment reason against the rise of Fascism (see Callinicos, 1989). The first is a commitment to empiricism and the verifiability principle of meaning where something is only meaningful if it is empirically verifiable through sense experience and observation (Ayer, 1971, p. 48). The second commitment, traceable to Epicurean Hellenistic philosophy (see Long and Sedley, 1987), is to a neutral observational language where truth as correspondence with reality is to be found in the observer's passive registration of Comte's 'positively given' (i.e. data) located in a directly accessible mind-independent external reality (see Reichenbach, 1963; Wittgenstein, 1922): a subject–object dualism. Third is a commitment to methodological monism: that only natural science methodology can provide certain knowledge in the social sciences (see Ross, 1991). However, at the heart of logical positivism's commitment to empiricism and inductive-verificationism lay Hume's epistemological contradiction. Popper rescued positivism by reconfiguring the scientific enterprise as deductive-falsificationism. He exploited the empirical asymmetry between the proof and disproof through his proposition of falsificationism aimed at producing *verisimilitude* based upon the ability of a theory's postulates to survive predictive tests aimed at objectively identifying non-correspondence with an external reality (Popper, 1976, pp. 148−150).

Contemporary justifications for induction

As Welch *et al.* (2013, pp. 252–253) found, an inductive approach has often been justified apologetically as a necessary precursor to deduction because of the exploratory or novel nature of the research undertaken. Rather than being presented as deduction's poor relation others have justified induction as superior through assertions of enhanced naturalism that makes findings more plausible, accessible and relevant (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2001; Van Maanen, 1979) especially to non-researchers (Watson, 2011) as it provides 'a strong handle on what "real life" is like' (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 10). Related to naturalism, another justification centres upon the view that deductive testing necessarily entails *a priori* operationalization of deterministic behavioural variables in which their inter-subjective basis is absent, or at best distorted (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Guba and Lincoln, 1994). By signifying the importance of inter-subjectivity qualitative researchers are concurrently drawing upon the long established idea that there exists an ontological

discontinuity (see Dilthey, 1976; Giddens, 1976; Laing, 1967; Mead, 1934; Merleau-Ponty, 1962) between the subject matters of the social and natural sciences. Since human behaviour, unlike that of physical objects, is inherently meaningful to actors it cannot be explained as the necessary outcome of the action of discrete causal variables (see Dilthey, 1976, p. 89); methodological monism must be rejected (see Ross, 1991). Moreover, we cannot reduce lived experience to a number of separate factors operating as distinct influences regardless of the social context in which action arises (see Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. ix). Therefore in order to access inter-subjectivity, explanations must be generated through verstehen (Outhwaite, 1975): the inductive description and analysis of actors' cultures in 'natural' (Denzin, 1971), 'real', settings (Gephart, 2004, p. 457). This dismissal of methodological monism as arising from a categorical error that conflates the social with the natural seems to put philosophical distance between positivism and the present-day deployment of induction. Nevertheless, how induction is used in qualitative management research sometimes retains key positivistic elements (see cell 2 of Table 1) – especially the presupposition of a neutral observational language and the consequent necessity to rigorously demonstrate the plausible objectivity required by the criteriological commentaries discussed earlier.

A priori theory and induction

Contemporary induction in management research, usually seen as synonymous with GT, is often presented as a flexible process where research questions, conceptualizations of phenomena, and theory concurrently emerge and are constantly refined through interaction with an evolving analysis of the data being collected through various forms of iterative fieldwork (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Suddaby, 2006). This immediately begs questions regarding the role of *a priori* theory during induction. It is of particular importance for qualitative researchers who may be criticized for lacking rigour in comparison to hypothetico-deductive researchers who systematically design research to refute theoretical predictions. Here two different positions are initially evident: first, that such pre-understandings need to be used as preliminary guides; second, that they must be kept at bay by being 'bracketed' from the outset.

The first position initially seems to be informed by Heidegger's (1927, p. 24) hermeneutics where he points to how we are always caught in a communally informed pre-understanding of being: a hermeneutical circle with no access to an uninterpreted given. For some, this epistemological predicament means that that we must clarify the theoretical pre-understandings we have to hand from the start of research. This is illustrated by Blumer (1954, p. 7) when he argued that, at the outset, researchers should take from extant literature 'sensitizing concepts' which 'merely suggest directions in which to look' and constitute flexible guides for uncovering empirical variation in phenomena rather than imposing *a priori* observational benchmarks.

The second view of the relationship with prior theory parallels Husserl's (1965) phenomenology. This aims to provide descriptions of actors' consciousness located in sedimentations of past experience of phenomena that are largely cultural and lead us to conceive the world as a common albeit experienced from different perspectives. To access the appearance of things in the external world to actors, Husserl argued that the researcher's own preconceptions of those phenomena (the natural attitude) must be set aside through 'bracketing' (or 'epoche' − the act of suspending judgement about the natural world to instead focus on analysis of mental experience) so as to enable 'reduction': the uncovering of the essential structure of phenomena as subjectively experienced by others. So although Husserl was a staunch critic of positivism (see Husserl, 1965, p. 189) this presumed ability to bracket suggests the promulgation of an epistemic privilege akin to neo-positivism's presumption of a neutral observational language: the researcher's ability to investigate the 'essences' of the phenomena constituted in the 'lifeworld' free from pre-conception and bias. In other words a subject−subject dualism is assumed.

Meanwhile, recognition of Heidegger's hermeneutic circle could lead to two stances within the first position noted above. The first entails dismissal of any positivist commitment to a neutral detached observer as a myth since no interpretation free from presuppositions is ever possible: a subject–subject duality that has significant implications for the accomplishment of induction and the epistemic status of the outcomes of research. The second follows Blumer (1954), for example, where recognition of the hermeneutic

circle might be limited to indicating the practical difficulties of starting any research without a preceding conceptual interaction with extant theory: a starting point that does not necessarily undermine the possibility of a subject–subject dualism during fieldwork and data analysis.

As we shall discuss below, there is debate over these alternative epistemological stances in the most influential contemporary approach to induction within management research: GT.

Neo-positivism's subject—subject dualism in GT

Management researchers (e.g. Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000; Gephart, 2004) have identified how GT was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a response by symbolic interactionists to the categorical error entrenched in methodological monism (see also Cherutz and Swanson, 1986) and to the threats posed by the methodological hegemony of structural functionalism. From the outset GT articulated a commitment to investigating how actors interpret reality and also abstracting those empirical descriptions into theoretical statements: ambitions that created epistemological ambiguities. What initially concerns us is the extent to which GT has necessarily severed ties to (neo) positivist epistemology.

Originally Glaser and Strauss (1967, pp. 161–183) saw the library as a source of qualitative data for aiding the development of theory through elaborating categories and as an aid to constant comparison. What they are unclear about is the role of extant literature at the outset of research (see also Dey, 1999). For example they talk of generating 'formal theory … directly from data … [but] … it is more desirable, and usually necessary, to start formal theory from a substantive one' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 79) already articulated in research. This ambiguity seems to have evolved into an important difference in subsequent approaches. For example Glaser (1978, p. 3; 1992, p. 31), as part of a strategy for maintaining a dispassionate objectivity in fieldwork, requires that no extant theory or literature should be deployed until an initial theoretical framework had been developed through 'sensitive' immersion in order to generate theory that 'really exists in data' (1992, p. 53). In contrast, Strauss (1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1998) seems to follow Blumer's idea of overtly develop-

ing sensitizing concepts from the relevant literature as necessary provisional points of departure but nonetheless requiring maintenance of objectivity in relation to data and participants to produce 'provisionally verified' theory (Straus and Corbin, 1990, p. 25). Regardless of these differences, Glaser and Strauss (and Corbin), with their continuing emphasis upon discovery and emergence, have remained committed to a neutral observational language (see Charmaz, 2000, p. 513; Clarke, 2003) during data collection and analysis so as to objectively develop theories embedded in the meaningful everyday inter-subjective realities of actors (see Glaser, 1992, p. 16; Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 99). According to Frendt and Sachs (2008, p. 447), this commitment to a subject—subject dualism requires demonstration of a separation of the researcher from his/her description and analysis of other actors' inter-subjective cultural experiences: the hypostatization of a passive observer which enables them to avoid recursively applying the notion of interpretation to themselves. The result is an epistemological privileging of any inductive account by management researchers (see Knights, 1992; Van Maanen, 1995) as 'part of another foundationalist enterprise' (Thomas and James, 2006, p. 780): a dogged neo-positivist demonstration of the qualitative researcher's 'more rigorous than thou' methodological attributes (Thomas and James, 2006, p. 788).

For instance, Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasized the requirement for researchers to provide traceable, self-critical and sometimes confessional audit trails to allow the reader to judge the objectivity and rigour of their research. Especially important here is an account of the researcher's field role that reflexively analyses the steps taken to maintain naturalism whilst navigating a course that avoids both cultural co-option and ethnocentricity by demonstrating a precarious social, emotional and intellectual balance between insider and outsider (e.g. Cicourel, 1982; Hammersley, 1992; Pollner and Emerson, 1983). Audit trails also provide details of how inductive analysis of data was accomplished to produce emergent descriptions and theory. So, in order to corroborate the objectivity of findings and demonstrate theoretical sensitivity, researchers are strongly advised to show how an unimpaired interplay of data with theory and description was achieved. This includes an account of how concepts and categories were synthesized, memo-ed, coded, cross-referenced with

inter-rater checks to various data sources, applied and theorized along with how alternative analytical outcomes have been considered and why they were discarded (see Adler and Adler, 1994; Locke, 1996; Morse, 1994). It is precisely the need to demonstrate how these processes have been undertaken in order to persuasively display a 'hard won objectivity' (see Seale, 1999, p. 161) that has been one of the key foci of recent criteriological specifications by various commentaries in prestigious management journals (see Bansal and Corley, 2011; Bluhm et al., 2011; Gephart, 2004; Pratt, 2009; Suddaby, 2006; Tracy, 2010, 2012).

Description and theorization of inter-subjectivity

Inductive analysis usually begins with 'thick' descriptions (Geertz, 1973, p. 24) of shared interpretations (Gephart, 2004; Glaser, 1992). Phenomenologists would usually consider such description of actors' lifeworlds sufficient and analytical movement beyond the world-as-experienced in order to theoretically explain it to be an epistemological violation (see Thomas and James, 2006, pp. 771–773). In contrast, others classify this phenomenological stricture as resulting in analytical interruptus (Loftland, 1970): a failure to develop theory that explains why any observed variation in observed cultural categories happens (see Denzin, 1978; Schatzman, 1991) and to show how those subjective experiences may be abstracted into theoretical statements about causal relations between actors (Suddaby, 2006, p. 635). Here neo-positivist GT purportedly provides procedural guidelines for accomplishing *both* a neutral description of actors' interpretive processes and their subsequent theorization.

It is emphasized that data analysis and collection should simultaneous and recursively inform each other to establish descriptive categories which, initially, are in constant flux as new data are collected and analysed (see Miles and Huberman, 1994; Morse, 1994). Through memo-ing and open-coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 181) related observations are consolidated to formulate provisional conceptual properties (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, pp. 35–36). Eventually conceptual categories are created, which combine conceptual properties and refer to specific variations in phenomena, having been adjusted and re-coded

as new data are collected and compared to embrace all observations and achieve theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 61). Here a move from description to theoretical development is enabled through analysing relationships between the saturated, internally homogeneous, categories 'which best explain the data … assembled' (see Becker, 1970, p. 196). This abstraction of patterns of actors' common subjective experiences into theoretical statements is often seen as problematic. As we indicate above, for some it entails a move beyond the knowing actor's experience in order to explain it: a philosophical impropriety as it relegates the actor's 'original voice' (Thomas and James, 2006, p. 790). For others it entails a process that often lacks systematic means of identifying the relationships between categories so as to rigorously ground theoretical emergence (Wasserman, Clair and Wilson, 2009).

There have been attempts at systematizing inductive causal inference by deploying Mill's (1874) inductive methods for causal analysis (e.g. Bloor, 1976, 1978; Johnson, 2004; Miller and Fredericks, 1999) or by adding deductive testing of emergent theory (e.g. Hammersley, 1989; Robinson, 1951). In contrast, Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 96) encourage 'axial coding' which puts 'data back in new ways … by making connections between categories'. This move from description to 'higher levels of abstraction' (Strauss, 1987, p. 55) through the use of conditions and consequences matrices to trace 'paths of connectivity' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 129, 199) may be extended to trace linkages in the data to micro and macro conditions (Corbin and Strauss, 1996) and, sometimes aided by fractal concept analysis, to enable macro-level conceptualization grounded in micro-level data (Wasserman, Clair and Wilson, 2009). For Glaser (1998) the use of such analytical procedures is overly formulaic and forces theory rather than allowing theory to emerge whilst controlling the impact of any preconceptions. Nonetheless, regardless of the procedures used, the aim would still be the 'discovery' of causally homogeneous categories with no exceptions to the proposed inductively generated theoretical inferences.

However, some remain unconvinced: as Thomas and James (2006, p. 777) observe, where are the 'inference tickets coming from in the supposed process of induction …?' They describe this abstract shift to putative theorization as a 'methodological alchemy' which is philosophically undesirable

for qualitative researchers and fails to adequately investigate and demonstrate the operation of inferred causal relations.

Whilst some inductive researchers have attempted to resolve this inference issue within the samples accessed in their fieldwork, Thomas and James (2006) also point to the problem of making ampliative inferences within an empiricist frame of reference, which was first articulated by Hume and raises the issue of inductive generalization. Often the perceived outcome of fieldwork is theory grounded in empirical data from a relatively small number of cases which undermine representativeness and generalization. This has created pressure to increase the size of samples in qualitative research (Cornelissen, 2009). For Eisenhardt (1989), whilst there is a possibility that theory generated inductively is likely to be novel and empirically valid it lacks the sweep of 'grand theory' and remains at a modest, idiosyncratic level applicable only to the social context(s) in which it was developed and therefore requires deductive testing in defined populations to enable extrapolation (see also Seale, 1999, p. 108). Nevertheless, Eisenhardt (1989) also argues that generalizability can be enhanced by comparing the emergent theory to existing literature (p. 545) which for Morse (1994) is part of a process of recontextualization where theory can be abstracted to new settings. In contrast, Mitchell (1983; see also Stake, 2000) argues that inductive inference can only be logical and derives its generalizability from the demonstrated all-inclusive power of the inductively generated and tested theory (1983, p. 190). Here the rigour and credibility of the procedures used on an initial site to comprehensively embrace any negative case through constant comparison until saturation occurs legitimizes extrapolation to other sites. But this still begs Hume's question regarding how we might ever know for certain that such comprehension and saturation is achieved and that the theory is applicable to new and un-researched contexts without making ampliative assumptions that negate neo-positivist's empiricist commitments. As Seale (1999, p. 112) cautions, 'unwarranted assumptions are made about the characteristics of the population of cases not yet studied'. In sharp contrast to these concerns, Denzin (1983) argues that generalization is in any case impossible due to the indexical or context-bound nature of human behaviour and what Vince (2006, p. 351) calls the consequent particularity of knowledge in context.

Social constructionism and the subject−subject duality in GT

Charmaz is a key representative of what has been dubbed the second generation of grounded theorists (see Morse *et al.*, 2009). She sees any inductive product as the inevitable outcome of social construction, rather than discovery or emergence, which must undermine the (self) presentation of researcher as 'distant expert' (Charmaz, 2000, p. 513) because 'data do not provide a window on reality' (2000, p. 524; also 2009, p. 130). Such rejection of a neutral observational language implies that any notion of researchers being able to suppress their own subjectivity in order to become a neutral conduit for others' cultural experience is both a quixotic rhetorical device and a contradiction in interpretive work. How far Charmaz develops the implications of this alternative epistemology for inductive praxis is rather opaque. Searching for middle ground 'between postmodernism and positivism' (2000, p. 510) she clearly rejects what she calls 'objectivist' GT due to its scientist pretensions and complex procedures (2000, p. 525). Social interaction between researcher and researched … 'produces data and therefore the meanings that the researcher observes and defines'. Thus any account of actors' 'discovered' realities is 'co-produced' (Charmaz, 1995, p. 35; 2006, p. 140) and countering sources of bias to display objectivity becomes criteriologically irrelevant. Rather what is required is a reflexive account of this co-authorship that shows how voices of the researched are present and meaningful. What is unclear here is what the epistemological status of such accounts may be. On the one hand, are they grounded and emergent in a representational sense where the researcher is assumed to be able to step outside his/her own cultural patterning of beliefs to neutrally describe this socially constructed inter-subjectivity produced through researcher-researched interaction? This raises the issue as to whether Charmaz inadvertently insulates this process from the action of the researcher's own interpretations to preserve correspondence by default and epistemologically contradict a social constructionist stance. On the other hand, if any account cannot correspond with inter-subjectivity, since the subjective processes of social construction should presumably also apply to producing the account itself, how can the account aspire to present anything more than

mere speculation – no matter how reflexive the co-production process may appear to be? Alternatively, if she is promulgating an epistemological alternative to correspondence demonstrated by hard won objectivity – what is it? Charmaz may leave herself open to the accusation of epistemological vacillation between the claim that findings emerge from data about co-production and the claim that they are the result of an analysis that was inevitably the researcher's own interpretation. This potential dilemma seems to be avoided by those who have also openly rejected a neutral observational language but then have more overtly considered how to develop coherent epistemological alternatives to positivism that simultaneously eschew relativism.

For example, critical theory (CT) has long rejected positivist epistemology (e.g. Horkheimer, 1937; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1947). In a Kantian (see Kant, 1781) fashion all human cognition is construed as deriving from *a priori* inter-subjective processes which socially construct versions of an external reality that simultaneously exists independently of those sense-making processes (see Habermas, 1974a, 1974b). So whilst we may never know reality-as-it-is, that reality contingently imposes pragmatic limits (Habermas, 1972, p. 33) upon human activities: therefore anything does not go. For Habermas (1984, 1987), the epistemological question becomes one of how to establish these realities-for-us legitimately and avoid relativism. Here he develops consensus as an epistemic standard via his notion of the ideal-speech situation wherein discursively produced democratic agreement between participants derives from dialogue, argument and analysis without the resort to coercion, distortion or duplicity. By implication any discourse evolving outside these conditions must be forced and distorted, thereby raising the issue of ideological hegemony by the powerful. This epistemology has been highly influential upon a group of writers who have tried to translate it into guidelines for inductive research.

For example, Habermasian epistemology was influential upon Guba and Lincoln's later work (1989, 1994) where they developed authenticity as social constructionist criteriological commitment. Here inductive research, such as GT, becomes more of a processual scheme that emphasizes researchers' and participants' reflexive and dialogical examination of their own inter-subjective understandings in the social context of the hegemonic discourses at play. So, not only must researchers reflexively interrogate their own *a priori* stances (Kincheloe and McLaren, 1998), they also must attempt to sensitize themselves and participants to how hegemonic regimes of truth impact upon their subjectivities in the development of alternative understandings of reality (Marcus and Fisher, 1986; Putnam *et al.*, 1993). For example, through inductively conducting 'critical' ethnographies (Forester, 2002; Morrow and Brown, 1994; Thomas, 1993), and achieving 'critical interpretations' (Denzin, 1998, p. 332) which go beyond a description of actors' subjectivities to develop theoretical understandings regarding the manner in which those subjectivities become constituted, the prime aim of the research is to liberate those it studies so that they understand the world in new ways and use this knowledge to change it (Dryzek, 1995; Jermier, 1998; Schwandt, 1996). In order to approximate Habermas's ideal-speech situation highly participative research designs are deployed (e.g. Broadbent and Laughlin, 1997) that aim to achieve dialogue (Schwandt, 1996, pp. 66–67) where the credibility of the socially constructed realities to those who have democratically participated in their development is crucial (Kincheloe and McLaren, 1998). In addition to consensus as a key epistemic standard for these inductively developed self-understandings and alternative accounts of phenomena, there is a simultaneous requirement that they should be used to intervene and thereby change a status quo which previously was construed as normal, authoritative and therefore immutable (see Alvesson, 1996; Gaventa and Cornwall, 2006; Jermier, 1998; Park, 2006). The result is sometimes a form of praxis aimed at transforming perceived inequalities where, based upon dialectical inductive theory building (Lather, 1991) and a dialogical relationship with researchers (Lynch, 1999, p. 57), participants become able to both understand and change their situation (see Brook and Darlington, 2013). Because of the contextually specific and socially constructed nature of consensus, issues of generalizability are largely irrelevant; instead there may be an emphasis upon 'accommodation' (Kincheloe and McLaren, 1998) where researchers use their knowledge of a range of comparable contexts to assess the implications of similarities and differences for praxis.

A commensurable philosophical position to CT, but which often downplays consensus as an epistemic standard, is articulated by critical realism

(CR) where ontological realism and epistemological subjectivism are also combined (Bhaskar, 1978, p. 249). Here, Bhaskar does this by differentiating between the intransitive ontological dimension of scientific inquiry (e.g. social reality), that exists independently of human knowledge, and the transitive socially constructed dimension (epistemology) that allows us to make sense of our worlds (see also Bhaskar, 1989). Nevertheless, unlike natural or physical reality, social reality is transitively produced and reproduced through our inter-subjectively derived agency but is intransitive in the sense that it exists 'at least in part independently of any knowledge claims' (Lawson, 1998, pp. 222–223) about it. Therefore, as in CT, critical realists have argued that we are always entrapped within an *a priori* culturally derived subjectivity in our social construction of our understandings of social reality. However, the latter, albeit it always mediated by fallible human cognition, is not determined by the former (see Fleetwood, 2004, p. 33; Sayer, 1992, p. 83; 2004, p. 8). Therefore critical realists reject both a correspondence theory of truth and the possibility of a neutral observational language – but in doing so they also reject what is called 'judgemental relativism' where there are no rational grounds for epistemologically judging between accounts (see Bhaskar, 1986, p. 72).

A key aim for CR is to retroductively excavate what Bhaskar (1986) claims are the structured layers of social reality so as to, in an inevitably fallible manner, identify generative or causal powers which underlie conceptually mediated (i.e. transitive) observable appearances in order to explain those empirically patterned phenomena. In other words during theorization CR seeks to link phenomena such as the observable inter-subjectivity of agents to the causal context of real but non-empirical structures which may produce those 'actual' events expressed in conceptually mediated empirical patterns (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 16). Here social structures pre-exist, enable and constrain agency whilst dialectically emerging from and changing that agency (see Archer, 2003, pp. 5−6).

Although some critical realists have rejected GT as a methodology (see Danermark *et al.*, 2002) this is usually because of its perceived neo-positivist origins. For others, as 'hermeneutics is essential' (Archer *et al.*, 1998, p. xv), a constructionist version of GT that enables mediated access to agents' inter-subjectivities but then moves to a situational analysis 'beyond the knowing subject' (see Clarke,

2009, p. 200; 2003) to examine generative mechanisms is deemed necessary and viable. Although her idiom is slightly different, such situational analysis of 'unstated or unrecognised influences' is also something which Charmaz (2009, p. 130) sees as necessary in her approach to GT.

However, this poses epistemological problems in that, given CR's subjectivist epistemology, how can we establish whether the causal powers retroductively excavated are more than a researcher's theorization and are real 'non-empirical' structures that condition, and are conditioned by, actors' inter-subjectively derived activities (see Halfpenny, 1994, p. 65). Moreover, as Al-Amoudi and Willmott (2011, p. 29) argue, epistemological subjectivism also applies to inductive analysis of those actors' inter-subjectivities. Indeed critical realists may contradict their subjectivist epistemology by inadvertently privileging their analyses: a potential problem we have raised in relation to Charmaz's social constructionist GT. To avoid the pitfall of positivist privileging, and in order to eschew the perceived dangers of judgemental relativism, Sayer (1992) proposes an alternative epistemic standard for CR which he calls practical adequacy (pp. 69–70) which simultaneously appears to be commensurable with CT's emphasis upon consensus as a basis for transformative praxis. Here, despite our inability to escape inter-subjective processes, Sayer (1992) argues that practical adequacy allows us to rationally judge between our social constructions by assessing their ability to 'generate expectations about the world … that are actually realized' (p. 70).

Sayer's proposal of a critical realist epistemic standard commensurable with a subject−subject duality seems related to James's and Dewey's rendition of Pragmatist philosophy which also attempted to navigate an epistemological course between what they saw as the Scylla and Charybdis of positivism and relativism (Margolis, 1986). Here there is some potential for confusion because Strauss (but not Glaser) is associated with Pragmatist philosophy (see Locke, 2001; Suddaby, 2006). However, this is based upon Peirce's view of Pragmatism (see Strauss and Corbin, 1994). Peirce (1931−58) argued that inductive and abductive cooperative scientific inquiry, despite being fallible, would eventually converge upon a final agreement that that would correspond with reality (Vol. 8, chs 13 and 41). For Rescher (1978, p. 52) this accretional view of scientific

progress is proto Popperian in its epistemological Darwinism. Although Peirce was cautious about the possibility of objectivity, its epistemic rejection is manifest in James's and Dewey's Pragmatism. For example, James (1909) argued that 'once we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we do not thereby give the quest or hope of truth itself' (p. 17) because 'experience … has ways of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulas' (James, 1897, p. 106; see also Dewey, 1929a, p. 19). In doing so they articulated an epistemic standard similar to practical adequacy and commensurable with CT's consensus standard as it focuses upon the extent to which inductively generated theory, grounded in dialogue and consensus, enables 'workable' interventions which can be assessed with reference to the extent to which they 'settle problematic situations' (Dewey, 1929b, p. iii). Through such praxis, it is thought contact with reality is enabled which allows evaluation and thus avoids judgemental relativism because it is 'the circumpressure of reality itself, which gets us sick of concrete errors' (James, 1909, p. 72; see also Gustavsen, 2006; Margolis, 1986).

Therefore Pragmatism has important implications for evaluating GT in terms of its workability or practical adequacy. This is something which Charmaz (2006) implies when she points to how grounded theories are always potentially transformative since they allow people to 'see the world from a different vantage point and create new meanings' which may be acted upon (p. 128). However, Pragmatism also has implications for how qualitative researchers epistemically evaluate their inductively built hermeneutical understandings of others' inter-subjectivity that goes beyond consensus. Here, for example, Davidson (1984, p. 200) has argued that such understandings must articulate what any cultural outsider must access and learn in order for them to be able to communicate and behave with pragmatic success and consistency in the cultural settings they are investigating.

Thus it would seem that the implications for the deployment of constructionist GT by CT and CR are similar and imply a significant degree of epistemological complementarity. Both emphasize the important role played by GT in describing actors' inter-subjectivity and in retroductive moves beyond the knowing subject to examine generative mechanisms. The main variability here can be the emphasis put upon actors' democratic and dialogical participation in the formulation of these descriptions and theorizations — something which has a relationship to the extent to which consensus is valued as a constructionist epistemic standard. Simultaneously both CR and CT emphasize the need for intervention and change based upon the emergent, often dialogically grounded, theory. Such interventions enable the further evaluation of theory in terms of its practical adequacy or workability. The key implication here is that GT then becomes part of a highly participative form of critical action research (see Cassell and Johnson, 2006) in the sense that it aids analysis and diagnosis and then becomes the basis of interventions whose effects may be evaluated before triggering a further round of participatory analysis, diagnosis, intervention and so on, possibly in new social contexts to explore the extent of accommodation.

Conclusions

In this paper we have attempted to contribute towards a reflexive understanding of the variable constitution of GT as a key example of contemporary inductive praxis. In this analysis we have mapped how varying philosophical commitments impact upon the deployment of induction in management research around the issues of neutral engagement, description, causal analysis and theorization of inter-subjectivity. Figure 1 summarizes the philosophical choices we have discussed and which inevitably face inductive researchers but may remain unnoticed. Figure 1 begins with choices, driven by varying ontological and epistemological commitments, between verstehen and erklaren and their rival inductive or deductive methodologies. Once verstehen and induction are chosen, researchers are implicitly faced by the choice between a subject—subject dualism and a subject—subject duality. We argue that neo-positivist approaches to GT are allied to a subject—subject dualism but with that selection researchers simultaneously have to deal with the relevance and impact of pre-existing theory upon their research: a choice that we have illustrated by the differences between bracketing and the use of sensitizing concepts. Simultaneously neo-positivists have to make choices around the aims of their research with regard to cultural description or then using those descriptions as a basis for subsequent theorization that moves beyond the actors' voices whilst methodologically justifying the 'inference
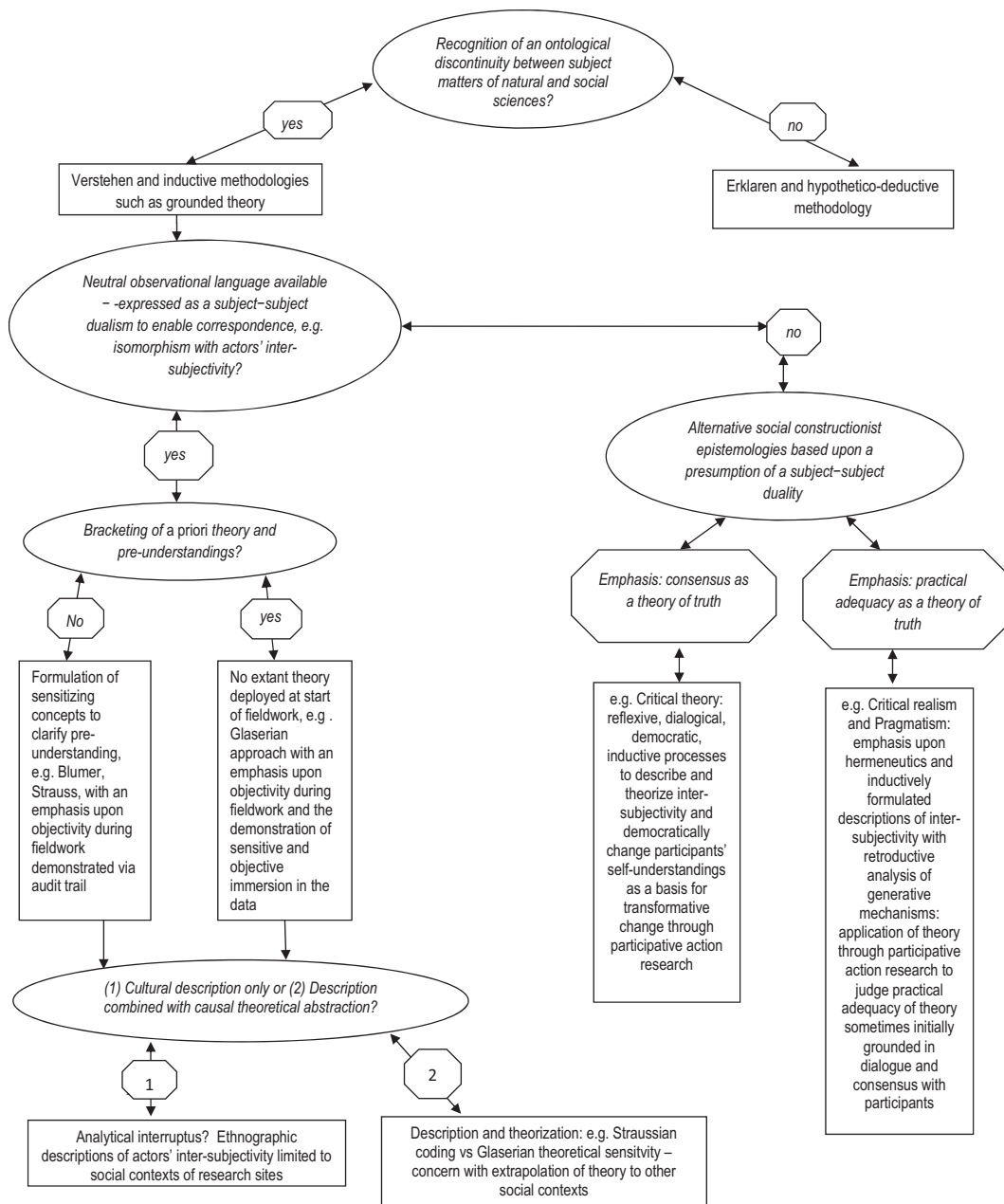
Figure 1. Variations in grounded theory and philosophical choices: a reflexive framework

tickets' that are used in this process. As can be seen in Figure 1, the choice of whether or not to bracket does not dictate the aims of the research, i.e. the extent of theoretical abstraction produced, but it will influence the research process undertaken and the perceived role of *a priori* theory in data collection.

In contrast, the earlier choice of a subject–subject duality leads to various social constructionist approaches where issues of epistemological legitimization, whilst avoiding claims to neutrality and eschewing judgemental relativism, loom large. Here we have considered how related approaches, such as CT and CR, with their varying emphases upon consensus and practical adequacy as epistemological standards, have reformulated the deployment of GT by in effect changing what 'grounded' means.

Therefore, as illustrated with specific reference to GT, induction may vary considerably under the impact of variable philosophical assumptions. We have attempted to illustrate key aspects of this diversity by showing the apparent variance in how qualitative researchers have attempted to 'ground' their descriptions and explanations of actors' meaningful behaviour deriving from observation of social phenomena in their 'natural' context. Hence, as we have argued, there are multiple potentially legitimate approaches to induction generally, and GT in particular, depending on the philosophical commitments being deployed and the coherence between those philosophical commitments and the approach taken. This potential plurality starkly contrasts with the singularity deemed appropriate by much commentary in prestigious management journals.

Therefore we suggest that it would seem highly arbitrary and excessively limiting to attempt to discipline qualitative researchers to adopt specific procedures which articulate only neo-positivist knowledge constituting assumptions. Within neo-positivism's epistemology, as Thomas and James wryly observe (2006, p. 779) 'neutral analytical procedures replace neutral controls and treatments of the experiment … in the hope … [of] … an uncontaminated correspondence'. It is precisely these epistemic aims that have been one of the key foci of jurisdictional specification by commentary in prestigious management journals ostensibly in support of methodological pluralism (see Bansal and Corley, 2011; Bluhm *et al.*, 2011; Gephart, 2004; Pratt, 2009; Suddaby, 2006; Tracy, 2010, 2012). Obviously such commentary can be helpful within a neo-positivist perspective. Indeed much discourse seems to focus upon strategies for coping with the epistemic contradictions and problems encountered by their empiricist forerunners especially around causal analysis and empirical extrapolation whilst trying to avoid the contradiction of metaphysical speculation. But surely this criteriological specification is limited to those underlying knowledge constituting assumptions. Moreover, as we have indicated, even within a subject−object dualism other philosophical disputes lead to varying methodological commitments around theorization and description. For others such issues are eschewed through epistemological shifts away from neo-positivism which result in considerable methodological reorientation that is legitimate within those alternative social constructionist knowledge constituting philosophical assumptions.

In the spirit of a permissive pluralism, Figure 1 attempts to summarize those choices invariably encountered in conducting inductive research and their relationship to varying philosophical sub-texts. Our key point is that such sub-texts need to be reflexively interrogated and articulated in both the design and reporting of research so that different choices are contextualized and justified with reference to ever-present knowledge constituting assumptions rather than being taken by default. Moreover, as a heuristic and reflexive device Figure 1 has criteriological consequences that require recognition so as to maintain the legitimacy of the philosophical diversity evident in qualitative management research. It implies a need to move beyond criteriological 'diversification' approaches which aim to develop evaluation criteria specific to particular methodologies like GT (see Sparkes, 2001) to a recognition that varying knowledge constituting assumptions can be put into practice in very different ways by what might ostensibly seem to be the same methodology. The implication of this for management research is that the deployment of different evaluation criteria needs to be overtly contingent upon such philosophical variance (see Johnson *et al.*, 2006). Clearly this requires that researchers, commentators and evaluators give more consideration to the philosophical assumptions they are employing in their judgements of research 'quality' as the latter is a concept with many meanings. For researchers, this brings reflexivity to the forefront of inductive research. Such reflexivity can take many forms (see Cunliffe, 2003; Johnson and Duberley, 2003; Lynch, 2000). It is clear, however, that at a minimum researchers should engage with underlying philosophical assumptions from the very start of framing a research project, not only when considering data analysis. Without careful consideration of these issues the field risks the unintended imposition of epistemological conformity and criteriological commensuration. We argue that this should be countered by a permissive recognition of philosophical differences and the consequent need to vary how research is evaluated in the light of reflexive interrogation and articulation of our, too often unnoticed, knowledge constituting assumptions.

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