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Grounded Theology: Proposing a Research Method

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Abstract:

Grounded theology is proposed as a research method using grounded theory to address theological questions. While grounded theory studies have been published in practical theology the results have been largely descriptive and theological reflection usually limited. There has been no explicit goal of generating theological ideas. The grounded theology approach relies on the creativity of the researcher. This paper advances an argument for using grounded theology as a research methodology in practical theology.

Keywords:

Grounded theology. Grounded theory. Theological method. Practical theology.

Grounded Theory: Proposing a Research Method

“There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecc 1:9). Maybe, but it is less applicable to practical theology. New research methods have been developed and applied in recent years, with the most influential reviewed in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (Miller-McLemore, 2014). Grounded theory has been used in practical theology, but not with the purpose of producing new theological insights. I propose using this method from social science research to generate theology - what might appropriately be labelled grounded theology.

The aim of grounded theory is to develop theology from the ‘bottom up’. Most qualitative research using grounded theory has been exploratory and largely descriptive. Theological reflection is often an afterthought, and not the goal of the research. In this paper I will argue for such an application of grounded theory which is consistent with the aims of the methodology.

1. From Grounded Theory

Grounded theory has influenced social science research for nearly 50 years and has produced many theoretically innovative studies (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This is a powerful methodology that employs strategies to gather rich data, to encourage the “emergence of conceptual categories”¹ with careful analysis to produce explanations and potentially generate theory. The ‘theory making’ potential of grounded theory has a natural application in theological research.

Over the years grounded theory has employed techniques such as interviewing and theoretical sampling. Data is analysed using coding: initial, focused, possibly axial and theoretical coding. The process of theorizing ‘as you go’ is facilitated by memo writing and sorting categories then finally proposing theory (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). It is an inherently adaptable process.

Grounded theology developed out of two qualitative studies. The first study was based on 15 interviews and the second re-interviewed 12 of the original subjects and three additional to replace those not available for the follow-up study. The ‘snowball technique’ of sampling was used to approach potential subjects. This method of gathering a sample is also known as ‘chain referral’ or ‘purposeful sampling’ which has limitations since it is not random selection but is useful to identify people with specific traits or interests. Ethics approval was gained through Charles Sturt University. The interviews lasted about 30 minutes.

The initial goal was to investigate views associated with theology and aging. This is consistent with grounded theory, which can begin with a general topic and no predetermined research problem. The following 15 people consented to be part of the first study: Bill age 68 Agnostic, Nell age 72 Agnostic, Sarah age 62 Agnostic, Anselm age 75 Liberal Protestant, Hannah age 69 Liberal Protestant, Campbell age 70 Anglo-Catholic, Annie age 67 Anglo-Catholic, Rowan age 65 Anglo-Catholic, Jean age 67 Charismatic, Frances age 62 Charismatic, Anthony age 65 Charismatic, Ruth age 63 Charismatic, John age 69 Reformed, Elizabeth age 67 Reformed, and Susan age 66 Pentecostal. In the second study I re-interviewed 12 of the original 15 subjects. Three subjects who were not available (Sarah age 62 Agnostic; Campbell age 70 Anglo-Catholic; Annie age 67 Anglo-Catholic) and were replaced with Otto age 74, agnostic; David age 72 Roman Catholic and Aurora age 76 Roman

¹ See What is Grounded Theory? <http://www.groundedtheory.com/>

Catholic. The questions of the first interviews explored themes such as the influence of aging, meaning, significant or unusual events, and attitudes to luck. The second interviews raised issues of religious enthusiasm, otherness and views of the 'good life'. This follow-up to explore emerging themes is also consistent with grounded theory. Each person chose a pseudonym to preserve anonymity.

The sample interviewed represented a range of perspectives. The classifications were mine but generally reflect church allegiance if present. There was no attempt to include people of other faiths. The people in the samples were well-educated, financially secure and living in Canberra, the national capital of Australia.

In grounded theory the researcher is encouraged to approach data without preconceptions. However, this is impossible, so it is better to accept the pragmatic principle that an open mind does not mean an empty head (Charmaz, 2014). There was no initial literature review but other views informed the discussion of results.

Once the data from interviews was collected, transcribed, the data was coded using NVivo 10. This was helpful to identify what might be considered micro-themes. However, I found this less useful than grouping general themes, followed by a 'match and compare' analysis of themes, memo writing and idea mapping with large sheets of paper. Themes tended to be large and it was better to visually represent ideas relevant to an individual's beliefs. The emotional reactions of participants were observed and noted, especially anything surprising or that might need explanation. This helped the final stage of sorting and refining ideas to inform theoretical conclusions. It was only in the last stage, in the discussion stage, was there any comparison with the theological tradition.

The challenge of this method is to be conceptually creative. This is both a strength and a weakness of the approach. There is potential to develop new ideas from the ground up, but since it is dependent of finding emergent themes and then conceptual development, like grounded theory it easily falls short and case can easily become dull or even bad theology.

2. Locating the Grounded Theology Approach

Grounded theology has a similar focus to theologies of liberation. The experience of ordinary people is important with notions of a 'theology of experience' and 'theologies from below'. Theology was democratized as the "work of the people" (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005: p. 3). In my studies interview data provided the basis for thematic analysis (Swinton and Mowat, 2006). The case study method also highlights the experience of individuals – an approach which has been used for exploration and possible theory building (Hopewell, 1987; Pembroke, 2011; Cronshaw, 2015). Grounded theology is close to ethnography with a focus on the "gaps and connections between theology and lived faith practices" (Moschella, 2014: 224). There have been attempts in ethnographic research to prioritize the perspective of believers. Robert Schreiter (1985/2015) proposed a development of 'local theology' using ethnographic methods. He commended the practical wisdom of those of local religious communities as sources of religious insight, with a process that honoured cultural complexity and local experience. An ethnographic researcher may spend time in the field with participant observation – which may add a dimension to grounded theology but was not been used in the initial studies. Ethnography can also use quantitative methods such as gathering survey and census data.

Aidan Kavanagh (1984) investigated church members practicing the liturgy. He distinguished them as "primary theologians" because of an arguably primary relationship between the believer and God, versus a "secondary" relationship of formal theologians reflecting on the

truth of their experience. David Mellott (2009), who was influenced by Kavanagh, did an ethnographic study of the Penitentes of Arroyo Seco in New Mexico. He found value in forming a reciprocal relationship with participants, who began as informants but ended up as research colleagues, to produce theological reflection. Mellott saw ethnography as a way of doing theology. The goal of developing theological insights seems to be an emerging trend in a number of research methodologies, but as yet not highly developed. For example, Mellott relied on Larry, a highly articulate Penitente, who seemed very capable of adding to a more developed theology of self-awareness before God.

Taking seriously the thought of individuals is similar to ordinary theology (Anstey, 2002). While similar the goal is very different. Ordinary theology attempts to understand lay beliefs through their God-talk (Anstey and Francis, 2013), and then compares what they believe with the theological tradition. Christie concluded from her interviews, “in matters Christological, ordinary believers only take what they need (Christie, 2012: 189).” Action research begins with a problem. The best way of learning is by doing (Elaine Graham, 2013; Ganzevoort and Roeland, 2014). This is similar to grounded theology being bottom-up, but it is more collaborative with a focus on action. This is seen in Elaine Graham’s understanding of “theology-in-action” with the commendable goal of “theological reflection [which] may be understood as more of a ‘treasure hunt; seeking to bring to the surface signs of God’s grace and activity present in the midst of culture.” (Graham, Walton and Ward 2005: 202). She is a seminal researcher who has also developed the idea of “theology-in-the-vernacular” in which theology is rooted in local cultures (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2007).

There is some overlap with narrative approaches, as Stephen Crites (1971) noted we organize our experiences in story-like forms. The exploration of participants’ religious experiences will inevitably take a narrative form (Ganzevoort, 2014; e.g., Thompson, 2012; and Sremac, 2014). This has been linked to hermeneutic approaches such as Charles Gerkin’s (1984) “living human document” and Bonnie Miller-McLemore’s (1993) “the living human web”. Indeed, the hermeneutical approach, with a broad scope of what can be interpreted including human experience and actions (Brown, 2014), has implications for grounded theology.

The only mention of grounded theory in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* was by Elizabeth Conde-Frazier under the heading of participatory action research. She described grounded theory as an “inquiry designed explicitly without preconceived answers and with openness to what is new and goes beyond our current theories. One analyses information while generating theory that may help understand areas of current interest as well as interests that emerge in the course of the investigation. The method works with the notion of theory as process.” (Conde-Frazier, 2014: 239). While this is a good description of grounded theory approach it does not explicitly seek theological insight.

3. Qualitative Studies in Journals

Recent research studies in *Journal of Practical Theology* and the *International Journal of Practical Theology* were reviewed. The most common research method was qualitative, but quantitative and some mixed methods were also included (e.g., Emery-Wright, 2014; Ershova and Hermelink, 2012). Since both are theological journals, so it was common to make some attempt to relate the findings to theological themes. Examples of this include Madeline Light and Oonagh O’Brien’s (2011) paper on older parishioners participating in Alpha courses and Susannah Cornwall’s (2013) interviews with intersex Christians. Some authors reflected on their experience in ministry. Naturally this was relevant to their theology. David McMillan (2011: 33) commented, “I am interested in the degree to which all our theology is autobiographical.” Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), a formal method of thematic analysis, was used by Peter Madsen Gubi (2011). Pete Ward and Sarah Dunlop

(2011) employed visual ethnography. They encouraged participants to take 10 photos of what was meaningful to them. This led to a discussion in focus groups. They concluded, from an ordinary theology perspective, “the ordinary is constructed in relation to, and out of, an interaction with the communally held tradition.” (p. 308) However, almost all of the studies were exploratory and largely descriptive in their results (e.g., Demmrich, 2015). There was little attempt to develop new theological insights.

One study by Steve Nolan (2011) used grounded theory with some theological implications. However, Nolan imported psychoanalytic concepts to understand the process of the chaplain being with the dying, his themes were descriptive of the process, with his conclusion that “it may be that presence is *the* mode of spiritual care, certainly for people who are dying” (p. 178). While interesting this is not a new theological concept.

4. Examples of Grounded Theology

I will illustrate the potential of grounded theology from the first published study in *Theology Today*, “Grounded Theology: A New Method to Explore Luck”. It was surprising that participants in my first study *reacted* to the idea. Luck was found to be both metaphysically subversive and emotionally messy.

No one attributed any real substance to the idea of luck. A number said that they did not *believe* in luck. Ruth expressed this, “No, I don’t like that term at all. Yes, so I don’t like the term good luck or bad luck.” Luck emerged in this study as a metaphysically subversive idea. If we are to accept that luck implies something operating to favour one person and not another, then it was challenging to all perspectives. The agnostic participants tended to see reality as ordered, ultimately impersonal and subject to random events. The notion of luck challenged this and asserted that there may be ways to exercise a magical control over desired outcomes. The idea of luck also challenged a concept of divine order held by some participants with strong predestination views. Curiously for the limited random group, it challenged both an overall order and like the agnostic perspective was disruptive of ideas of randomness. So luck, it would appear, is a subversive idea to at least the perspectives included in the study, though it might have been different if the sample was taken from people at a casino.

Luck also seemed emotionally messy. Most people expressed feeling fortunate. Bill said, “I am very fortunate ... being born into the family ... mostly come from fairly affluent families, families who have a decent education, families who, relative to their society and their group of the time have been comfortably off and we are like a sort of minority I think you know, 1% or 2% of the world’s population.” But unfair things happen in life. The good die young, the wicked prosper, as the psalmists observed long ago (e.g., Ps 73:3). Indeed, misfortune affected the people in the study in various ways. This included traumatic childhoods including sexual abuse, Nell’s father leaving her family when she was five, the death of two of Annie’s children, the profound disabilities of a child born to Sarah, the suicide of Sarah’s husband, loss of a same sex partner of many years (Rowan), and unhappy marriages (Hannah and Susan). Most of this is beyond any individual agency, so it feels like ‘it happens to us’ in a mindless way.

The challenge was to make sense of it even without a belief in God. Sarah recalled, “My son W was born, I don’t believe in God, but when he was born I definitely felt I was being punished by whoever, it was not God, because I’d been an evil and bad person, I mean you’re

just trying to make sense of it and I couldn't make any sense." Sarah reflected, "I never believed in God. I mean, I would have dearly loved to have had a religion to turn to, something to give me some solace." This is perhaps even more difficult for those who believe in God. Hannah said, "Sometimes I think, why am I here and they're over there and suffering in that way, no, but you use the word loosely but I don't really believe in it."

While the people in this study generally described their own lives as fortunate, we all know others who have suffered 'bad luck'. The emotional dissonance might be expressed in starkly religious language: Why am I blessed? Why are they cursed? And this question has no obvious answer. The notion of luck raised uncomfortable emotions in relation to this aspect of life.

A number of other papers have been written and are under review. The themes that have emerged include 'Cosmic Loneliness' and a model for believing spiritual ideas.

The concepts that emerged from these studies have some potential for contributing to theological reflection. The idea of luck has not been extensively researched or even considered in theological circles. The idea of cosmic loneliness might impact aspects of believing. This can also be seen in the selective attention associated with different kinds of beliefs.

5. A Grounded Theology?

Qualitative research can do more than provide a 'thick description'. However, most applications of qualitative research to theological research have been exploratory and the results descriptive. But the challenge is to go beyond being descriptive to being *generative*. This more ambitious approach is what grounded theology tries to achieve. The methodology from grounded theory is used to try to create theological concepts and applied insights.

Where to from here? So far I have used the interview method to gain data, but there are other ethnographic methods which might be applied such as participant observation and the use of visual images. It is also possible to ask the important question of whether social science methods, which might be described as 'secular', are well suited to gathering theological data. This question was raised by Eileen Campbell-Reed and Christian Scharen (2013), who proposed adapting our methods to be more sensitive to the spiritual nature of the data we collect and analyse.

The method of grounded theology can be used to explore any area with a significant component of human experience. For example, how better to understand human sinfulness than to analyse the experience of sinners – which includes naturally all of us. Or concepts like discipleship, fellowship and participation in the church, sanctification, and the work of the Holy Spirit. The 'rich soil' of human experience can be used by theologian 'gardeners' to grow a 'living' theology.

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