Applying Grounded Theory

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Application of grounded theory (GT) is a relatively neglected topic by my colleagues. I have written several chapters in my books on applying GT. Two colleagues, Odis Simmons and Barbara Artinian (2009), as well as Dirks and Mills (2011), and Walsh (2014), have also written about applying GT.   In the first two chapters of this book I discuss at length properties of generally applying GT and then professional issues and personal matters when applying of GT. There follows in this book nine chapters, four by me and one by Simmons and one by Artinian and one by Dirks and Mills, that are already published in books on GT, and one by Walsh. Thus, this book ends like a reader which publishes in one place already written work.   The reader of this book may experience some redundancy in these chapters, but that is the nature of reader texts as different authors discuss the same ideas and topics.

General Properties of Applying GT

In this book I am writing about only the application of classic GT as I originated it in 1967 in which the concepts of a GT theory are abstract of time, place, and people. Thus, I am NOT referring to any of the multi versions of so-called GT. The multi versions are just different and, to some degree, just jargonized with GT vocabulary. The application of GT has been almost totally neglected in the literature on GT. Yet, it is a vital topic for our profession and ourselves.   Thus, I will be writing about the application of abstract concepts whether embedded in a theory or just singular. I will be writing about applications to profession, literature, in service to clients, and for personal use.

Anselm and I saw clearly when writing "Awareness of Dying" in 1965 the general implications of our awareness context theory for application as it gave many control and access concepts. As a consequence, I wrote the chapter on the practical uses of awareness theory (see chapter 3 herewith). In this chapter I detailed at length, in a very formal manner, the requirements for applying awareness theory. I asserted that to be applied a GT must fit the area to be applied, must be relevant to the people applied to, must be understandable to the people in the area applied, must be sufficiently general, and must give the applier some control. This formatting was especially to compete with clinical practice conjecture. Today, 50 years later, these requirements are true enough for applying a whole GT, but they are only a small part of applying GT during these preceding 50 years. Most application in recent years is applying an abstract GT concept, which has grab and general implications, and thereby helps explain what behavior is going on. This can improve clinical practice or other behavioral patterns with intervention when one is allowed to enter and improve the environment. Applying a whole theory in a formal way is possible but is not necessary.

In recent years among the few who apply GT, we just purposely intervene for improvement in behavior with conceptual explanatory power from one imageric concept-- usually, which is usually a core category, not a whole theory. Today we also apply GT, non-purposely, almost automatically as an informal conceptual explanation as it may occur in casual conversation or a happening. It is the way people knowing grounded theory think. Grounded theory concepts have abstract power and grab for people. Informally applying GT has grown with the spread of classic GT

Of course, a GT is applicable to data from which it is generated. It also applies with fit and relevance to similar areas of concern. Thus, awareness applies to many areas of medical concern.   What I wish to add is that application of a GT is based on conceptual fit and relevance, even if the area is different. For example super-normalizing theory applies on the football field as well as among heart attack victims or skiers. Or credentializing fits many areas where competence and quality control are necessary. Or routing based on BMR's (basic mobility resources) goes on everyday in our lives. As we plan getting from here to there.

These fits to many types, and areas, and data occur almost automatically and conceptually irrespective of the data from which they were generated. Their conceptual grab and their use is nonstopable and occurs informally and casually more often than formally. Thus, we do GT applications naturally in many ways. The GT methodology is based on coding what we do naturally, that is comparing incidents in our lives to see patterns in everyday life. GT comes naturally in our everyday private life. We know our routing patterns, we know the credentializing patterns of school and work to assure quality behavior. We know purchasing patterns of food markets and so on. We are constantly coding brief GT's naturally that we generalize and engage in behavior in terms of. We all are applying GT of some sort. (See below on Personal applications).

When applying a GT to fit and be relevant to another area of concern, we use the constant comparative analysis to apply and even generate more conceptual properties to perhaps apply. Thus, the original theory, when applied, generates even more theory through application. 'This can start a formal theory implication depending how far one takes application by constant comparison. This analysis for application can back test the GT for preconceptions, though they seldom occur in a well generated GT. The preconception concepts will not work.

Planning ahead of time to generate a GT, as many do unfortunately, that can be applied (hopefully) is not classic GT. It preconceives the emergent problem in the problem area and thusly the concepts needed for fit and relevant application, both of which cannot be preconceived doing GT. They must be discovered and the applicability will emerge with it. Dirks and Mills are wrong in saying that the goal of applying GT must be part of the research to achieve "ultimate worth" (see chapter 6). This is pure preconception, which GT avoids to get data on what is really going on.

Be careful when applying a GT exactly to a different population, as the main concern may be different for the new participants. Also the reciprocal effect of the application to another main concern may require a major modification of the applied GT. It is better to

just apply the conceptual understanding of the existing concepts with conceptual properties from constant comparisons that fit with relevance to the emergent concerns of the new population. (See chapter 3 on intervention with GT).

When considering the application of an existing GT, generated by oneself or another person, one needs to ensure that it is credibly relevant and fits to the applied to population. The modification may be general or specific depending on the intervention purpose. The intervention may be for general understanding or social structural change or a combination of both. Thus the managerializing of client oriented service practice is to sharpen service with understanding. Only use that part of the GT that applied and, if necessary, just reciprocally modify that part of the GT. Intervention properties will emerge as to how the GT is best applied. Stay open to reciprocal modifications that are earned by generating. This is not correcting a GT. It is extending it with more fit and relevance.

GT helps us to see things as they are, not as we preconceive them to be. Even without a GT, having a GT orientation helps us spot preconception when applied. We do not know how to apply GT until preconceptions are spotted in the participants' behavior and attitude. GT orients us to seeing our behavior and the behavior of others as data; we are able to see these things as they are, not as we wish them to be. Without preconceptions our minds are free to see things as they are so we can apply with trust in a favorable outcome. As the applying proceeds, the GT itself grows with the outcomes from application.

Since they are abstract, GT concepts are generalizable; they apply based on the reversibility of interchangeable indicators to a wide range of empirical data or indicators within situations and contexts with fit and relevance. The abstract power of a GT grows in applicability when it is applied while it remains empirically grounded with fit and relevance. GT grows with its use in application. Grounded changes occur in the problem area with no conjecture or speculation.   Complex multivariate GT applications are grounded and practical; they become useful over a wide range of areas. Generalizing with GT concept can go on forever.

GT applications of generalizations are not stale dated as are QDA generalizations or descriptions where the description changes any time. GT applications are abstract and modifiable upon comparisons.   With GT providing the links between concepts and recommendations for change in data, interventions and resulting changes for practice are not difficult since recommendations are grounded with modifiable abstractions. Conjectured theory is easily forgotten as reified and too abstract; the GT concepts fit with relevance and necessary modification as they are grounded. Grounded abstraction generates implications and possible interventions for application. And the application itself can easily generate more properties (concepts) than the applying GT concepts.

Context during application is a general word for environment or situation. As the application precedes it gives control and access to the situation. It helps the applier understand and explain to clients what is going on in the context to which it is being applied. The application can also help effect a change with sensitivity in or to the context problem. As said above, application of GT concepts can also modify the GT conceptually

with new ranges, imagery, and properties of the original GT concepts by comparing the GT concepts with the applied to data or concepts which generate the modifications.

When necessary, application of a core concept or its subcore concepts is especially applicable because people can see them as applicable in many places for their conceptual grab and power. Like the core concept supernormalizing can easily become conditioned and contextualized for use because of its imagery and grab. Same with managerializing practice or credentializing   certifying quality performance, or resisting residual selves, or atmosphering a groups meeting, or competence displays and so on. This aspect of the abstract power of GT concepts is very powerful. The concepts fit with relevance general to other data, far beyond the original data that yielded the emergence of the GT. The original data can easily be forgotten. One does not need to know it for application. A GT can become autonomous as it is seen and applied "everywhere."

Needless to say, descriptive generalities of QDA lack this power. They become stale date very quickly. They are not abstract of time, place, and people as GT concepts are. Thus, when applied, they can be incorrect a day or two or weeks later, so their applicability is very limited. (see my book of Descriptive Remodeling of GT). They are stuck with the worrisome accuracy concerns of QDA as data changes. GT concepts do not change. They get modified by properties yielded by constant comparisons. Thus for example, supernormalizing of heart attack victims theory can easily be applied to studying management with regard to the over demand of on its staff beyond their normal physical limits. In short, the application of GT is a field just waiting to happen beyond its meager beginnings to date. It is lacking in the literature because of its lack of research and action on applying GT.

When considering a GT application of an existing GT (generated by oneself or another person), the applier needs to ensure its credible relevance to application population. This relevance can easily require modifications to the applied theory to ensure fit and relevance. The modifications may be general or specific depending on the specific purpose of the impending intervention, which could vary from a specific change to just a general understanding or a combination of both. The abstractness and generality of GT conceptions allow the generation of GT changes and formulations at the same time when constant comparing concepts to intervene. The applier need only use that part of the applied GT theory that fits with relevance. For example, an applier could use the just applying awareness theory to pretense awareness contexts. When applying the concepts, the applier lets emerge how application best works and how reciprocal modification of the theory emerges also to suit the application. The applier stays open to earned reciprocal modifications. These modifications are not correcting the theory. They extend it with growth in its power with more fit and relevance for a wider variety of data applications.

Be careful in applying a GT to a different population with a different main concern. Even with reciprocal modifications the GT theory may not fit with sufficient relevance and forcing concepts on behavior may occur. Short of doing a full-on GT on the new population, it is best to just apply some concepts to give some understanding of the participants current behavior and not suggest change and solutions. Interventions of a stronger nature could go

awry. Simple understandings can grow and emerge to intervention for the participants on their terms.

Applying a GT that gets reciprocally modified and extended by the data applied to it does not produce a formal theory beginning. It just modifies the existing theory with more conceptual coverage. It just extends the substantive GT. A formal theory generation requires a full systematic comparison of two or more well-generated substantive theories based on enough participants to show established patterns. For example, a formal theory of supernormalization would require systematic comparing of separate substantive GTs on heart attack victims, on professional football players, on recreational skiers, and on impaired aged people. A single substantive GT can sound like a formal theory and can be written like one, but it is not one. By the same token, substantive theory seems to be enough and quite applicable to a variety of populations. There are almost no written formal theories (See Status Passage, by Glaser and Strauss, 1971). Applying a substantive theory to another population sounds like generating a formal theory but it is not. The substantive GT is just expanded and may be written "as if" formal. Application mere starts the idea for doing a formal theory (if one has the resources).

Applying GT with a goal of a specific change may bring in preconceptions as to desired change. However popular and realistic the change may be to many, it can bring in preconceptions that are quite biased. Using GT for this purpose is counterproductive and undermines the quest of GT -- what is really going on. The applying of GT resulting in a favorable change should emerge naturally. The general implication of a GT concept can easily lead to conjecture on its possible use for a bias change. As powerful as it may sound, the change should emerge from applying the concept, not as an application requirement goal for a concept.

This concludes my chapter on general properties of applying GT. It is thin because so little has been written on applying GT, which yields then properties of applying for others to analyze. This chapter then is merely a beginning of a bigger study waiting to happen. I now turn to discussing properties of professional and then personal applying of GT.

References

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