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The role of the orthodox grounded theory methodology in establishing universal behavioural patterns in comparative cross-national research

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## Abstract

This position paper discusses the role of the orthodox grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978) in establishing universal behavioural patterns in comparative cross-national research. Having identified two main methodological issues in this field – i.e. a lack of “any real comparison” (Pierce & Pride, 1972, p. 13), an absence of a unifying, multi-/cross-level of analysis and a disregard of the interaction between levels of analysis – it is argued that the orthodox grounded theory methodology could help address these two methodological issues in comparative cross-national research by establishing universal behavioural patterns. Substantive and methodological justifications are also provided to substantiate the role that an orthodox grounded theory methodology plays in the establishment of universal behavioural patterns, contributing to methodological development and implementation of best practice in this field. The academic, societal, economic and policy impact and value of methodological development to the social sciences concerning its contributions to comparative cross-national research are also explained.

Keywords: comparative cross-national research; grounded theory methodology; social research methodology

# The role of the orthodox grounded theory methodology in establishing universal behavioural patterns in comparative cross-national research

## **Introduction**

From an orthodox grounded theory perspective (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978), this position paper discusses the role of grounded theory in establishing universal behavioural patterns in comparative cross-national research. It begins by identifying two main methodological issues in comparative cross-national research, followed by the explication and justification of a grounded theory perspective. Next, the notion of “grammar” of “behaviour” (Fox, 2004, p. 10) is further explored, extending its original use in the study of “Englishness” (Fox, 2004, p. 10) to universal behavioural patterns in comparative cross-national research. We then explain the role that grounded theory plays in the establishment of universal behavioural patterns in comparative cross-national research, stating largely its methodological tenets and beliefs. This position paper is summarised by re-iterating the two main methodological issues in comparative cross-national research and the role of grounded theory in establishing universal behavioural patterns in comparative cross-national research.

Having reviewed the extant literature in this particular methodological field, the two main methodological issues in comparative cross-national research<sup>1</sup> that we have identified are: (1) there is a situation whereby “‘comparative’ too often has meant description... – usually without any real comparison” (Pierce & Pride, 1972, p. 13) and (2) there is an absence of a unifying, multi/cross-level of analysis in comparative cross-national research and a disregard

of the interaction between levels of analysis (e.g. individual, group, organisational, national and supra-national). In order to address these two main methodological issues in comparative cross-national research, we advocate the establishment of universal behavioural patterns (i.e. “grammar” of “behaviour”, Fox, 2004, p. 10) at an abstract conceptual level (Glaser, 1978) from specific national contexts, as well as make methodological sense of the fluid interaction among social actors (e.g. individual, organisation, nation) and the constant shaping of each other in an inter-dependent manner. This means that we will combine at least two types of cross-national research – contextualisation and de-contextualisation (Hantrais & Mangen, 1996) by working from contextualised, descriptive and nation-specific data towards de-contextualised, abstract and cross-national concepts and theories. It is argued that the relevance of grounded theory methodology here is similar to “convergence theory where researchers look for universal trends” (Hantrais & Mangen, 1996, p. 5). Handy (1999) shares our methodological belief in this paper, stating that:

The nature of the problem having once been explored, the individual must conceptualise it. He must learn how to set this one experience of the problem in a more general context or framework. If he does this he will be able not only to explain the first problem but all others like it. Conceptualisation elevates the particular to the universal. Without concepts the isolated experience becomes mere anecdote, an experience talked of but not learnt from. (p.27)

Methodologically speaking, we intend to demonstrate the unique contributions and possibilities the orthodox grounded theory methodology can bring to comparative cross-national research, vis-à-vis other methodologies. As far as we are aware of, it has rarely been adopted and used in comparative cross-national research. It will also provide us fresh,

exciting insights and a deeper level of understanding of issues confronting different countries and possible directions (Hantrais & Mangen, 1996, p. 3).

The academic impact of this methodological discussion is the adoption of grounded theory methodology in comparative cross-national research, which is a rare research practice so far. Our adoption of grounded theory methodology reflects the ever increasing need within the wider social research community of being relevant to and humane towards those being researched when one does social research in a rigorous manner (Glaser, 1978; Fei, 2009). Our adoption of grounded theory methodology is also to celebrate the diversity of comparative cross-national research methodologies and methods, as well as to address and hopefully offer solutions towards some of the common issues in comparative cross-national research, such as comparability<sup>2</sup> and equivalence<sup>3</sup> (Nowak, 1977). However, we also would like to re-iterate that “*our perspective (grounded theory) is but a piece of a myriad of action in Sociology, not the only, right action*” (Glaser, 1978, p. 3, italics in original). We very much welcome the opportunity of having some inter-methodological dialogues with regard to comparative cross-national research. On the other hand, the non-academic impact of this methodological discussion is the understanding how people from different nations can indeed, in an abstract and conceptual sense, work collectively on the common platform, despite the manifest cross-national differences.

### **Explication and justification of the orthodox grounded theory methodology**

From our standpoint, we have made a conscious decision of choosing the orthodox grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978). It enables us to discuss these two main issues concerning comparative cross-national research as outlined in the previous

section of this paper. Nevertheless, we also acknowledge the fact that there exist several modified, unorthodox versions of grounded theory methodology<sup>4</sup> (e.g. Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Charmaz, 2000). Over the past forty years, grounded theory methodology has been widely adopted and used in social research, ranging across many academic disciplines. According to Glaser (1992), it is “a general methodology of analysis linked with data collection that uses a systematically applied set of methods to generate an inductive theory about a substantive area” (p. 16). “The goal of grounded theory is to generate a theory that accounts for a pattern of behaviour which is relevant and problematic for those involved.” (Glaser, 1978, p. 93).

We would like to make a distinction between methodology and method, since they are often used inter-changeably and loosely in the social research vocabulary. We regard grounded theory as a methodology, as it “emerges from a set of general intellectual attitudes and orientations rather than from a set of rules or principles” (Cole, 2006, p. 315). On the other hand, we view methods as the products of methodology (Cole, 2006). In the case of grounded theory, it “can be easily used as a general method of analysis with any form of data collection...Further, it can combine and integrate them. It transcends specific data collection methods” (Glaser, 1978, p. 6).

Despite the fact that grounded theory methodology has been commonly used with qualitative data, its potentials of working with quantitative data represent fascinating research opportunities (Glaser, 2008). More crucially, our methodological choice fits well with the general purpose of doing comparative cross-national research, according to Hantrais and Mangen (1996), that “a study can be said to be cross-national and comparative if one or more units in two or more societies are compared...concerning the systematic analysis of

phenomena, usually with the intention of explaining them and generalising from them” (pp. 1-2).

In the orthodox grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978), research problem and questions are emergent, rather than pre-defined or pre-conceived as a result of for instance, doing a literature review and then identifying the gaps within the body of extant literature. The research problem is not pre-empted by the researcher, but rather defined by those being researched themselves (McCallin, 2003). Grounded theory researchers have their areas of research interests at the outset, not professional and/or preconceived research problem (Glaser, 1998). “Grounded theory accounts for the action in a substantive area. In order to accomplish this goal grounded theory tries to understand the action in a substantive area from the point of view of the actors involved. This understanding revolves around the main concern of the participants whose behaviour continually resolves their concern.” (Glaser, 1998, p. 115)

Considering the fact that grounded theory is a fully-fledged methodological package on its own (McCallin, 2003), it has a set of methodological tenets, dealing with various aspects of research, such as reading and using the literature (Glaser, 1978), the emergence of research problem (Glaser, 1998), conceptualisation of latent pattern accounting for the continual resolution of the main concern of research participants (Glaser, 2002b), “social process analysis as the focus of analysis” (Glaser, 1978, p. 109), the notion that “all is data” (Glaser, 2001), and that grounded theory is abstract of time, place and people (Glaser, 2003). Methodological procedures of grounded theory involve open and selective coding, constant comparison, theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation, theoretical coding, memoing, hand-sorting of memos and theoretical writing (Glaser, 1978).

In addition to the methodological tenets and procedures of the orthodox grounded theory as outlined above, there is an independent set of criteria for judging grounded theory: relevance, fit, workability and modifiability (Glaser, 1978). Grounded theory is “relevant to the action of the area” under research (p. 5). “Grounded theory arrives at relevance, because it allows core problems and processes to emerge.” (p. 5) Fit means “the categories of the theory must fit the data. Data should not be forced or selected to fit pre-conceived or pre-existent categories or discarded in favour of keeping an extant theory in tact” (p. 4). For a theory to be workable, it “should be able to explain what happened, predict what will happen and interpret what is happening in an area of substantive or formal inquiry” (p. 4). A theory has the possibility of getting modified once compared with new data and if required, further saturated towards a higher level of abstract conceptualisation (Glaser, 1978).

### **The notion of ‘universal behavioural patterns’**

The notion of ‘universal behavioural patterns’ used in this position paper has been influenced and inspired by two different strands of the literature, substantive and methodological, respectively. The first strand is the notion of “‘grammar’ of English behaviour” (Fox, 2004, p. 2), which was used in the study of “Englishness” (Fox, 2004, p. 10). According to Fox (2004), it is intended to “identify the *commonalities* in rules governing English behaviour – the unofficial codes of conduct that cut across class, age, sex, region, sub-cultures and other social boundaries” (p. 2, italics in original). Fox (2004) also argues that “when absorbed in the task of defining a ‘national character’, it is easy to become obsessed with the distinctive features of a particular culture, and to forget that we are all members of the same species” (p. 11). For this reason – considering the (substantive) potential and possibilities as discussed by

Fox (2004) above, we endeavour to establish ‘universal behavioural patterns’ in comparative cross-national research.

The second strand of the literature that informs the notion of ‘universal behavioural patterns’ in this position paper lies at one of the methodological tenets of grounded theory – ‘conceptualisation of latent pattern’ (Glaser, 2001). Grounded theory concerns the generation of emergent, conceptualised and integrated patterns that are denoted by categories and their properties (Glaser, 2001). Three most important traits of ‘conceptualisation of latent pattern’ have been identified: (1) latent pattern naming by concepts which are categories and properties; (2) the concepts have ‘enduring grab’; and (3) the concepts are abstract of time, people and place (Glaser, 2001; 2003). It is in this methodological strand of the literature that we realise the methodological feasibility and do-ability of establishing ‘universal behavioural patterns’ in comparative cross-national research (See Glaser, 1978, Chapter 10 – one of the new directions in grounded theory: cross-cultural ethnography).

### **The role of the orthodox grounded theory methodology in establishing universal behavioural patterns in comparative cross-national research**

Having explicated and justified the methodological choice (i.e. the orthodox grounded theory), as well as explained the notion of ‘universal behavioural patterns’ and the two strands of the literature that inform it both substantively and methodologically, we further discuss the role of the orthodox grounded theory methodology in establishing ‘universal behavioural patterns’ in comparative cross-national research in terms of two key aspects. The first aspect concerns the contributions to methodological development and implementation of best practice in comparative cross-national research. The second aspect draws attention to the

impact and value of methodological development to the social sciences concerning its contributions to comparative cross-national research.

*Contributions to methodological development and implementation of best practice in comparative cross-national research*

The first and foremost methodological contribution that the orthodox grounded theory methodology brings to comparative cross-national research is that of doing relevant, rigorous and humane research (Glaser, 1978; Fei, 2009). We acknowledge the fact that colleagues may have adopted different interpretations and practices concerning these three aspects of doing social research. By “relevant”, it is meant researching into problems facing research participants, rather than the researchers (Glaser, 1978). Being “rigorous” and “humane” means the adoption and use of grounded theory as a whole methodological package and the humane approach towards research participants throughout its research process, respectively (Fei, 2009). Based upon the notion of social process analysis (Glaser, 1978), the second methodological contribution lies at the fact that practice or everyday activities (i.e. “what is really going on?”) (Glaser, 1998) are regarded as a unifying methodological element (Cole, 1996), cutting across multiple levels of analysis (e.g. individual, group, organisation, region, nation) (Klein, Dansereau & Hall, 1994; Rousseau, 1985). This is to suggest that to compare and conceptualise what people do cross-nationally is fundamentally central in our methodological approach. This multi/cross-level of analysis contrasts with the separate and isolated treatment of, for instance, individual and national levels (Smith, Peterson & Thomas, 2008), micro, intermediate and macro levels (Pierce & Pride, 1972). Our last, but not least contribution is the shift from the descriptive mode of analysis (Leung, 2008) with respect to different types of equivalence (Lonner, 1979; Nowak, 1977; Armer, 1973), comparability

(Nowak, 1977), “similarities and differences” (Hantrais & Mangen, 1996, p. 3), or “national likeness and unlikeness” (Hantrais & Mangen, 1996, p. 3) in general, towards commonalities cutting “across class, age, sex, region, sub-cultures and other social boundaries” (Fox, 2004, p. 2) at an abstract conceptual level (Glaser, 1978). The latter is developed as “theoretical equivalence” (Teune, 1990). This means, from a grounded theory perspective, when doing cross-national research, a set of emergent concepts and categories are constantly compared on a theoretical basis and further conceptualised at a higher level of abstraction (Glaser, 2001).

In the course of making these methodological contributions discussed above, we also hope to shed some light on some of the general problems in comparative cross-national research from an orthodox grounded theory perspective: the management of research, availability of and access to comparable datasets and the definition of the research parameters and associated issues of equivalence of concepts (Hantrais & Mangen, 1996), as well as adequacy and comparability of descriptive categories; functional equivalence of the phenomena under study; comparability of investigation procedures; adequacy, representativeness and comparability of samples; problems of interpretation (Frijda & Jahoda, 1969). Some of these issues have already been discussed by colleagues in this methodological field, e.g. sampling (Munroe & Munroe, 1991; Ember & Ember, 1998), types of data, for instance, aggregative data, sample survey data, data generated from content analysis, and cultural data (Scheuch, 1966; Deutsch, 1966), primary vs. secondary (Ember & Ember, 1998).

*Impact and value of methodological development to the social sciences concerning its contributions to comparative cross-national research*

The contributions to the methodological development, as outlined above, address a long-standing tension in the development of contemporary social science, “between (1) those scholars who stress the uniqueness of events in time and place, and (2) those scholars who emphasise abstraction from a number of specific events in order to make general statements about human behaviour” (Pierce & Pride, 1972, p. 15). From an orthodox grounded theory point of view, this tension can possibly be resolved by working from time-, place- and people-specific events to the discovery of behavioural patterns that are independent of time, place and people (Glaser, 1978). In particular, universal behavioural patterns can be discovered through the systematic application of the methodological procedures of orthodox grounded theory (e.g. constant comparison, theoretical sampling, etc.) (Glaser, 1978). They can also be discovered in the form of emergent concepts and theories that are relevant to research participants, as opposed to borrowing and using them from existing disciplines. The very use of the latter may blind us from seeing the commonalities cross-nationally (Brislin, 1983). Therefore, the overall values and impacts of this particular methodological development are to tackle the problem of “theoretical poverty of comparative research” (Oyen, 1990, p. 8) in today’s social sciences. In our view, the orthodox grounded theory methodology is considered as useful “for the development of a general science of human behaviour” (Whiting, 1954, p. 531).

The methodological discussions in this paper intend to exhibit research impact in four key areas – academic, societal, economic and policy. They will be accomplished through conducting relevant, rigorous and humane research on the basis of our methodological choice,

expertise in this particular methodological area and experiences in using the orthodox grounded theory methodology.

The academic area of the research impact is the adoption and use of the orthodox grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978) in comparative cross-national research, which has been a rare research practice so far. Such an adoption is to celebrate the multiplicity and plurality of social research methodologies, as well as to address and consequently offer solutions towards some of the common issues in comparative cross-national research, such as comparability and equivalence (Nowak, 1977).

Based upon our proposed use of the orthodox grounded theory methodology in comparative cross-national research, the societal area of research impact are two-fold: (1) to offer social actors (i.e. individuals, organisations, nation states) an abstract and conceptual perspective (Glaser, 1978) that cuts across nations; (2) from a comparative cross-national point of view, to provide social actors methodological means of perspective building – from contextualised to de-contextualised national settings. The first societal area of research impact helps social actors enhance their understanding of social phenomena that they are interested in – which is of direct relevance to them and to the national and cross-national contexts in which they are operating. The abstract and conceptual perspective (Glaser, 1978) that is put forward will serve as a “theoretical mirror”, reflecting the behaviour of social actors, as well as the behaviour of their counterparts cross-nationally. The second societal area of research impact demonstrates the skilful, and yet playful fabrication of the “theoretical mirror” and its temporariness, from contextualisation to de-contextualisation of national settings, as well as their re-contextualisation given the fluidity of the social world (Wells, 1995).

The economic area of research impact concerns the provision of exposure (i.e. a “theoretical mirror”) to the social actors. By so doing, it will allow these social actors to guide and benchmark their behaviours on the basis of the emergent “universal trends” (Hantrais & Mangan, 1996, p. 5). However, this is not to suggest that these “universal trends” are universal standards to be followed, but rather, an additional piece of information being made available to these social actors for their own perspective building.

Finally, the policy (covering both academic and social) areas of research impact will be addressing: (1) relevance and rigour of conducting comparative cross-national research – through our methodological choice (i.e. the orthodox grounded theory) (Glaser, 1978; Fei, 2009), and (2) how social actors from different national contexts could interact with each another more meaningfully, tackling and confronting key challenges facing all of them, on the basis of commonalities (Fox, 2004) at an abstract and conceptual level (Glaser, 1978), rather than differences at a descriptive level. In the academic policy area, we would like to join the ongoing discussion concerning relevance and rigour of academic research and provide our perspective from our methodological point of view (i.e. the orthodox grounded theory). In the policy area for social actors such as individual nation states and groups of nation states, we aim to further our understanding of universal behavioural patterns of social actors involved, from a comparative cross-national perspective. We intend not to merely present what is going on in a number of national settings, but rather to generate an abstract and conceptual perspective on the basis of comparison between the national settings (Glaser, 1978).

We hope that by effectively exhibiting research impact in these four intertwined areas whilst we discuss two main methodological issues in comparative cross-national research, our work

will ultimately make valuable contributions to the field of comparative cross-national research, both methodologically and substantively. It will also broaden the knowledge of the social actors and more crucially, direct their actions as pointed out by the abstract and conceptual perspective (i.e. universal behavioural patterns) cutting across national contexts (Glaser, 1978; Fox, 2004).

## **Summary**

It is identified that there exist two main methodological issues in comparative cross-national research: (1) there is a situation whereby “‘comparative’ too often has meant description... – usually without any real comparison” (Pierce & Pride, 1972, p. 13) and (2) there is an absence of a unifying, multi/cross-level of analysis in comparative cross-national research and a disregard of the interaction between levels of analysis (e.g. individual, group, organisational, national and supra-national). In order to address these two main methodological issues, the establishment of universal behavioural patterns at an abstract conceptual level (Glaser, 1978) and the role of the orthodox grounded theory methodology that plays in this research endeavour are discussed both substantively and methodologically.

The adoption of the orthodox grounded theory methodology in establishing universal behavioural patterns makes contributions to methodological development and implementation of best practice in comparative cross-national research in three significant ways: promoting relevant, rigorous and humane research conduct (Glaser, 1978; Fei, 2009), treating practice and everyday activities as a unifying methodological element (Cole, 1996), and shifting from the descriptive mode of analysis (Leung, 2008) towards “commonalities” (Fox, 2004) at an abstract conceptual level (Glaser, 1978), in other words, latent pattern of behaviour (Glaser,

2001). The proposed use of the orthodox grounded theory methodology in the establishment of universal behavioural patterns, which is a crucial methodological development to the social sciences central to this position paper, has impact and value in four key areas, academic, societal, economic and policy.

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Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> The terms “cross-national” and “cross-cultural” have been used inter-changeably and loosely in the literature. The distinctions between the two have been discussed in the methodological literature (Kobben, 1979) (see Table 1 below). It is suggested that “the cross-national comparison is narrower than the worldwide cross-cultural one because the results of a cross-national comparison are generalisable only to a limited range of cross-cultural variation – that which encompasses only the complex societies (usually multicultural nation-states) of recent times.” (Ember & Ember, 1998, p. 653)

Table 1 Characteristics of cross-cultural and cross-national studies

	Cross-Cultural Studies	Cross-National Studies
Discipline	Anthropology	Sociology; Political Science
Sources	Ethnographies	National Statistics; Surveys
Research Techniques	Participant Observation; Case Studies	Questionnaires; Interviews
Constituent Units	Mostly Communities and Ethnic Groups	Mostly States

Source: Kobben (1979, p. 1)

<sup>2</sup> Definitional and operational aspects of comparability – “what we want to study and how can we assess or recognise in different social settings the phenomena which we want to study” (Nowak, 1977, p. 34)

<sup>3</sup> What has also been discussed in the methodological literature is several types of equivalence: functional, conceptual, linguistic and metric (Lonner, 1979); different types of equivalence (Nowak, 1977); appropriateness vs. equivalence within the research process (Armer, 1973)

<sup>4</sup> See: Glaser (1992) and Glaser (2002a)