STUDY ON LEVELS OF THEORY: GRAND TO GROUNDED

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ABSTRACT

Theories tied to observation and meant to apply in a particular area of application are called "grounded" by Glaser and Strauss (1967). In their study of the awareness of death, Glaser and Strauss demonstrated that middle-range theory is constructed by "grounding" it in observation—that is, building a theory by relying more on observed data than on abstract ideas. Yet, the so-called "grounded theory" approach does not rely entirely on induction (reasoning from particulars to generalizations), but rather moves back and forth from data gathering to deduction (reasoning from generalizations to particular cases) to test the theory.

Grounded theories may serve as building blocks for formal theories, while remaining close enough to real-world observations as to give us confidence in their validity. An example from information seeking would be Kuhlthau's (1993a) model of the search process. Kuhlthau's model was developed through close observation of the ways that information seekers construct knowledge by tying it to what they already know as they pass through various stages of uncertainty and understanding. It self derived from a general, psychological theory (i.e., Kelly, 1963), Kuhlthau's model could be expanded into a more general theory of information seeking through further observation and development.

Key words: *demonstrated, Grounded , seeking , observation, development.*

INTRODUCTION

A theory is something more specific than a paradigm; the question is, How specific? In a quotation at the beginning of this chapter, the eminent sociologist Robert Merton complains that social scientists do not always share the same definition for theory, much less the same goals regarding the kinds of theory to construct. He was particularly concerned about continued attempts to create "grand" theories that tried to explain large segments of human behavior in a universal way. In their emulation of major social theorists like Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer, and Talcott Parsons, other scholars have tried (and failed) to predict actions and tendencies across too many individuals, cultures, and societies. Recently Skinner (1985) has pointed to a "return of grand theory" in the work of still-living scholars like Jürgen Habermas and Anthony Giddens, who refuse to restrict theory to limited questions, methods, and evidence.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several authors have pointed out that a body of work by philologist George Zipf (1949) functions as a paradigm or grand theory for studies of information seeking. Poole's (1985) analysis of the information seeking literature found that 40 of the 51 studies he sampled lent their support to Zipf 's Principle of Least Effort. Although Zipf did not claim that his principle was a formal theory, Poole demonstrates that it has the earmarks of a general theory, and that propositions may be derived from it.

According to Zipf (1949), each individual will adopt a course of action that will involve the expenditure of the probable least average of his work—in other words, the least effort. Zipf supports his theory with evidence from various aspects of human behavior, most of it based on studies of language usage.

For example, the statistical distribution of words in the text of James Joyce's Ulysses follows the kind of pattern on which Zipf based his theory. Ranked by frequency of appearance, the 10th most common word in Ulysses appears 2,653 times; the 100th most common word, 265 times; and the 1,000th, 26 times. The result is a distribution of data in which the number 26 appears as a constant. Another example comes from the 1930 U.S. census, in which a ranking of the 50 most populous cities revealed that the second-largest had one half the population of the first, the third-largest one-third of that population, and so forth, down to the 50th-largest city. Again, a suspiciously non-random distribution.

Davis (1986) describes how "successful" (i.e., both famous and widely applied) social theories addressed major problems (e.g., economic change) and also overturned previous assumptions about the topic (e.g., that religion is largely unrelated to economic activity, a view challenged by Max Weber). Davis examines the grand theories of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber, among others, to show how broadly they were applied to explanations of behavior.

For example, Durkheim's theory that the division of labor played a primary role in social organization has been used to study phenomena in government, law, religion, science, and the arts, as well as to explain the very notion of individuality among humans. His notion that intermediate social groups, such as occupations, helped to hold society together in the face of declining community and family ties could be considered a "grand theory."

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Rather than trying to reinvent or replace the broad theories that emerged during the nineteenth century, Merton argued that we should concentrate on the development of limited, "middle-range" theories; such theories function at a higher level than a testable hypothesis, but

deal with limited settings, remain close to the level of observable phenomena, and offer the potential for aggregating findings.

To illustrate the middle-range, Merton offered the example of "reference group theory," the idea that individuals judge themselves by referring to the standards of significant people in their lives, rather than to some absolute criteria that apply to all humans. For example, you probably judge how financially "well off " you are by considering the wealth of your friends, relatives, co-workers and acquaintances—rather than consulting United Nations statistics on average annual incomes around the world, or even those of your own nation. Referential judgments constitute a phenomenon that can be readily observed in many social settings and across cultures, such that results can be compared and related to other sociological concepts, such as class.

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Grounded theories may serve as building blocks for formal theories, while remaining close enough to real-world observations as to give us confidence in their validity. An example from information seeking would be Kuhlthau's (1993a) model of the search process. Kuhlthau's model was developed through close observation of the ways that information seekers construct knowledge by tying it to what they already know as they pass through various stages of uncertainty and understanding. Itself derived from a general, psychological theory (i.e., Kelly, 1963), Kuhlthau's model could be expanded into a more general theory of information seeking through further observation and development. To see how these ideas evolve, let's begin by looking at the foundations of information seeking theories.

CONCLUSION

However, here we are concerned with theory rather than practice. Zipf notes that the importance of his Principle of Least Effort lies in its universality in regards to human behavior. Over the long haul, humans tend toward a surprising efficiency in their allocation of effort. This tendency has enormous implications for studying the use of information.

A related approach has been called the cost–benefit paradigm. This perspective attempts to explain behavior in terms of a tradeoff between the effort required to employ a particular type of strategy (e.g., eliminating choices by looking at their worst possible outcomes), and the

quality of the resulting action. The notion of a cost–benefit trade-off in information seeking is similar enough to the Principle of Least Effort that the two paradigms are sometimes conflated.

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