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The Feasibility of Grounded Theory Methodology on Brazilian Public Administration Research

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Resumo

O tema de como conduzir pesquisas acadêmicas de alta qualidade nos estudos relacionados à administração pública continua a estimular as mentes de muitos eruditos na academia. Aparentemente, há uma leve convergência de pontos de vista acerca de como a pesquisa deve ser empreendida com a contínua adição de novas idéias e novas abordagens. Este artigo põe em foco importantes assuntos relativos à aplicação da *grounded theory* na pesquisa em administração pública. Seu foco recai, principalmente, na viabilidade da metodologia de *grounded theory* na pesquisa em administração pública brasileira, com ênfase no objetivo de prover a compreensão desta abordagem estabelecida nas ciências sociais para a análise de dados qualitativos. Nosso propósito foi identificar os fundamentos desta metodologia e suas implicações para a pesquisa em administração pública. Dessa forma, exploramos a estrutura e as implicações da metodologia, desenvolvemos algumas proposições acerca de sua aplicação e identificamos orientações para exploração e pesquisa adicional desta estratégia analítica de pesquisa em administração pública. Na conclusão, resumizamos sugestões baseadas em nossas análises para melhor edificar a teoria de administração pública brasileira fundamentada em *grounded theory*.

Palavras-chave: pesquisa qualitativa; metodologia de pesquisa; *grounded theory*; hermenêutica; administração pública.

Abstract

The issue on how to conduct high quality academic research in public administration studies continues to exercise the minds of many scholars in the academia. There seems to be slight convergence of views as to how research should be conducted with new ideas and new approaches being continually added. This paper addresses important issues concerning the application of grounded theory in public administration research. It focuses mainly on the feasibility of grounded theory methodology on Brazilian public administration research with emphasis on the objective of providing an understanding of this established approach in social sciences for qualitative data analysis. Our purpose has been to identify the foundations of this methodology and its implications for public administration research. We therefore explore the

structure and implications of the methodology, advance several propositions concerning its application, and identify directions for further exploration and additional research of this analytic strategy on public administration research. In the conclusion, we summarize suggestions from our analysis for improving the building of grounded Brazilian public administration theory.

Key words: qualitative research; research methodology; grounded theory; hermeneutics; public administration.

Introduction

The previous decades have seen an increase in the range of research approaches that are considered acceptable for public administration research. There is now widespread acknowledgement of qualitative research as a valuable and valid research approach. However, qualitative research covers a plurality of research paradigms, within which there are many research methods, research processes and techniques.

The existing methods, processes, and techniques used on a regular basis and replicated by disciplines do not allow for properly conceiving the redefining of problems. Thus, there is a need for addressing persistently methodological issues to innovate and create an interdisciplinary foundation for knowledge in public administration.

In management studies, the relations between theories and encapsulated knowledge appear multifaceted: theories provide for concepts upon which instruments are contrived; at the same time, instruments create knowledge for those who take action in organizations, and also for researchers; but also to a certain extent, instruments have their own autonomy in regard of management theories – the cognitive autonomy (BAIRD, 2004).

All these aspects are at work in the structuring of any particular field of investigation where methodological issues stemming from practice have a major role. Other fields of management studies could have been cited. They would have given illustration of a similar observation: practical methodological issues will certainly lie at the core of management studies in the coming years. It is in regard to this consideration that this paper hopes to contribute through relevant aspects.

There are many different research strategies (collecting data through document study, interviews, observation or participation, and analyzing data using hermeneutics,

phenomenology or grounded theory) for building interpretive understanding. Our particular interest involves grounded theory, a popular methodology in qualitative research, which is founded on an iterative cycle which is both inductive and deductive where theory is allowed to emerge directly from data and is ultimately tested or grounded against the “real world”. Such methodology enables the development of deep understanding of the complex interaction of people, processes and technology within public organizations.

The benefits of the methodological richness of qualitative research are balanced by the difficulties of holding the interest with the diversity of approaches and their associated requirements for quality, validity and rigor. This paper presents a methodological framework based on grounded theory methodology, in which research processes, tools and techniques can be selected and implemented in order to build theory in Brazilian public administration.

Our exploration of this topic proceeds in six parts. The first part traces the origins of grounded theory methodology. The second part describes the grounded theory methodology. The third part analyses the implications of grounded theory methodology on Brazilian public administration theory. The fourth part discusses the main areas of potential use of grounded theory methodology on Brazilian public administration research. In the fifth part we discuss our assertions. In the conclusion, we summarize suggestions from our analysis for improving the building of grounded Brazilian public administration theory.

Origins of Grounded Theory

The nature of grounded theory is contentious due to differences that grew up between Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss who were the co-authors of the original and seminal text **The Discovery of Grounded Theory** published in 1967. It is common ground that both argued for a rationale of theory that was grounded-generated and developed recursively through interplay with data (STRAUSS and CORBIN, 1994).

Their approach was seen as revolutionary at the time because it challenged the dominant quantitative model in social science research both in terms of its artificial divisions between theory and research, and in the inferior role assigned to qualitative research (CHARMAZ, 2000).

Grounded theory has bifurcated roots in the rigorous positivist traditions that Glaser grew up with, and in the empirical traditions of the Chicago school field research and Herbert

Blumer's symbolic interactionism of Strauss' background (CHARMAZ, 2000; STRAUSS and CORBIN, 1994).

The result was that grounded theory emerged as a tool which combined Glaser's deductive attitude to data analysis, with Strauss' inductive methods; and, it is intended to be used in an iterative deductive and inductive successive approximation approach to theory generation.

Grounded Theory Methodology

Grounded theory methodology is most accurately described as a research method in which the theory is developed from the data, rather than the other way around. What makes this is an inductive approach, meaning that it moves from the specific to the more general. The method of study is essentially based on three elements: concepts, categories and propositions, or what was originally called "hypotheses". However, concepts are the key elements of analysis since the theory is developed from the conceptualization of data, rather than the actual data.

Corbin and Strauss (1990) define it as follows: "The grounded theory approach is a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon".

The primary objective of grounded theory, then, is to expand upon an explanation of a phenomenon by identifying the key elements of that phenomenon, and then categorizing the relationships of those elements to the context and process of the experiment. In other words, the goal is to go from the general to the specific without losing sight of what makes the subject of a study unique.

Grounded theory is often perceived as a method which separates theory and data but others insist that the method actually combines the two. Data collection, analysis and theory formulation are undeniably connected in a reciprocal sense, and the grounded theory approach incorporates explicit procedures to guide this.

This is especially evident in the sense that according to grounded theory, the processes of asking questions and making comparisons are specifically detailed to inform and guide analysis and to facilitate theorizing process (GLASER, 1992). For example, it is specifically stated that the research questions must be open and general rather than formed as

specific hypotheses, and that the emergent theory should account for a phenomenon that is relevant to the participants.

There are three distinct yet overlapping processes of analysis involved in grounded theory from which sampling procedures are typically derived. These are: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Open coding is based on the concept of data being “cracked open” as a means of identifying relevant categories. Axial coding is most often used when categories are in an advanced stage of development; and selective coding is used when the “core category”, or central category that correlates all other categories in the theory, is identified and related to other categories.

Data collection is directed by theoretical sampling, which means that the sampling is based on theoretically relevant constructs. Many experiments, in their early stages, use the open sampling methods of identifying individuals, objects or documents. It is done this way so that the data’s relevance to the research question can be assessed early on, before too much time and money have been invested. In later phases, a systematic relational or variational sampling is frequently employed with the purpose of locating data that either confirms the relationships between categories, or limits their applicability.

The final phase generally involves discriminating sampling, which consists of the deliberate and directed selection of individuals, objects or documents to verify the core category and the theory as a whole, as well as to compensate for other, less developed categories. Also, other procedures such as memo writing, and the use of diagrams as well as procedures for identifying and incorporating interaction and process are included as necessary parts of the analysis.

Grounded theory contains many unique characteristics that are designed to maintain the “groundedness” of the approach. Data collection and analysis are consciously combined, and initial data analysis is used to shape continuing data collection. This is supposed to provide the researcher with opportunities to increase the density and saturation of recurring categories, as well as to assist in providing follow-up procedures in regard to unanticipated results. Interlacing data collection and analysis in this manner are also designed to increase insights and clarify the parameters of the emerging theory.

At the same time, the method supports the actions of initial data collection and preliminary analyses before attempting to incorporate previous research literature. This is

supposed to guarantee that the analysis is based on the data and that pre-existing constructs do not influence the analysis and the subsequent formation of the theory. If existing theoretical constructs are used, they must be justified in the data.

Grounded theory provides detailed and systematic procedures for data collection, analysis and theorizing, but it is also concerned with the quality of emergent theory. Strauss and Corbin (1994) state that there are four primary requirements for judging a good grounded theory: a) it should fit the phenomenon, provided it has been carefully derived from diverse data and is adherent to the common reality of the area; b) it should provide understanding, and be understandable; c) because the data is comprehensive, it should provide generality, i.e., the theory includes extensive variation and is abstract enough to be applied to a wide variety of contexts; and, d) it should provide control, in the sense of stating the conditions under which the theory applies and describing a reasonable basis for action.

Finally, Creswell (1998, p. 58) stated that grounded theory studies challenge researches since: a) the investigator needs to leave behind, as much as possible, the theoretical ideas or notions so that the analytic, substantive theory can emerge; b) despite the evolving, inductive nature of this form of qualitative inquiry, the researcher must recognize that this is a systematic approach to research with specific steps in data analysis; c) the researcher faces the difficulty of determining when categories are saturated or when the theory is sufficiently detailed; and, d) the researcher needs to recognize that the primary outcome of this study is a theory with specific components: a central phenomenon, causal conditions, strategies, conditions and context, and consequences – there are prescribed categories of information in the theory.

Implications of Grounded Theory Methodology on Brazilian Public Administration Theory

The research methodology suggested in this paper is that of grounded theory (GLASER and STRAUSS, 1967), with an aim of generating a Brazilian substantive-level public administration theory. This approach has been effectively used in organizational research and may possibly be adopted for three primary reasons.

First, grounded theory is an inductive theory discovery methodology that allows the researcher to develop a theoretical account of the general features of a topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observations or data (LOCKE, 2001;

TURNER, 1983). This generative approach seems particularly useful in Brazilian public administration given that no models of building theory have been established so far. While models of building theory do exist in the Brazilian context, they are less applicable to the entire stages of research in general focusing or dealing largely with their development stages.

Second, a major premise of grounded theory is that to produce accurate and useful results the complexities of the organizational and institutional context have to be incorporated into the understanding of the phenomenon, rather than be simplified or ignored (SELDEN, 2005). Therefore, the use of grounded methodology allows the inclusion and investigation of these key organizational elements.

Third, grounded theory facilitates “the generation of theories of process, sequence, and change pertaining to organizations, positions, and social interaction” (GLASER and STRAUSS, 1967, p. 114). Thus, a research approach that specifically includes elements of process and change is particularly appropriate to analyze the public administration milieu in Brazil.

These three characteristics of grounded theory – inductive, contextual, and processual – fit into an interpretive rather than positivist orientation of research. The focus should be on developing a context-based, process-oriented description and explanation of the phenomenon, rather than an objective, static description expressed strictly in terms of causality (GOULDING, 2005; O’CONNOR et al., 2003). As a consequence, the grounded theory methodology gives predominance to realism of context and theoretical and conceptual development as research goals (CLARKE, 2005). Therefore, it could describe and explain the interaction of contextual conditions, actions and consequences of the phenomena in the Brazilian public administration

Finally, the methodology of grounded theory is interactive, requiring a steady movement between concept and data, as well as comparative, requiring a constant comparison across types of evidence to control the conceptual level and scope of the emerging theory (FINCH, 2002; DEY, 1999). Consequently, this provides an opportunity to examine continuous processes in context in order to draw out the significance of various levels of analysis and thereby reveal the multiple sources of loops of causation and connectivity so crucial to identifying and explaining patterns in the Brazilian public administration.

Main Areas of Use of Grounded Theory Methodology on Brazilian Public Administration Research

The following section describes the main areas in which it is proposed that the use of grounded theory methodology on Brazilian public administration should focus. They aim at reflecting some of the key Brazilian public administration science questions in which there are increasingly data and where strategies of analysis are not widely used in substantive areas.

It is intended that this list should be refined and much conceptual and empirical work must be done to test, explore and further develop the structure and implications of the grounded theory methodology. It should also be stressed that the following is not expected to be an exhaustive list but rather a set of exemplars on which the grounded theory methodology could be used.

First, while in Brazil there have been large longitudinal surveys for many years, increasingly data are available from a host of large and small scale longitudinal surveys which allow researchers to properly address many substantive areas including, for example, the consequences of teenage pregnancy, pathways in and out of crime, or transitions to old age. Indeed research into all aspects of the life course can often be placed into context of a qualitative research.

In addition to single outcomes such as those highlighted above there is a major imperative to consider multiple risks for example for teenage outcomes such as pregnancy, drug misuse, crime and scholastic underachievement which may be inter-related.

However, strategies to analyze such data are not so well developed. Classical methodologies of analysis were suitable only for continuous dependent variables and even for such variables the approach has been criticized in recent years. Conversely, grounded theory methodology provides researchers with a clearer method for assessing the data.

Second, many social scientific outcomes are influenced by networks, for example strategic decisions by political units or agencies may depend on decisions by similar institutions; young people are often placed under peer pressure to undertake certain activities; or in educational institutions, resources or other issues may lead to different networks of learners having very different educational experiences and hence outcomes. In short, there is a

wide number of applications of network data in disciplines as diverse as public administration, economy, education and sociology.

There have been advances both in data availability and in methodology in recent years but not a commensurate advance in the use of such techniques. Given the potential of such data to address important social scientific questions there still needs to be a push to make the science of collecting network data more widely understood; and to mainstream the analysis of network data into public administration, especially through grounded theory methodology.

Third, Brazilian public administration faces the challenge of making the most of a series of very large cross-national data collection exercises over recent years and grounded theory methodology helps in the analysis of these cross-national data.

It is not simply large data collection which will lead to these very large data sets; as many of the large national data collection episodes have noted analyzing cross-national data is not simply a case of putting together a series of data sets and adding dummies variables. Instead, there is a whole raft of cultural, socio-economic and spatial considerations so as to be able to meaningfully compare data from Rio de Janeiro with those from Amazonas, for instance.

Increasing use of administrative data, typically merged from a number of sources with data from, for example, interviews will lead to very rich data sets which will only fulfill their full potential if they are analyzed properly through grounded theory methodology. As the above has indicated these data have a very wide series of applications across the full breadth of the Brazilian public administration science and massive potential applications in government policy.

Fourth, an important development in public administration analysis in recent years has been the combination of data from more than one study in a secondary analysis, which improves the knowledge based on the area under study.

This can both provide new insights and the evidence for policy decisions in many areas of government, for instance: education for the public service; the political context of

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public service; issues in local, state and federal government; and issues in local, state and federal service.

However, while there may be a greater potential for grounded theory methodology in the public administration science than it has been the case in the past few decades, many situations where it is either ethically or practically not possible to undertake a grounded research will remain.

Thus, there is a multilevel situation to be addressed. Not only are there statistical issues associated with analyzing the data but there are also methodological issues surrounding the creation of such data for example how one should merge data from a number of sources in a coherent and scientific manner.

There are many topics of interest which would benefit from being addressed using the grounded theory methodological approach. For example, the reduction of recidivism, the impact of changing different types of welfare payments, strategies for child support and care, or the impact of government initiatives on small business success or failure.

In fact, with the increase in Brazilian legislation there is even more need to be able to properly evaluate the effect of policies and hence to elaborate new policy. The Brazilian longitudinal data sets can be used to address and to inform these policies but it should also be stressed that by its very nature, this is an issue where one will require the ability to merge data from a number of sources in order to make progress.

Examples of situations which have important policy relevance would be: budgeting, finance, accountability, and performance; intergovernmental and international relations; human resource management and social equity; responding to threats and disasters; public safety, law, and the courts; ethical issues and administrative courage; environmental justice, public works management and policy; housing, social services, health policy and management; environment, science, and technology.

Finally, as our understanding of the complex nature of the Brazilian society increases, it becomes increasingly important to evaluate these circumstances effectively in order to inform sensible policies. The key areas in which we believe the Brazilian public administration is lacking expertise are research design, data collection, data quality

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assessment and, indeed, theorizing. None of the extremely exciting or important propositions described in the above areas can be undertaken with any degree of confidence unless the data have been collected sensibly.

There is a need for research and discussion to consider the many possibilities presented by grounded theory methodologies to develop theories, which properly integrate the multitude of qualitative data sources with those of a more quantitative nature. At last, the aim here is to provide alternatives at the cutting edge issues facing Brazilian public administration with a view to developing intellectually-stimulating debate between scholars from a variety of disciplines able to take forward an important research agenda as well as improving its current practice.

Discussion and Analysis

In general, the assumptions of this paper support the argument that Brazilian public administration research is engaged in modest theory testing. The published papers tend to mainly represent research that is in its early conceptual phase, identifying concepts and issues for future research.

However, substantive-level theory is not developed and the persistent lack of empirical research explains the gap that exists between theory and practice in the Brazilian public administration. Grounded theory helps to close this gap by providing a methodological framework to assist public administration researchers working in an interpretative paradigm to build theory from qualitative data.

Under these circumstances, the attempt to close the gap between the ivory tower and the real world may well appear, to some at least, as more convincing. It is, of course, not the argument of this paper that such a move renders grounded theory and practice unproblematic.

The analysis in this paper has tried to weave together issues and theories from different perspectives that, by a large, have been debated by different groups of theoretician in mutual isolation. The main discussion is simply that theoretician interested in the flourishing of grounded theory methodology would do well to explore the challenges raised in the field. Of course, given the vast scope of the field, it has not been possible to present any knock-down arguments about the limits of a grounded theory methodology.

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This paper has not explored all the permutations of public administration management, all the possible reforms of state that would favor citizens, nor all the case studies of public administration management to find governance structures that facilitate the efficient pursuit of multiple objectives.

Our hope is simply to have presented a case why the Brazilian public administration theory should benefit from a much more thorough exploration of these issues. The more specific discussion is that there is a need for fundamental reconsideration at least when it comes to thinking about public administration research. This should not in any way be taken as a repudiation of other research methodologies.

This preliminary discussion was meant to be a modest contribution to the public administration research, a small part of the broader case for the claim that public administration theoretician should take a second look at the advantages of a grounded theory methodology or at least at the pitfalls of certain naïve departures from this methodology.

Conclusion

Grounded theory methodology is an exciting and promising research area. There is strong indication that it will receive even greater levels of research interest than currently is the case, in the forthcoming years.

If researchers draw and apply the lessons and experiences from methodologies such as grounded theory, then the Brazilian public administration has better chance to converge quickly and emerge as an area with substantial intellectual bases and become a strong contributor to knowledge and practice.

On the contrary, failure to regard the lessons can lead to a lot of resources being wasted, research capital being spent on unproductive debate, and result in futile exercise in reinventing the wheel.

Hence, it is necessary to shorten the learning curve and quickly demonstrating the efficacy and veracity of grounded theory methodology as a body of knowledge worthy of scholarship and practice.

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The basic purpose of this paper was to provide Brazilian public administration scientists with an overview of an original body of literature, the grounded theory, and to offer a few suggestions on how it might usefully be applied to the study of Brazilian public administration.

Our hope is that this introductory treatment will help to impose simplicity and coherence on a growing, complex body of research, and that it may serve as a useful starting point for those who wish to pursue these ideas further.

One simple theme deserves emphasis in this conclusion. The works of Glaser, Strauss, and others in grounded theory has to this point been the most promising source of creativity, theoretical and methodological progress; but they have yet to generate the amounts and kinds of theoretical work their proponents had hoped for and probably would have predicted many years earlier.

The grounded theory methodology sheds new light on methodology by focusing on theory construction – an elegant suitable focus that captures the essence of organizational relationships and offers a coherent framework for integrating a myriad of dimensions of public administrative performance. For these reasons, among others, many researchers of the Brazilian public administration are likely to find the grounded theory an especially attractive strategy of inquiry and research.

The Brazilian public administration tends to involve multiple principals and agents, competition and cooperation, diverse individual goals, noticeable constraints on choice, and a number of other features anchored in the institutional context. For analytical purposes, there is a legitimate inclination to assume away as many of these complications as possible – but it may well be that we can not explain behavior to our satisfaction, or even roughly predict it, without taking these sorts of things systematically into account.

The interplay of theory and data could well produce far more complex theories of dynamic public administration processes and relationships, as well as theories much more representative of the Brazilian public administration's reality than current models. In a world of multiple actors, multiple time periods, and strategic behavior, this is surely a reasonable expectation.

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Based on our discussion of the feasibility of grounded theory, we urge public administration scholars to explore the potential of their research questions to accommodate rigorous grounded theory research and to dare to go on using this methodology with all research problems that could benefit from building theory and that allow for empirical inquiry.

All areas of the public administration field need theory development. We can not unfortunately point out areas of public administration research that would be in a position to benefit from grounded theory more than other areas. However, we hope that grounded theory research will gain more footholds in all areas of public administration research in the future.

In the teaching curricula, and research agendas of universities and colleges, public administration is a promising field, and as such it will benefit from rigorous tries at theory development. Knowledge creation is facilitated by building grounded theory that constantly complements theory-testing (EISENHARDT, 1989), and Brazilian public administration will need their base of a proper theory.

In summary, we believe that grounded theory in general has a lot to offer to the field of public administration. We wish to support the further use of the methodology and hope to have contributed to the spreading of knowledge on its employment.

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