



Sense and sensibility: Two approaches for using existing theory in theory-building qualitative research

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ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the role and use of theory in theory-building case research. How to use existing theory in theory-building efforts is a crucial, yet somewhat overlooked challenge within qualitative research. On that background, the purpose of the paper is to explore, compare and discuss two distinct approaches for using existing theory and developing theoretical awareness in theory-building case studies. Upon discussing the role and use of theory in case study research in general, we identify two approaches for drawing on pre-existing theory, labeled the *in vivo* approach and the *ex ante* approach. The *in vivo* approach takes departure in a single theoretical framework, anchored in a single paradigm, and the aim of theory-building is to gradually deepen, refine and complement this framework. The *ex ante* approach suggests that researchers should look for paradox in the form of theoretical tensions and use these to develop theory, meaning that researchers should develop an elaborate theoretical understanding of meta-theoretical stances and use these to generate different readings of the case material, subsequently prioritizing and integrating them into a coherent pattern.

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Researchers seeking to develop new theoretical insights derived from case research face an important dilemma: how to use existing theoretical frameworks in case study research and still remain flexible in their theorizing efforts. However, for qualitative researchers few guidelines exist on how and when to most appropriately include theoretical perspectives in their investigations (Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2004). Not least in the field of business-to-business marketing, where research on many interesting phenomena, such as for instance the coordination of marketing activities with those of other activities in- and outside the organizational perimeter must be researched in the context where they unfold, case studies hold a prominent role in theory development (Bonoma, 1985). However, there has been a call for more rigorous procedures for qualitative research in terms of clear procedures for detailing the research process in a consistent way (Bonoma, 1985; Johnston, Leach, & Liu, 1999; Perry, 2001).

Pre-existing theory provides a crucial challenge to theory-building qualitative research. Research literature warns us against being too theoretically predetermined when conducting inductively oriented qualitative research, as this may prematurely lock our analytical focus and blind us from imaginative theorizing and from revealing new insights and theoretical breakthroughs (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Maxwell, 1996; Mills, 1959; Weick, 1989). On the other hand, researchers do not enter a field without some theory-driven specifi-

cations and expectations (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Few people would disagree that our access to and framing of social reality into 'cases' is mediated by prior knowledge. However, despite that most would agree on this, there is a widely held misconception that the hall marks of qualitative research is that it is exploratory, inductive and grounded. Researchers fray from involving pre-existing theoretical frameworks mainly for two reasons: using pre-existing theories is seen as incompatible with conducting explorative research, and involving pre-existing theory is by some likened with the proposition testing canons of positivist research. However, unspecified theoretical expectations or a lack of theoretical knowledge may lead researchers to replicate pre-existing findings adding little to existing theoretical knowledge, or to produce massive amounts of data without any clarity with respect to how this data can lead to novel insights.

Contrasted to quantitative research which relies on measurement and bracketing according to close-ended categorizations, the researcher's openness to sensory impressions and subjective interpretations of these are central in qualitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, pp. 41–42). We believe that the sense of qualitative research strategies can be balanced by the sensibility of pre-existing theoretical frameworks, as part of the developing inter-subjectivity and validity in qualitative research. Reflecting on pre-existing theory can be understood as part of the process where researchers engage in a discourse with the scientific community. The purpose of this paper is to explore, compare and discuss two distinct approaches for using existing theory and developing theoretical awareness in theory-building case studies. Each approach represents a different way of balancing the quest for new theoretical insight with the quest for

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benefiting from and maintaining a dialogue with existing theoretical frameworks. We label the two approaches *in vivo* and *ex ante* approaches for drawing on pre-existing theory. The paper is structured as follows. First, we discuss the role and use of theory in qualitative research aiming at theory-building as opposed to theory-testing. Then, we define and discuss the two approaches for use of theory along with their underlying dimensions and differences. In the following discussion, we compare the two approaches, addressing the challenges involved with each one. We conclude by discussing the contribution of each approach to business-to-business marketing researchers.

1. The role of theory in theory-building qualitative research

A frequent misconception of qualitative research is that a researcher is required to enter a field of study without any theoretical ballast. This perspective is often ascribed to Grounded Theory, however erroneously (Suddaby, 2006). No researcher is a *tabula rasa* upon which reality is imprinted. We enter the field as subjects, preconditioned from previous formal training or from experience, and our mental ballast will interact in framing reality for us. Theoretical perspectives are fragments of an autobiography developed by an individual researcher (Bedeian, 2004). Rather than refraining from theoretical predispositions, qualitative researchers should embrace and understand how they interact in their sense-making efforts during theory-building.

In order to discuss the role of theory in qualitative research, we need to define what we mean by the concepts of theory and theory-building qualitative research. *Theory* is an abstract notion, which is defined in more or less precise terms. It is used arbitrarily throughout the literature and is often confused with other concepts such as *models* and *propositions* (Sutton & Staw, 1995). Theory may be conceptualized as “an ordered set of assertions about a generic behavior or structure assumed to hold throughout a significantly broad range of specific instances” (Sutherland, 1975:9). This idea of generalizability of theoretical insights, however, has been challenged, particularly in social science research. Theories aiming to reach a high degree of generalizability do this at the expense of other aims of research such as accuracy and simplicity (Weick, 1995). The definition of theory also relates to ontological conceptions of the nature of knowledge. Social scientists have addressed this in terms of theoretical range and argued that social researchers should refrain from the building of grand theory in the image of natural science. Instead, theory-building should take a bottom-up approach and focus on engaging on theorizing and minor work hypotheses closer to the social reality which they address (Merton, 1957).

For our purposes, *theory-building* is defined as the process through which researchers seek to make sense of the observable world by conceptualizing, categorizing and ordering relationships among observed elements. This definition builds on Astley (1985) and Weick (1989), both of whom also focus on theory-building as a sense-making process, where the interplay of observation and multi-relational reflection through interpretation and authoring plays a central role for the generation of new theory. We are explicitly concerned with theory-building from case studies using mainly qualitative data. Theory-building has been contrasted to theory-testing case research. Theory-testing using case studies concerns the confirmation or refutation of propositions or predictions derived from a theory (Wilson & Woodside, 1999). Using cases for theory-testing has been suggested in situations where events are unique and therefore do not allow for alternative approaches such as sampling (Yin, 1994) or in situations where an insider's perspective is necessary in order to understand the intricacies of the phenomenon under study (Johnston et al., 1999). Theoretical designs using qualitative studies to build new theory contrast with this approach (Eisenhardt, 1989), because they emphasize the meaning rather than the measurement of

the phenomenon (Daft, 1983). The research process is iterative in scope, suggesting that the researcher continuously moves back and forth between field investigation and theoretical reflection (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Eisenhardt, 1989; Orton, 1997). In qualitative research, researchers are the instruments of observation and interpretation. Moreover, as part of their ongoing sense-making efforts, researchers start to evoke interpretations immediately after they enter into qualitative investigations. As pointed out by Dubois and Gadde (2002), the main difficulty of case studies concerns the interrelations of these various elements in the research process.

Theory-building progresses through either interpolation or extrapolation (Weick, 1989). *Interpolation* refers to a process, where concepts and partial explanations are gradually deepened building upon broad outlines of theory which may be refined and complemented as research progresses. *Extrapolation* refers to a process where concepts and theories are developed and modified by subjecting them to alternative theoretical perspectives with different explanatory abilities. Whereas interpolation entails a gradual adjustment of developed insights resulting from interpretation processes, extrapolation is characterized by deliberate theoretical leaps among schools of thought which may hold axiomatically different conceptualizations of core concepts and therefore may propose radically diverging explanations and even different framings of what is to be focused upon analytically in research inquiry.

Exactly because social contexts are unstable over time and may unfold in unpredicted ways, pre-existing scientific theory may provide an ample source of inspiration to theorizing efforts. Moreover, because theories may not be applicable as grand concepts explaining all incidents of phenomena, there is also room for simultaneously using more theories to encourage imaginative thinking, even if such theories have conflicting views on the relevance of particular concepts for understanding the issues studied as well as on how such concepts are interrelated. The role of theory in case research is to support the researchers' ability to focus, and to help sort and structure data in an informative manner, in the situation of data overload characteristic for qualitative research (Miles, 1979). However, focusing too strongly on pre-existing theoretical concepts may also temporarily blind researchers in their quest for establishing new insights and may therefore hinder theory development and lead only to induction and validation of previous theorizing (Weick, 1989). Therefore, in theory-building qualitative research, pre-existing theory should be seen as a means for imaginative theorizing, a resourced form of musing, allowing for the free flowing interplay of observation and multi-relational reflection (Locke et al., 2004).

2. Two approaches for involving pre-existing theory in theory-building research

In the literature on qualitative research strategies, very few contributions detail the processes of involving theory in theory-building (Van Maanen, Sørensen, & Mitchell, 2007; Weick, 1989). For instance, Eisenhardt's frequently cited paper on the use of case studies for theory-building purposes (Eisenhardt, 1989), except for a brief suggestion to defer literature studies until the later stages of the research process, does not discuss the role of theory in the processes of theory-building. From the perspective of a research practitioner embarking on qualitative research, we found that the literature concerned with the use of existing literature in theory-building generally differs in terms of *how* as well as *when* the use of pre-existing theory is suggested to take place. The issue of *how* concerns the researcher's preparation and treatment of inspirational theoretical resources in field studies. Particularly, it links to a fundamental debate among different ontological conceptions of the nature of knowledge and their epistemological consequences. Whereas one strand of philosophical thinking on the nature of science sees knowledge as justified true beliefs upon which subsequent theory-building must

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