[7883 words; 5524 excluding abstract, references and diagram]

What can grounded theorists and action researchers learn from one another?

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Abstract

Grounded theory and action research are not usually regarded as similar approaches to research. Indeed, there are important differences. However, both develop theory grounded in specific evidence. Both are capable of being used flexibly and responsively. Their differences suggest ways in which each might be enhanced. Grounded theory is more explicit about how theory is built from evidence. Action research might well emulate this. Action research is more explicit about how understanding informs action, and sometimes collects and interprets information more efficiently. There may be useful lessons there for grounded theory. This chapter explores some of the mutual benefit for grounded theorists and action researchers in better understanding and perhaps utilising each other's approach. I conclude with a proposal for an approach which combines much of the best of both grounded theory and action research.

As its name implies, grounded theory builds theory grounded in data. The resulting theory then has a good fit to the phenomena being researched. Action research shares the purpose of building theory from experience. It may be that grounded theorists and action researchers have something to learn from each other. That is my purpose in writing this chapter.

I begin with a brief overview of action research. The similarities and differences between action research and grounded theory are then explored. Following this I identify some learning opportunities arising from the comparison. To anticipate what follows, I suggest that action researchers can learn from grounded theorists by being more explicit about the actual theory they develop and how they do so. Grounded theorists can learn how to involve their informants more directly in the research process, how to collect and interpret data more economically, and how to involve themselves more directly in action if they wish.

I draw on the seminal work of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) and Glaser's subsequent elaborations (especially 1978, 1992, 1998, 2003). Important are grounded theory's flexibility, responsiveness to the research situation, treatment of literature as data, sampling techniques, and the distinction between substantive and formal theory. Studying grounded theory has enhanced my understanding of action research.

The books by Karen Locke (2001) and Kathy Charmaz (2006) have been useful in addressing more succinctly many of the key features of Glaser's approach. Glaser's insights are scattered over several books, many not indexed. I could extend the comparison of action research and grounded theory to Strauss and Corbin (1998). However, for me the strongly data-driven processes of Glaser's approach align more closely with my conception of action research, which I now describe.

Action research

The origins of action research are usually traced to John Collier (1945), Kurt Lewin (1946) and others. For Lewin action research was 'a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action' (1946:38). Action research was a way of engaging directly with real social problems while developing theoretical understanding. As Robin McTaggart (1991:6) says, their practices were 'children of the times'. John Dewey (1916) had earlier argued for the importance of knowledge derived from action. Many contemporaries of Lewin and Collier used and wrote about action research. The aim was to achieve change while developing theoretical understanding. It still is. Action research is integrated action *and* research. Each turn of the action research spiral includes both research and action. The research facilitates the action, which in turn facilitates the research.

Most varieties of action research are variations on the theme of integrated research and action within a cyclic and participative process. Such varieties include participatory action research (Whyte, 1991), cooperative inquiry (Reason, 2003), and community based participatory research (Israel et al., 2005) among others.

Soft systems methodology (Checkland and Holwell, 1998), action science (Argyris, Putnam and Smith, 1985) and appreciative inquiry (Egan and Lancaster, 2005) share key features with mainstream action research while also displaying more substantial differences. Soft systems methodology, for

example, uses explicit systems-based analysis to develop action plans, and is less explicitly cyclic. Action science has a strong emphasis on challenging the defensive behaviour which undermines relationships and interpersonal understanding. Appreciative inquiry labels most action research as "deficit oriented" (Whitney, 1998:314) and limits its attention to what is positive about the organization or client group.

All action research shares a commitment to both theory development and actual change. So does action learning (for example Marquardt, 2004), using collaborative project teams to plan and implement change. Despite their different histories, action learning and action research are similar in practice. In fact action learning is more similar to mainstream action research than are some of the more marginal action research varieties. Many action researchers such as David Coghlan (Coghlan et al., 2004) and Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt (2005) routinely use action learning.

Many varieties of action research are displayed in the *Handbook* edited by Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (2001), currently under revision. Some key action research papers, early and more recent, have been collected in the four volume Sage publication *Fundamentals of action research* (Cooke and Cox, 2005). These two works reveal the extent of the action research family. Different writers emphasize different aspects with some contention about what is obligatory. For the most part, though, action research exhibits the following characteristics.

Above all action research is *action oriented*, intended to achieve change. The change occurs as understanding develops, not as a separate and later application of the understanding.

Action research is *responsive* to the situation. The understanding and the change are initially local, though the understanding can be extended through multiple studies.

Accordingly, action research is *emergent*. At the beginning of a study not enough is known either to develop good theory or to design the research methods in detail. Action research builds its theory and fine tunes its methods and develops its plans of action gradually as it proceeds. As understanding increases, methods and plans of action are improved.

Because change is an emphasis action research is usually *participative*. In many studies the people in the research situation are directly involved from beginning to end. They choose the goal or problem, diagnose it, and plan and implement the action.

Action research theorising is *abductive*, in the sense in which C.S. Peirce (1940) used the term. Something unexpected is observed. A plausible hypothesis is developed to explain the observation. Inductive and deductive reasoning may both be drawn upon for this purpose. The hypothesis guides the next plan, which is then immediately tested in action.

Much action research occurs in *small groups*. People meet together to analyse a local issue and plan a response. They then implement and monitor their plans and meet again to plan the next step.

Most varieties follow Lewin's original description in being explicitly *cyclic* or spiral. Action alternates with critical reflection. During critical reflection theory emerges in the form of an understanding of what happened, and how. The understanding helps in planning the next action. The combination of action and reflection within each cycle allows action and research to be integrated. The cycle is often described as *plan → act and observe → reflect* (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988).

Action research is often used directly to *improve practice* (for example Marshall, 2004), ranging from individual development to the large scale whole-industry research common in Scandinavia. Scandinavian action research described by Bjørn Gustavsen (2005) has involved multiple organisations within a national industry coming together in facilitated forums.

My approach is eclectic, borrowing from any version that suits. Like many other action researchers I supplement action research with methods and processes from elsewhere, including facilitation (as for John Heron, 1999) and organization development (see French and Bell, 1999). I'll have more to say about this. A facilitator guides people through processes which help them to analyse their own situation, set their own goals, and develop and implement

action plans. Organization development is a set of processes and techniques that a facilitator or consultant can use to assist in participative organisational change.

Grounded theory and action research are not usually regarded as part of the same research family. As the above description of action research reveals there are some differences and also some important parallels.

Differences and parallels

Some differences are obvious. Action research pursues action. Those who do the research implement its results. Grounded theories may convert easily into action. The researchers, however, are seldom the actors.

Action research is usually participative. Though sometimes less so than its adherents claim (Webb, 1996), it nevertheless usually involves participants to some extent except when individuals research their individual practice. Grounded theory participants are usually involved only as informants. In fact Glaser (2003) discourages their further involvement, as does Janice Morse (1998) for qualitative research generally. (I address their concerns later.) In grounded theory the researcher builds the theory.

Some differences between grounded theory and action research are different emphases or arise because of different terminology. Features explicit in one are left implicit in the other. Action research is more explicitly cyclic. Grounded theory, however, has its implicit cycles in the recurring process of

data collection, coding and memoing. The grounded theory literature is explicit about how to develop theory, and in what form. In this respect in particular action researchers have much to learn from grounded theorists, as I argue below.

Learning from grounded theory

Much of the grounded theory literature is about how to convert information and experience into theory. Beginning with *The discovery of grounded theory* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) the 'constant comparative method' of coding and theorizing continues to be the core of a grounded theory approach. In Kathy Charmaz's recent (2006) book the description of theory development is one of the themes which add to the book's coherence and usefulness. Writers about grounded theory as different as Ian Dey (1999) and Karen Locke (2001) give attention to theory construction. Though Cathy Urquhart (2001) complains that even here some detail is lacking, the grounded theory literature is more detailed than most.

Chris Huxham (2003:243) probably speaks for many other action researchers when she says that theory building 'is probably the most challenging aspect of action research'. And, she adds, for which 'there can be no predefined methodology'. Other writers such as Chris Argyris (Argyris, Putnam and Smith, 1985) and Colin Eden and Chris Huxham (2002) deplore the lack of explicit theorising in much action research. To be fair, others including David Partington (2000) have criticized the lack of explicit and relevant theory in qualitative research generally, grounded theory excepted.

Many of the 45 chapters in the *Handbook of action research* (Reason and Bradbury, 2001) talk about the importance of integrating theory and practice. Few say how to do it. Victor Friedman (2001), who uses action science, gives the most substantial mention of theory building in the handbook. In other work, theory building is a strong feature of soft systems methodology (Checkland and Holwell, 1998). It takes the form of concept maps: graphic representations of the researched situation that build a 'rich picture' typically in the form of symbols and their links. As mentioned earlier, action science and soft systems methodology are distinct and less mainstream forms of action research.

I've known several thesis candidates who chose grounded theory for data analysis within an action research thesis. Asked why, they responded that action research literature didn't explain how to analyse data. Grounded theory literature did. They followed Strauss and Corbin (1998), possibly because of the detailed explanations of coding and theory building, possibly because of that book's easier availability. Glaser's form of grounded theory may have been more suitable. Being more explicitly emergent (Glaser, 1992) and less constrained it suits an action research study.

In the action research literature theory is mentioned, though seldom in practical detail. So is the virtue of theory-practice integration. (By theory I mean an explicit model or set of statements which illuminate a situation by

abstracting its key features. I say more about the possible form of theory later.) More often than not 'theory' is mentioned. '*A* theory' isn't developed.

Action research theorising is associated with reflection. Reflecting on what happened the action researcher forms assumptions about what occurred and why, and then tests the assumptions by acting on them (Greenwood, 2002). Ernie Stringer (1999) for example explicitly equates such assumptions with theory. For the most part no process is given for doing this. One acts, and reflects on the action. From the reflection theory somehow arises.

Anastasia White's recent (2004) paper titled 'Lewin's action research model as a tool for theory building' is revealing. Certainly, the paper reports an explicit theory of conflict. I can imagine using it to inform my own conflict management practice. How the theory was built is not described except in the most general terms. It's also telling, I think, that White chooses the Kolb learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) as the process to guide her reflection. The cycle consists of active experimentation, concrete experience, reflective observation, and *abstract conceptualisation*. In much of the action research literature the theory building step isn't as evident. In other respects action research and experiential learning cycles are similar.

There are hints in the literature of something more. Richard Winter (1998) writes about the way in which he integrates prior understanding when he plans a present action, though without an easily definable process of theory generation. McKay and Marshall (2005) use cognitive mapping for theory

building, implying that action research isn't otherwise up to the task. Cognitive maps are a graphic way 'of representing the way in which an individual or group define and conceptualise a situation' (McKay and Marshall, 2005:5). Cognitive maps can serve their purpose well. Because they are developed participatively they are likely to be acted on. The action again provides a test of the cognitive map.

Chris Huxham (2003) offers one of the few detailed descriptions of theory building I was able to find in the mainstream action research literature, illustrated by a specific case study. At some risk of oversimplification her process can be summarized as follows.

1 identify items in the data relevant to the study's purpose
2 with colleagues, agree on the items to include; cluster the items; label the clusters
3 create a conceptual framework from the clusters
4 review data from other studies and refine the framework
5 seek comment widely, revising the framework and the arguments for it.

This is more substantial, and suits the small group and action oriented nature of action research. It bears some similarity to an approach I describe later. The puzzle is that so little action research provides similar explanations.

It is not surprising, then, that some writers have turned to grounded theory to remedy the perceived shortcomings of action research. Grounded theory data

analysis is often included within an action research study. The action research is chosen for its support of action. The grounded theory is assumed to provide rigour. Action research is often viewed (mistakenly, I would argue) as lacking rigour, as McKay and Marshall (2001) explain.

The combination can be very effective. The theory and the theory-building process are made evident and therefore more open to challenge. The apparent rigour of the research is enhanced in the eyes of some critics. Later I offer some further comments on this. First, I wish to provide some examples of the combined use of action research and grounded theory.

There are examples in the information systems literature, including Henfridsson and Lindgren (2005), Kock (2002), and Wastell (2001). Baskerville and Pries-Heje (1999:1) talk of 'grounded action research', which features grounded theory inserted into action research cycles. The intention is 'to add rigor and reliability to the theory formulation process'. Yoong and Pauleen (2004; Pauleen and Yoong, 2004) use 'grounded action learning' (in effect grounded action research) in their studies of group decision systems. As in the earlier studies cited the action research guides the intervention process. Grounded theory is used for data analysis and theory building.

The community health literature also contains examples. The motivation often appears to be to improve the perceived low status of action research (Regehr, 2000). Gerald Mohatt and colleagues (2004a, 2004b) chose participatory action research for their study of sobriety in Alaska because it allowed sensitivity in

their contact with participants. Grounded theory again provided the theory development. The sensitivity of the topic of child sexual abuse was part of the motivation for Schachter et al. (2004; Teram et al. 2005) to use action research, again complemented by grounded theory. Paul Greenall (2006) reported that he used grounded theory within an action learning study of non-compliance with prescribed medical treatment, though without details of the actual procedures.

I've been able to identify a few studies combining action research and grounded theory in other literatures. Based on his doctoral research Richard Hale (2000) described the use of grounded theory and participatory action research to develop tools to aid mentoring. Su Wild River (2005) investigated and improved the sustainability efforts of local government. Taylor, Schauder and Johanson (2005) studied Australian attitudes to civil society.

In almost all of the studies cited above the research appears to have been conceived initially as action research. Grounded theory was added to make the theory building more systematic or rigorous. One of the few exceptions is Teram et al. (2005). In their view neither grounded theory nor action research alone provided them with the combination of rigour and appropriate relationships.

I have not been able to find studies where the grounded theory was foundational and action research was added, except perhaps Schachter et al. (2004). Grounded theory and action research were used for different phases of

their study. Theoretical understanding was initially developed using grounded theory. Plans developed from the theory were implemented using action research.

The combinations of action research and grounded theory reported above have worked well. Grounded theory complements action research by addressing those research aspects in which action research is seen as weakest. On the other hand the coding which grounded theory requires has almost certainly slowed down the process. I therefore offer, later, a less laborious alternative.

Other advantages of grounded theory

As far as I can tell, there has been less use made of other advantages which grounded theory might offer. In particular, action researchers might make use of explicit theoretical frameworks (Glaser, 1978, ch 4), literature treated as data (Glaser, 2001, ch 11), and the distinction between substantive and formal theory (Glaser, 1978, ch 9; Glaser & Strauss, 1967 ch4). The third of these can be addressed to some extent in a number of ways. Multiple case studies offer one possibility, as in the study by Gwyer et al. (2004). Just as grounded theory develops substantive theory into formal theory by extending sampling, multiple cases allow the local theory resulting from action research to be generalised more confidently. Literature can also be used as data (see below) and action research might make wider use of the purposeful sampling that Glaser and Strauss (1967) regarded as a central part of a grounded theory methodology.

To avoid having the literature colour the data analysis, Glaser and Strauss (1967; Glaser, 2001) advocate consulting the relevant literature *after* data analysis. This is contentious in grounded theory circles, as Charmaz (2006) summarizes. Dey (1999) voices the common complaint: it is naïve to imagine that a researcher can avoid preconceptions.

There is a more compelling reason to postpone a literature review in grounded theory or action research. Initially it can be hard to know which literature is relevant. At the beginning of a change program (for it is at change work that action research excels) the researcher knows very little about the situation. The other participants know more – but not enough to improve the situation or they would already have done so. As a study proceeds, assumptions are developed and tried out in action. Understanding grows. The relevant literature becomes more easily identified.

In any event, very applied work tends to span disciplinary boundaries. Applied research situations do not partition themselves according to conventional disciplines.

Further, literature can later be treated as data which tests or refines the emergent theory. This also counters the criticism that action research findings don't generalize. (It's an unwarranted criticism, as Richard Baskerville and Allen Lee, 1999, explain. If it were true, practitioners would not learn from

experience.) The literature can help to define the extent to which the emergent theory can be generalized.

I accept that of course we take our preconceptions into the research situation. This, too, is less a problem than is sometimes claimed. To protect against preconceptions a researcher can vigorously seek out disconfirming evidence. I later describe a theory building approach which encourages this.

As I have shown, there is little clarity in action research about how theory is developed. Despite Urquhart's (2001) misgivings grounded theory deals well, and in detail, with the theory-building process. Grounded theorists may see some virtue in the combinations of grounded theory and action research described above. Beyond that, they are unlikely to borrow from action research unless they can preserve grounded theory's ability to derive theory grounded in evidence and to use repeatable processes to do so. That said, I think there is some useful learning to be gained by grounded theorists from the action research literature.

Learning from action research

Many of the features of action research are intended to support action. It's common for action researchers to involve participants extensively in a study so that the planned actions have the commitment of those participants. Many, such as Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (2001) believe democratic participation is obligatory. So do most of the other authors in their handbook.

When participants are involved in data analysis, transcripts and coding are less suitable than structured or unstructured discussion processes. Processes accessible to participants allow greater participation. But can (or even should) participants be involved in helping to interpret data? Janice Morse (1998) clearly believes they shouldn't. She points out, correctly in my view, that participant views are emic – local – rather than etic – generalized. As she also says, the theory emerging from a study is unlikely to be 'a perfect fit to the particular experience of a single participant' (1998:443). Kathy Charmaz (2005) agrees that participation can raise some potential problems.

Reasonably enough, Morse objects to participants in effect vetoing the theorising of the researcher. But that isn't necessary. A key feature of action research is that researchers and informants are regarded as equals in the research endeavour – different and equal. Researcher and informant can reconcile their differences. In this process of mutual education each of them will find their understanding deepened. I return to this below in the discussion of dialectic processes.

More often in action research the researcher works with participants in a group, or several groups. The opportunities for mutual education are thus strengthened. Informant learns from informant as well as from the researcher. The researcher learns from multiple informants. As in some other qualitative research a maximum variation sample may be chosen to increase the diversity of informants. That allows more perspectives to be taken into account (Creswell, 1998:120). Involving participants in analysing the information they

provide further capitalises on the variety. It also offers researchers some protection against their own preconceptions.

Admittedly the achievement of both rigour and participation requires certain communication and facilitation skills. The required skill level is not beyond the reach of many grounded theorists. Many such researchers carry out in-depth interviews requiring effective communication skills. Many facilitate focus groups, a demanding task as Claudia Puchta and Jonathan Potter (2003) make evident. Though Holly Edmunds (1999) suggests using professional moderators to facilitate focus groups many qualitative researchers facilitate their own focus groups successfully. A qualitative researcher who can facilitate a focus group can draw on the same skills in other group settings.

Issues related to participation are understandably mostly ignored in the grounded theory literature. However, practitioners in the fields of community and organizational change deal with them daily. Grounded theorists' existing skills can be supplemented with processes and techniques from other literatures.

For example Chris Argyris (2004) has provided useful interpersonal strategies for management researchers. In particular he explains the advantage of testing assumptions before acting on them. For those who find Argyris's approach difficult, Roger Schwarz (2002) has applied it to group facilitation in systematic and easily learnable ways. Viviane Robinson (Robinson and Lai, 2006) has translated Argyris's ideas into practices more easily used. Bernard

Guerin (2005) has described in some detail common evidence-based intervention processes and the skills they depend on. A typical intervention for resolving conflicts (much abbreviated here) will illustrate his style (2005:166):

> Find out the full stories of what happened ...
>
> ...
>
> Find novel solutions and problem-solve.
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> ...
>
> Get a resolution that will commit them to the future.

In addition there is a substantial literature in fields such as community development (Mikkelsen, 2005), community psychology (Nelson and Prilleltensky, 2004), public participation (Creighton, 2005), deliberative democracy (Gastil and Levine, 2005), and organization development (Axelrod, 2002), among many others. The relevant skills and processes are not difficult to find and apply. If necessary, suitably skilled practitioners can be added to the research team.

I can think of few participant groups who would respond enthusiastically to the thought of coding the record of a group discussion. They would be more likely to favour a process which generated action plans and theories in the course of discussion. The practitioner literature offers many suggestions for generating action plans. There are processes for developing understanding from information which can also assist, and forms of theory.

The form of theory

It is not only the process for theory building that is given surprisingly little attention in the action research literature. The *form* of that theory is also often neglected. To lead to action, however, a theory is likely to take the form 'do this to achieve that'. Or, more formally: 'to achieve consequences C, carry out actions A'. Argyris and Schön (1974:29) again have something useful to offer. Their 'theory of action' takes the form

> In situation *S*, if you intend consequences *C*, do *A*, given assumptions a_1 ... a_n.

I elicit theories from participants in this form by guiding the participants through the following three pairs of questions in turn. We strive to reach consensus on each before proceeding, using conflict resolution processes if necessary:

1a What are the important features of the situation?

1b Why do we think those are the important features?

2a If we're right about the situation, what outcomes [that is, consequences] are desirable and feasible?

2b Why do we think those outcomes are desirable and feasible in that situation?

3a What actions do we think will give those outcomes in that situation?

3b Why do we think those actions will give us those outcomes in that situation?

Answers to the 'a' questions provide in turn the situation, the consequences and the actions. Answers to the 'b' questions surface assumptions. Together the answers provide a basis for theory building, which I shortly turn to.

We then carry out our planned actions and compare the results to the expected outcomes. In doing so we provide a test (Greenwood, 2002) of the adequacy of the actions and to some extent of the assumptions which underpin the actions. As Ned Kock and his colleagues (1997) point out, by including action, the iterative cycle of action research enhances rigour. Bob Williams and Bill Harris (2001) have further developed the six questions above to create a structured journal to aid reflection and understanding.

Theory building

A grounded theory emerges from the process of constant comparison. This can also be done in structured discussion, without the onerous task of coding. I've described elsewhere (Dick, 1990, 1999) a process for doing this in both individual interview and small group settings. For ease of explanation I'll describe an individual interview process, 'convergent interviewing', which has now been tested and critiqued by a number of other researchers.

The 'engine' which drives the process can be viewed as a set of decision rules:

1 Compare a data set (perhaps a set of interview notes) to another data set, or (after early interviews) to the emergent theory.

2 Note overlaps between interviews (or between interview and emergent theory). Overlaps will consist of agreements or disagreements. An

agreement is where both sets mention a topic and do so compatibly, for example that 'teamwork needs improvement'. A disagreement occurs when both mention the same topic but incompatibly. One may identify teamwork as needing improvement, and the other as a strength of the team.

3 Where there is agreement probe for exceptions (in the same interview, or in subsequent interviews). The exceptions, when found, then constitute a disagreement.

4 Where there is disagreement probe for explanations. 'Some say teamwork is good. Others say it requires attention. Help me to understand how this difference arises.'

The process can be viewed as a dialectic which uses apparent disagreement to generate agreement at a deeper level. It is summarized in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Although I use the logic of Figure 1 widely in my own work I know of relatively few published studies applying it to processes other than interviewing. One exception is the study reported by Satish Mehra and Anthony Inman (2004) who applied a similar process to analysing focus group data. Terry Gatfield (2005) called on two experts to build theory from data using a combination of this process and Delphi.

There are now in excess of 100 interviewing studies (including conference papers) using convergent interviewing. Most offer no critique. Those who do usually report favourably. Thompson, Donohue and Waters-Marsh (1992) found that convergent interviewing complemented quantitative research into manager perceptions. Using convergent interviewing for market research Sally Rao and Chad Perry (2003) reported efficient data collection with quick convergence on key issues. Wil Williams and Duncan Lewis (2005) favoured the method's efficiency and recommended its use for strategic management research. These studies confirm my own experience.

Extending the method to health research, Michelle Driedger and her colleagues (Driedger et al., in press) reported that the dialectic process of convergent interviewing helped a multi-disciplinary and multinational research team arrive at a shared ontology and epistemology. With a growing trend towards the multidisciplinary research advocated by Benjamin Crabtree (Crabtree, Miller and Stange, 2001) and the 'integrative research' championed by Gabriele Bammer (2005) the usefulness of dialectic processes may increase. Fernald and Duclos (2005) believe there is a growing need to manage multidisciplinary research teams but little advice on how to do so.

The logic of the analytic and theory building process above isn't limited to interviews. It can be extended to any data set. In unpublished studies I've used it within and between focus groups or group feedback analysis groups, among other applications.

In short, I propose an addition to the repertoire of both action researchers and grounded theorists: Argyris and Schön's theory of action framed as a set of reflective questions combined with the 'data engine' of Figure 1 for theory building. The data engine provides enough guidance for researchers, as the cited publications on convergent interviewing attest. A 'theory of action' approach supports the integration of theory and action which action researchers value. The flexibility of grounded theory and action research is maintained. The process remains strongly data-driven in the style of Glaserian grounded theory. A vigorous pursuit of disconfirmation protects researchers and participants from their preconceptions.

The comparatively greater efficiency of this approach may appeal to grounded theorists in some circumstances. In addition, action research may provide grounded theorists with a meta-methodology with which they can improve their use of grounded theory.

Action research as meta-methodology

Action research is frequently used by practitioners who wish to research and improve their practice – a suitable application, as Dawn Freshwater (2005) has argued. Researchers are practitioners of research. Action research can be a meta-methodology to research the practice of research.

I'm not aware of grounded theorists who have used action research for this purpose, though some may have done so. Outside the grounded theory literature there are a few instances. For example Burgess, Shaw and de Mattos

(2005) used action research as a methodology to develop a methodology. Waterman et al. (2005) met regularly as an action research group to critique and refine a study of nursing practice.

As Janice Morse (2002) has advocated, the multidisciplinary trend mentioned earlier is often accompanied by the use of multiple methods. Here, too, meta-methodological action research may help to achieve a 'coherent pluralism', in Michael Jackson's (1999:12) apt phrase. Where several methodologies are combined action research can provide an overarching and monitoring framework.

The place of emergent methodologies

I believe that the case made in *The discovery of grounded theory* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) still holds. Emergent data-driven methodologies like grounded theory and action research can complement the more common theory-driven methodologies.

Conceived too narrowly, the currently fashionable 'evidence based practice' can underestimate or overlook how complex and therefore unpredictable people are, individually and collectively. (In its narrower forms evidence based practice is the practice of basing all intervention on the evidence from scientific research.) Unless complemented by other approaches it can lead too easily to theory driving evidence, and evidence in turn driving practice: *theory* → *evidence* → *practice*. Emergent methodologies can provide a balance by allowing this sequence also to be reversed in the form of practice based

evidence (Fox, 2003). Evidence gathered in practitioner settings can be an additional source of theory generation: *practice* → *evidence* → *theory*. This is not inconsistent with Jane Gilgun's (2005) thoughtful analysis of evidence based practice in several disciplines. Tom Bourner and Penny Simpson (2005) present a similar argument for using action learning in PhD studies.

Grounded theory and action research bring overlapping but different strengths to research. Grounded theorists and action researchers can expand their repertoire and their relevance to practice and theory by borrowing each other's methods, techniques and skills.

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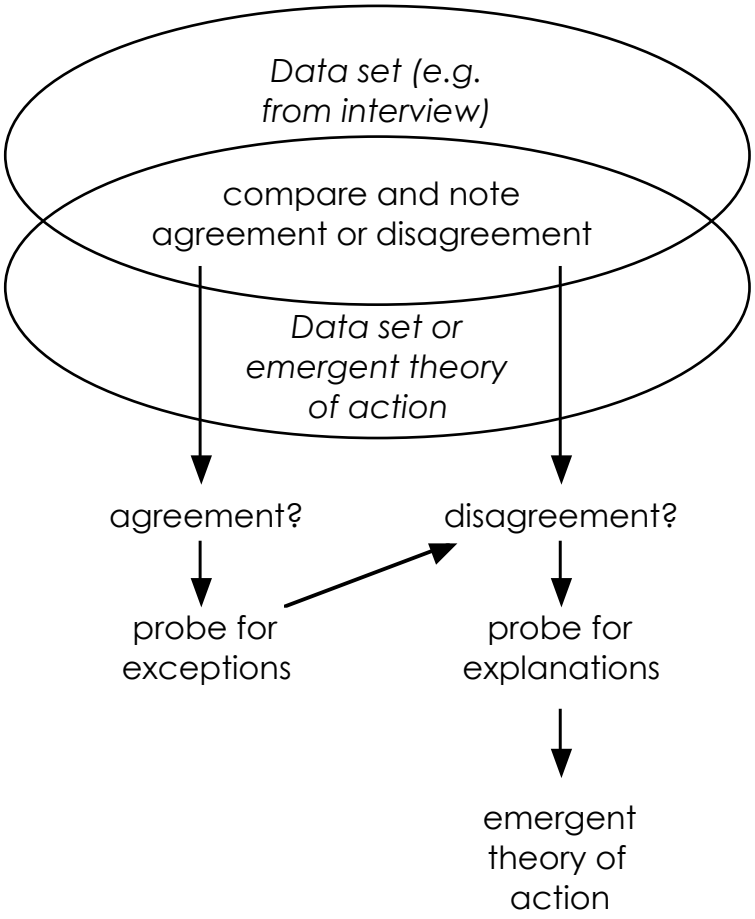

Figure 1. The 'data engine', a form of constant comparison

(amended from Dick, 2002)