

# Grounded Theory Methodology as Methodical Hermeneutics

## Reconciling Realism and Relativism

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**ABSTRACT.** In this article it is argued that the realism–relativism duality addressed by the grounded theory approach to qualitative research is best accounted for when the method is understood to be an inductive approach to hermeneutics. Phenomenology, C.S. Peirce’s theory of inference, philosophical hermeneutics, pragmatism and the new rhetoric are drawn upon in support of this argument. It is also held that this formulation of the grounded theory method opens the possibility that the method improves on earlier approaches to methodical hermeneutics. As an outcome of this formulation, the debate on the validity and reliability of returns from the grounded theory approach is cast in a new light. The new methodical hermeneutics is discussed in terms of prior attempts to relate hermeneutics to method.

**KEY WORDS:** grounded theory methodology, hermeneutics, induction and abduction, qualitative research

The grounded theory method was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as an alternative to what they saw as a predominantly rational approach to theorizing in sociology. Thus, rather than conceptualizing theory and then testing it with data, in the grounded theory method the conceptualization of theory is derived from data. Since its inception, it has been taken up by several disciplines in addition to sociology, including psychology (e.g. Pilowski, 1993; J.C. Watson & Rennie, 1994). Typically, the application of the method involves understanding the meaning of texts of various sorts, whether as notes of participant observation of social conduct, extant writings or transcriptions of interviews. Glaser and Strauss have always maintained that a grounded theory is relative to the perspective(s) of the person(s) producing it, and that different sets of investigators working with the same information may derive alternative theories from it. In compensation, they have held that this perspectivism is acceptable so long as each theory is

accountable to the information. Thus, relativism and realism have been acknowledged, but only tacitly. Recently, I have brought out into the open the realism and relativism intrinsic to the grounded theory method, and have challenged that neither Glaser's (1992) nor Strauss's (1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994) current methodologies adequately address the tension between them. I have held that, in order for this tension to be reconciled with the subject matter addressed by the grounded theory method and with the procedures constituting the latter, it is necessary to view it as a form of hermeneutics. Correspondingly, I have drawn upon phenomenology, C.S. Peirce's theory of inference, philosophical hermeneutics and pragmatism in support of the notion that the grounded theory method amounts to a union of hermeneutics and method, or methodical hermeneutics (Rennie, 1998a, 1998b, 1999; cf. Corbin, 1998; Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000).

Up to now, this methodical hermeneutics has been only sketched. In the present article, I more fully develop the arguments for it. I begin by examining the nature of the subject matter typically addressed in a grounded theory analysis, and the way it is dealt with, as a way of teasing out how the method resolves to hermeneutics. Within this examination, Continental philosophical thought is drawn upon to support the point that, *as* hermeneutical, the method addresses the tension between realism and relativism. I then turn to how induction is involved in the method. Here the application of C.S. Peirce's theory of inference is useful because Peirce worked out a way to support the claim that induction is self-correcting, which helps to make the grounded method sufficient unto itself rather than merely the first step in scientific inquiry. This outcome is in keeping with the intent of a hermeneutic analysis, which is to derive an understanding of the meaning of text—an understanding that stands on its own. Moreover, as a pragmatist, Peirce held that knowledge production involves the perspectives of those engaged in it, which keeps in place the tension between realism and relativism.

Thus, the presentation has several objectives. The immediate goal is to establish that the grounded theory method is indeed hermeneutical. The second purpose is to raise the possibility that, although it was not conceived as such, the method actually constitutes an improvement, in some respects, on earlier attempts to apply method to hermeneutics. Integral to this second goal is a third intent, which is to challenge the philosophical hermeneutic critique that method holds little place in hermeneutics. Fourth, a practical goal is to derive from the study a constructive contribution to the debate on the validity and reliability of the returns from a grounded theory inquiry. Finally, throughout, all of these objectives are organized by the attempt to reconcile the realism and relativism intrinsic to the method. This reconciliation is, of course, extremely difficult to achieve and I do not pretend that what follows is a final accomplishment of it. Instead, it is offered as a contribution to the quest for it.

## The Hermeneutic Nature of Grounded Theory Method

Hermeneutics has been defined as the 'theory of the operation of understanding in its relation to the interpretation of text' (Ricoeur, 1978, p. 141). It is an ancient tradition that began as Greek and Judaic interpretation of legal and religious texts, and which was practiced intensely during the Reformation. The role of the hermeneut is to understand the meaning of text when the meaning is confusing or obscure in some way (Taylor, 1971). This is not to say that text that is easy to understand does not involve interpretation in the broadest sense. Philosophical hermeneutics (see below) has contributed to the contemporary view that understanding ineluctably involves perspectives and hence is interpretive (for a historian's take on this point, see Kuhn, 1970).

Ricoeur makes a distinction between the semantic and structural aspects of text, suggesting that the structural (i.e. syntactic) features are constitutive of the text itself and are readily apparent, and hence objective (Ricoeur, 1981). The semantic aspect has to do with the meaning of the text, which may require interpretation. Thus, according to Ricoeur, consideration of structure enables explanation, whereas engagement with semantics is a matter of understanding. As an extension, then, when the text is difficult to understand, the activity of understanding is hermeneutic. From the beginning, Glaser and Strauss have been interested in *explaining* social conduct on the basis of the analysis of observations about it, reports on it made by the actors engaged in it, and/or extant literature to do with it. The mode of explanation is in terms of relations among structures. The system of categories (see below) and relations among them that instantiate the theory assume this form. But all this is not structure in the syntactic sense. It has nothing to do with the structure of a sentence on a page. It is structuralism having to do with the *meaning* of text.

Although Strauss and Corbin (1994) indicate that grounded theory analysis is interpretive, they do so from the position of American pragmatism (particularly, the writings of Dewey [1938/1991] and Mead [1917]). Pragmatism is contemporary in recognizing that all forms of inquiry in all domains involve perspectivism, and hence are interpretive. But it fails to take into account adequately the insight that sociology (and, hence, social science in general, it could be added) involves what Giddens (1976) has referred to as a *double* hermeneutic. As Giddens remarks, 'Sociology . . . deals with a pre-interpreted world where the creation and production of meaning-frames is a very condition of that which it seeks to analyze, namely human social conduct' (quoted in Habermas, 1981/1984, p. 110). Moreover, the double hermeneutic is about human agency. As agents, people may choose the way in which they represent their experience, and, indeed, may opt either to misrepresent it or not to disclose it. Regardless of the extent to which persons are prepared to represent their experience in 'good faith', the

experience is both constituted in part and influenced by interests, values, beliefs, and so on. In this sense, people are made to be interpreters of their experience of themselves.

A person's experience is external to another person. As suggested by Schütz (1967), when compared to an Other, the person having an experience is in a better position to know its meaning. It may also be the case, however, that experience is inchoate for the person experiencing it and may be difficult to articulate (Taylor, 1989). In this circumstance, the Other may be helpful as an aid to the articulation. In any case, shared language and custom allow the Other to understand much of what the person conveys. Nevertheless, this understanding is influenced by the Other's own values, beliefs and experiences. Thus, any understanding of a person's utterances and displays is an interpretation of an already interpreted text. This state of affairs means that researchers must decide on how deeply to interpret text. If cautious, they may elect to stay close to denotation of the text. Alternatively, they may prefer to engage in what Ricoeur variously has referred to as a 'depth' hermeneutics, or a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. In this approach, it is the latent rather than the manifest meaning of the text that is interpreted (Ricoeur, 1981). The first strategy, of course, serves the interest of objectivity, while the second is practiced in the interest of achieving deeper understanding at the risk of heightened relativity.

### *Categorization as an Expression of Understanding*

It is because the grounded theory method has to do with the meaning of the semantic aspects of text that any theory coming out of the application of the method is about understanding, not explanation. Grounded theorists represent their understandings in the form of *categories* and relations among them. Usually the primary investigator is both the inquirer into the phenomenon of interest and the analyst of information about it. This tactic is adopted because it is generally agreed that it is not good practice to delegate to someone else the gathering of the text to which the analytic procedures are to be applied. Thus, when interviews are used as the mode of inquiry, the analyst already has a sense of the text given by a respondent even before it is transcribed. Moreover, the act of transcribing it deepens the understanding of it so that, irrespective of whether or not the text as a whole is read and reread prior to the analysis of its particulars, the analyst has a sense of the meaning of the text as a whole. Thus, the hermeneutic circle is entered. In other words, the understanding of the whole of the text influences the understanding of a part of it, and the understanding of each part in turn influences the understanding of the whole. This circling of part to whole and back again results in progressive understanding that, in principle, is non-ending, although, hopefully, it reaches a kind of stability, at least within the

horizon of the particular hermeneut. (For more on the hermeneutic circle see, e.g., Dilthey, 1976.)

Glaser and Strauss developed a technique described as 'constant comparative analysis', in which the meaning of a given fragment of text (or meaning unit) is constantly compared with the meaning of other units.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this technique is to force the analyst to stay close to the meaning of the text, or, looking at it the other way, to discourage the analyst from making subjective the understanding of the text by importing a priori, rationally derived understandings. How constant comparison is to be carried out procedurally has never been insisted on dogmatically. In the set of procedures specified in the original version of the method, Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommend converting fragments of the text into 'codes', which are then sorted into categories. It would seem that what they mean by a 'code' is a reduction of the meaning of a given unit of the text. These codes are sorted into clusters according to shared meanings, and the meaning of each cluster is represented as a category. The codes are repeatedly sorted into clusters until new sorts are exhausted. Accordingly, categorization at this level is judged to have reached *saturation*.

Alternatively, Turner (1981) and Rennie, Phillips and Quartaro (1988) independently chose to categorize progressively from meaning unit to meaning unit when proceeding through a text. Thus, in this procedure, a list of categories develops as the analysis goes ahead, and the list is referred to as each new meaning unit is addressed. When new meanings are encountered, categories to represent them are added to the list. Understanding the relations among categories may be assisted by diagrams, flow charts, narrative schematization, and so on, depending on what works best for the particular analyst. As in the other procedure, the gathering of new texts to do with the phenomenon of interest continues until relatively few new categories are necessary as new texts are analyzed, at which point the list of categories is judged to be saturated.

In the interest of furthering the 'discovery-oriented' objective of a grounded theory analysis, analysts are encouraged to hold in abeyance their anticipations, hunches, expectations, hypotheses, and so on, about the phenomenon of interest. Thus, although they have never acknowledged the connection, Glaser and Strauss have incorporated into their method the phenomenological technique of bracketing without addressing the complex question of the extent to which such an activity can be carried out successfully (for an excellent elucidation of bracketing in phenomenology, see Zaner, 1970). In addition, grounded theory analysts are encouraged to keep a research log in which they record their hunches, speculations, thoughts about relations among categories, and so on, as they arise once the study has begun (to engage in 'theoretical memoing', as Glaser and Strauss put it). These various expressions of reflexivity are advocated in the interest of objectifying the understanding of the phenomenon of interest.

This quest needs to be appraised in the light of hermeneutics. The philosophical hermeneutic critique (Gadamer, 1960/1992; Heidegger, 1927/1962) of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology (e.g. Husserl, 1913/1962) makes a strong argument against the belief that it is possible to achieve transcendental objectivity through the procedure of bracketing. This critique points out that certain aspects of an individual's horizon of understanding ineluctably are inaccessible to self-reflection. The strength of this argument notwithstanding, however, it is also the case that there are aspects of the horizon that *are* accessible (cf. Ericsson & Simon, 1980; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), if not in the transcendental sense. Once explicitated, the aspects become objectified in terms of the local culture of which they are a part. The upshot is that grounded theorists' efforts to contain biases by being reflexive in various ways eventuate in a middle ground between realism and relativism.<sup>2</sup>

The activity of categorizing proceeds through several stages of increasing abstraction. Analysts are encouraged to keep their initial categories close to the language of the text. Such categories are termed 'descriptive' by Glaser and Strauss, although, as seen, interpretation is involved in the description. The objective of the analysis is to conceptualize 'higher-order', or more abstract categories that subsume the descriptive categories. Indeed, the pinnacle of this objective is the conceptualization of a supreme or *core* category that gathers together the meanings of all other categories. Glaser and Strauss suggest that the conceptualization of higher-order categories is best achieved through the sorting of the 'theoretical memos' (i.e. research log entries) made *about* the (interpreted) relations among the lower-order categories. In any case, during the initial phase of the analysis, the analyst experiences considerable tension in deciding whether to conceptualize concrete or abstract categories. In the interest of concreteness, it is tempting to make the units of meaning very small, and to stay close to the denotation of the text. This strategy can easily result in hundreds of 'categories' that do little more than repeat the text. For the unwary, the Turner-Rennie et al. method of categorizing, especially, may lead to this temptation (in the language of the Glaser and Strauss approach, the codes are all too easily treated as categories). Even the latter approach can entail a similar temptation, however, depending on how the analyst goes about the task. That is, positivistic analysts may be inclined to keep the meaning of clusters of codes tightly tied to the words of the text making up the codes, thus resulting in a large number of clusters of codes and hence categories.

Given that it becomes very difficult to represent, in a write-up, a system of more than 50 categories (Glaser and Strauss recommend that it be limited to around 20), abstraction is the order of the day. It is done either immediately, during the initial 'descriptive' categorizing phase, or later, when the many 'descriptive' categories resulting from concrete conceptualization are pooled into higher-order categories (or discarded if they prove to have limited

applicability to the text as a whole being analyzed). The point is that, regardless of how it is done, with the advent of higher-order categorizing, interpretation increasingly comes into play.

The development of categories and associated theory in grounded theory analysis is complex and has much to do with creativity. Users of the method have commented on how they get immersed in the phenomenon under study to the point where it becomes their life: the articulation of the understanding of the phenomenon gestates for weeks or months, but even then the resulting understanding is always open to new interpretations. It is difficult to know as a consequence when the analysis is actually over, yet it is necessary to force an ending at some point (K. Watson, 1999).

Within this creative process, grounded theory analysts work with their own experience when attempting to understand the experience of others mediated through the text. It is within the interplay between external and internal experience that the art of good interpretation lies. Too much caution expressed as reluctance to give rein to subjectivity can result in 'missing' the life of the experience under study. Alternatively, giving undue rein expresses the life of the analyst more than that of the respondents. Good interpretation thus involves living inside and outside the experience and monitoring of the degree of fit between the two aspects.

Resulting from this engagement, good categories are often metaphorical because metaphors succinctly articulate complex meanings. For example, in a study of the impact of therapists' imagery on the psychotherapeutic process, Shaul (1994) did a grounded theory study of therapists' tape-replay-assisted recollections of moments in which they experienced an image in response to clients' discourse. Shaul came to understand that the therapists' discourse was influenced by the experience of the image, regardless of whether or not the image itself was imparted to the client. He also interviewed the therapists' clients about their experience of the discourse before and after the time that the therapists' images had occurred, and performed a grounded theory analysis of these reports. The analysis indicated that the therapists' discourse following their experiences of their images matched the clients' inner experience more than the discourse preceding the image. Shaul concluded that therapists' imagery acts as an *empathic lens*—a metaphor that aptly captures the effect of the imagery.

### **Induction in the Grounded Theory Method**

In its original form, the grounded theory method is thought to emphasize the context of discovery more than the context of justification (Reichenbach, 1949). Although they have never acknowledged it explicitly, both Glaser and Strauss tacitly endorse the notion of verification in science as put forward by the logical positivists. Thus, in the original version of the method

(and the version upheld by Glaser, 1978, 1992), a distinction is made between verification and validation. Verification is a stronger version of credibility than is validation. Validation of the categories, and hence the theory, comes from the procedures constituting the method of grounded theory analysis, but their verification must await the development of hypotheses *from* the grounded theory so developed, which are tested in the way of normal science.

The difficulty created by the claim of validation, however, is that the assertion is made in terms of induction alone; deduction is excluded from the method entailed in the development of the theory, and instead is reserved for the testing of the theory once it is developed. Glaser (1978, 1992) maintains that validation comes about through the checks and balances constituting the method itself, that is to say, the constant comparative method, bracketing and theoretical memoing. This is not a strong argument, however, and appears to be what motivated Strauss (1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994) explicitly to incorporate hypothesis testing directly into the method itself. In this approach, the traditional way of categorizing by clustering codes is replaced by a study of text in which hypotheses about how a given unit of analysis, whether an observed behavior recorded as a note or some other kind of text fragment, could be explained. 'What could have given rise to this particular datum?' is in effect the operative question asked. The assumption is that evidence will accrue during the course of the analysis that will differentially support some hypotheses over others. Thus, from a given fragment, predictions are made about what might be expected in future fragments. Accordingly, as the analysis proceeds, some hypotheses are confirmed while others are not. By the end of the analysis, if all goes well, the analyst has developed a categorical structure that is internally verified.

Glaser (1992) criticizes this approach to categorizing on the grounds that it promotes a premature leaping into theory because, unless the analyst is very careful, it would be easy to fall into personalized hypothesizing. An examination of transcripts of Strauss's interactions with students whom he trained using his approach tends to provide support for Glaser's concern (see Strauss, 1987). Strauss's hypothesis generation and testing, from text fragment to fragment, is very tedious. Evidently, an hour or more easily could be spent speculating on how a single fragment might be explained. Given that a text protocol could consist of scores of fragments, the prospect of repeating the intensity of that kind of analysis throughout is daunting. It is perhaps for this reason that it is apparent from the transcripts of his training sessions that Strauss was inclined to settle on his confirmed hypotheses after going through just a few fragments, thereafter treating the meaning of ensuing fragments as confirmatory. It would thus seem that this procedure can lead to an early interpretation that gets rather rapidly consolidated, perhaps at the expense of other interpretations that could be made if the text is treated more as a whole.

Hence, it is difficult to be sanguine about the gain achieved by the Strauss and Corbin innovation if it is made at the expense of the discovery orientation prized by traditional grounded theory. On the other hand, it is not easy to argue convincingly that the returns from the original grounded theory method are valid in their own right when there is not a good fit between the procedures on which the claim is made and the logic supporting them.

### *Peirce's Theory of Inference*

The foregoing analysis has thus raised the following question: Is it possible to support Strauss's claim that the grounded theory method is inherently more verificational (or, better, validational) than supposed while maintaining the original way of doing the method?<sup>3</sup> As we have seen, the key seems to have something to do with hypothesis testing. Is it possible to make the case that, although Glaser has never characterized the original method of categorizing as such, it, too, can be considered to involve hypothesis testing? It is difficult to do this in terms of the conventional theory of inference because, as indicated, it is limited to induction and deduction. It is possible to do it, however, in terms of C.S. Peirce's theory of inference (Peirce, 1965).

Peirce maintains that, in addition to induction and deduction, abduction is another mode of inference. In his view, deduction is tautological in that the meaning entailed in the conclusion of a deduction is already contained in its premises. Thus, new knowledge does not come from deduction. Instead, it comes about through the interplay between abduction and induction. Abduction is the imaginative creation of a hypothesis and is the 'sheet anchor' of science, as he puts it (Peirce, 1965, VI, p. 531; VII, p. 220; see Tursman, 1987), because new ideas are always abductive.

Peirce explains abduction as follows. Let us suppose that a scientist is working with data of some sort and comes up with a finding that cannot be explained. The scientist may then imagine a cause which, if true, would provide and explanation. He puts such a situation in the form of an argument:

The surprising fact, C, is observed.  
But if A were true, C would be a matter of course.  
Hence, there is reason to suppose that A is true.  
(Peirce, 1965, V, p. 189)

More recently, in an attempt to address what he judges to be a weakness in its third term—the conclusion—Curd (1980) has modified this argument as follows:

The surprising fact, C, is observed.  
The hypothesis, A, is capable of explaining C.  
Hence, there are *prima facie* grounds for pursuing A.  
(p. 213, cited in Tursman, 1987, p. 14)

Thus, for Peirce, the normal course of science involves the gathering of facts (induction), which give rise to an abduction, which is then tested by further induction. The significant consequence is that *induction is self-correcting* (Tursman, 1987).

Peirce's interest was in applying logic to natural science. Thus, caution is in order when making any attempt to extend his logic to human science. Even so, the extension seems reasonable. First, when giving a prominent place to the role of imagination (abduction), Peirce gives free play to interpretation, thereby providing a link with hermeneutics. Second, Peirce holds that knowledge is always tentative, never absolute. In turn, the constitution of knowledge is a matter of growing consensus among those engaged in a given line of inquiry. This position is also in keeping with hermeneutics.

As for the grounded theory method, Peirce's theory is directly applicable as follows. Regardless of the set of procedures used to conceptualize categories, any category in effect is an abduction (hypothesis) awaiting validation as the grounded theory analysis proceeds. Accordingly, it does not stretch Peirce's abduction argument too far if it is modified for hermeneutics in the following way:

This [interesting, surprising, etc.] passage of text, C, is encountered.  
The meaning, A, of C may apply to the text as a whole.  
Therefore there are *prima facie* grounds for pursuing A.

In the case of the original way of categorizing, abduction awaits the inductive sorting of codes into clusters. Once made in the form of a category applied to the cluster, the abduction is tested by ensuing inductive analysis of the text. When abduction is engaged early in the analysis, most of the induction involves additional texts that are acquired as the analysis proceeds (by virtue of the gathering of data and their analysis being conducted concurrently). Alternatively, when the abduction is made later in the analysis, the induction involves both new text as it is gathered and the text that is already at hand. In the case of the Turner-Rennie et al. way of categorizing, abduction is applied to a new text fragment as it is encountered during the course of the analyst's progress through the text. Once made, the resulting hypothesis is tested by the inductive analysis of ensuing text. Thus, in the traditional way, abduction emerges from induction and returns to it. In the Turner-Rennie et al. way, inference begins with abduction and is followed by induction. Either way, induction informs the abduction. Categories (or abductions/hypotheses) are changed, discarded or pooled into other categories depending on the interpretations given to the remaining text to be analyzed. Moreover, in the grounded theory method, earlier text is analyzed in the light of the categories developed later on in the analysis, to see if they apply to the earlier text (in expression of the hermeneutic circle).

It is important to point out that the interplay between abduction and induction applies regardless of whether the text is given by a single participant or is constituted of the individual reports regarding several individuals. Depending on the interpretation given to his works, this feature either extends significantly or complements Dilthey's methodical hermeneutics. My reading of translations of and commentaries on Dilthey's works (e.g. Dilthey, 1961, 1976, 1977; Makkreel, 1977/1992; Rickman, 1988) has given me to understand that his methodical hermeneutics was directed to the understanding of either particular events or actors. If this interpretation is accurate, then the present version of methodical hermeneutics could be taken as a way to expand Dilthey's version into a way of understanding generals as well as particulars. In a recent paper, Teo (1999) acknowledges that, indeed, the usual interpretation made of Dilthey's method is that it was restricted to the understanding of particulars. Teo holds, however, that this interpretation is wrong. Instead, Teo asserts, Dilthey was interested in types as well as tokens. If Teo's interpretation is sound, then the present approach complements Dilthey's method (see note 6 below).

### **Methodical Hermeneutics and Rhetoric**

When the objectifying returns from bracketing combined with the interplay between abduction and induction in the grounded theory method are taken into account, support is provided for the claim that the method involves the demonstration of knowledge claims. As such, a link is established between the method and Cartesian–Kantian epistemology. Alternatively, to the extent that the fundamentally hermeneutic nature of the mode of inquiry involves relativism, rhetoric is brought into play. Rhetoric has been defined as the art of persuading an audience to a point of view over matters that are uncertain (Aristotle, 1954). It is closely connected with hermeneutics—a point that is made about both ancient (Eden, 1987) and contemporary (Hernadi, 1987) hermeneutics. In response to Aristotle's defense of it, rhetoric was esteemed in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance but came under the same disfavor accorded to it by Plato once the Enlightenment got underway (Vickers, 1988).<sup>4</sup> Rhetoric is coming into renewed respectability in contemporary thought about knowledge development, however, and in the bargain has been extended beyond its traditional confine to oratory to include written arguments as well (e.g. Bazerman, 1988; Dearin, 1969; Nelson, Megill, & McCloskey, 1987; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958/1969). This renewal has been buoyed by contemporary thought as expressed in American pragmatism (e.g. Dewey, 1938/1991; Peirce, 1965), postmodernism (e.g. Rorty, 1979), social constructionism (Gergen, 1985) and philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1960/1992; Heidegger, 1927/1962). These schools

of thought are united in emphasizing that knowledge production is relativized to the perspectives of its producers (for a good overview, see Fay, 1996; for related literature see Bernstein, 1983; Kvale, 1996; Margolis, 1986).

The case for the involvement of rhetoric in the grounded theory method of inquiry needs to be made directly. In recognizing that a grounded theory is to be presented as *plausible*, Strauss and Corbin (1994) coherently draw upon pragmatism. Whether in terms of Peirce's or Dewey's version of it, pragmatism holds that knowledge production is a matter of perspective and that warrants to truth are a matter of consensus among the members of the community of inquirers. Pragmatism makes no distinction between natural and human science, however. Although Peirce's pioneering work in semiotics has implications for human science (Hernadi, 1987), his main concern was with developing a modern logic commensurate with modern natural science (Tursman, 1987). Meanwhile, although Dewey was greatly preoccupied with social issues, his characterization of the experiment as the most advanced expression of human inquiry is modeled after the experiment in natural science (see Dewey, 1938/1991). As seen, the constant comparative procedure interpreted as abduction and induction contributes to a way of making hermeneutics methodical, and in a way that provides justification for the claim that the returns are internally valid. But it would be a mistake to conclude from this that the grounded theory method is thereby brought into the domain of natural science, precisely because of the double hermeneutic pertinent to the method. The result of all this is that the method involves rhetoric to an even greater extent than is made visible when it is seen as an expression of pragmatism.

Qualitative research methodologists influenced by the grounded theory method who identify with positivism are inclined to import natural scientific notions of reliability and validity (e.g. Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; Miles & Huberman, 1984; for a characterization of this approach as scientific realism, see Madill et al., 2000). Thus, researchers may be encouraged (even required in some cases) to conduct 'member checking' (i.e. checking with research participants about the adequacy of formulations [Guba & Lincoln, 1982]). They may be urged to 'triangulate' findings (i.e. to look for alternative evidence in support of their formulations). They may be directed to work in teams and to make categorization a matter of team consensus. The incorporation of such procedures into a grounded theory endeavor applies an objectivistic gloss to the study that may increase the study's rhetorical impact—at least on readers who identify with positivism. Ironically, it is consistent with looking upon grounded theory methodology as methodical hermeneutics to suppose that the same procedures may *decrease* its impact if they interfere with the groundedness of the study, thereby diminishing the extent to which it resonates with the reader. First, engaging in 'member checking' is collegial and expressive of the humanistic

values supporting qualitative research. It is also useful, as intended, as a check on the biases of the researcher. However, it raises the thorny question of whom to believe when there is a disparity between the researcher's and the respondent's interpretation of the respondent's text. Although it is true that respondents may know the meaning of their texts better than anyone else, it is also true that this may not be the case, depending on whether or not respondents are defensive about the experience and conduct represented in their texts. Second, triangulation may enhance persuasiveness but its use is tricky. For example, acquaintances of respondents may be asked to give their impressions of the respondents' experience and conduct, as a way of getting an objective stance on that experience, but this 'objectivity' requires interpretation as much as the respondents' reports. Finally, team consensus in the conceptualization of categories doubtless increases their reliability, but possibly at the expense of their validity. After all, the interpretations given by a single member of the team may be more penetrating than those of other members, but may be censored because the others cannot 'see' them (for related critiques, see Giorgi, 1988, 1989; Madill et al., 2000; Packer & Addison, 1989a, 1989b; Stiles, 1993, 1997). Once it is understood that the grounded theory method is both hermeneutical and rhetorical, the relativization inherent in all objectifying initiatives, whether positivistic or not, becomes more clear.

On the other side of the coin, as emphasized, the grounded theory method does not resolve to being empty rhetoric constituted of the use of tropes and figures. There are a number of considerations having to do with the method that support claims to knowledge coming out its application. Figures indeed may be employed (as in the use of metaphor in the conceptualization of categories). Nevertheless, when the intent is to convey understanding and not merely the creation of effect, the use of such figures contributes to demonstration, although, of course, not the kind of demonstration that comes from the application of the syllogism in logic. Second, being reflexive during all phases of the inquiry and communicating the returns from the reflexivity help to objectify the researcher's understanding, and thereby contribute to demonstration. Third, the detailing of the procedures used in the inquiry lets the reader know that the analysis was done thoughtfully, painstakingly and systematically, all of which reassure the reader that presented understandings are based on rigorous method. Fourth, staying grounded when interpreting enhances persuasiveness: as Glaser and Strauss have always maintained, a properly grounded theory will ring true for the reader (sharing the same culture as the author of the theory) and need not be illustrated very much. Still, it is reassuring for the reader to be enabled to 'see' the theory and categories supporting in it in fragments of the text involved in the inquiry, regardless of how much the overall formulation resonates. Finally, in making impact on the reader, there is no substitute for clear, vivid language, as in any other kind of writing.

In summary, the grounded theory method is very different from the positivistic approach to social science because it takes into account the double hermeneutic inherently constituting it. Accordingly, users of the grounded theory method need to resist a slide into the kind of objectivism that positivism upholds because this slide risks throwing the baby out with the bath-water. The 'life' of the subject matter is in the meaning of the text constituting it, and ascertaining of the meaning is a matter of interpretation, which is always relative to the interpreter. Thus, in grounded theory analysis, the demonstration involved does not entail the deductive type so prized in natural science. Instead, as indicated, it involves the interplay between induction and abduction conducted reflexively. It also draws upon the assumption that the meaning of the text that is brought to light through the grounded theory inquiry will resonate with an audience sharing a culture with the interpreter, such that the audience will identify with the interpretation and be moved by it. These principles have figured in an effort made recently by Elliott, Fischer and Rennie (1999) to develop tentative guidelines for publishing qualitative research in psychology and related fields.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Although Strauss and Corbin characterize the grounded theory method as interpretive, they do not go as far as to cast it as a form of hermeneutics, while Glaser is less inclined to mention that the method involves interpretation, despite his recognition of perspectivism. On the other side of the coin, qualitative researchers who have addressed the relationship between hermeneutics and grounded theory have not taken the step of making the grounded theory method a part of hermeneutics. Thus, Addison (1989) indicates that he used some grounded theory procedures to aid his hermeneutic study of medical residents' passage through a residency (Addison, 1984), but sees the grounded theory method as involving different assumptions than hermeneutics. In a similar vein, Wilson and Hutchinson (1991) have theorized that hermeneutics can be used to complement a grounded theory analysis, but do not view the latter as an expression of the former. Meanwhile, none of the above methodologists has gone so far as to conclude that supports for claims to understanding derived from the method coherently are a matter of rhetoric supported by relativized demonstration.

Whether advanced by Schleiermacher (see Bleicher, 1980; Palmer, 1967), Dilthey (1961, 1976, 1977) or Betti (see Bleicher, 1980), methodical hermeneutics has been an attempt to extend the Cartesian–Kantian epistemological project to the human sciences. In their efforts to adhere to realism in the face of the relativism involved in the double hermeneutic, all of these formative hermeneutics in one way or another looked to Hegelian foundation-

alism. Thus, Schleiermacher's divinatory method of interpreting the intentions of the author of a text was influenced by Hegel's notion of transcendental Absolute mind (Dilthey, 1977). Dilthey's approach expressed his objection to idealist philosophies of history, including Hegel's (Bleicher, 1980). Nevertheless, he drew on Hegel's concept of objective mind instantiated in cultural objects of various sorts; although Dilthey was sensitive to relativism, it is generally agreed that he was uncomfortable with it (See Introduction to Dilthey, 1976). Meanwhile, Betti (1962/1980) drew on Hegel when attempting to work out an objective-idealist approach to *verstehen*.

The striving for epistemology represented in Schleiermacher's, Dilthey's and Betti's methodical hermeneutics has been challenged by Heidegger's prioritizing of ontology over epistemology and by Gadamer's (1960/1992) notion of the fusion of the interpreter's horizon of understanding and the horizon entailed in the text. In the light of this philosophical hermeneutics, the epistemological project carried forward by the methodical hermeneutics is considered untenable because of the ineluctable immersion in culture and language of all attempts to achieve understanding, and especially those made in the human sciences. This position has led to a debate between Habermas, Betti and Gadamer about the relationship between hermeneutics and epistemology, with Habermas and Betti being on the side of epistemology, and Gadamer against it (for useful commentaries, see Bleicher, 1980; Teigas, 1995; Warnke, 1987). Fanned by the relativistic wind of postmodernism that philosophical hermeneutics helped to create, there has been a tendency in the contemporary application of hermeneutics to human inquiry to give the nod to Gadamer. This sentiment has been expressed in Addison's position on the relationship between hermeneutics and the grounded theory method.

The departure that I am taking is to blend Cartesian-Kantian epistemology, hermeneutics and rhetoric. The relativism stressed in the philosophical hermeneutic critique supports this move. But the compatibility with the critique does not end there: Heidegger's ontology is about being-in-the-world as opposed to a dualistic separation from it, and in this sense expresses realism. Meanwhile, Gadamer emphasizes the role of tradition in human affairs. Both positions support the stance that realism entails the commonalities afforded by language and culture. As for the matter of horizons of understanding, as seen, the present version of methodical hermeneutics disputes the philosophical hermeneutic argument that it is pointless to attempt to escape from one's horizon of understanding. Instead, it maintains that a relativized version of Husserl's technique of bracketing offers a middle ground between realism and relativism so long as the investigator makes a conscientious effort to be self-reflective and to express the returns from the reflexivity. Overall, then, the present version of methodical hermeneutics is in league with the others in arguing against the Gadamerian conclusion that, apart from philosophical hermeneutics itself, method has no place in hermeneutics. Moreover, although to address the

matter in detail would take us beyond the scope of this article, the move of characterizing the grounded theory method as methodical hermeneutics appears to bring induction more systematically into the latter, compared to the earlier approaches to methodical hermeneutics. If it can be agreed that this move is made while positioning methodical hermeneutics midway between realism and relativism, then it would seem that the approach strengthens the stand against the philosophical hermeneutic position.

Some critics may argue that declaring the grounded theory method to be hermeneutic ignores the emphasis in contemporary hermeneutics on praxis, or engagement in the world, as opposed to mere reporting on such engagement. Addison (1989), for example, makes this complaint. Although the returns from his participant observation of medical residents are wonderful, there is nothing about the method that excludes such an approach to research. Indeed, it does not look all that different from the way in which Glaser and Strauss did their own hospital studies (e.g. Glaser & Strauss, 1965). In any case, it is important to distinguish between hermeneutics *per se* and hermeneutics influenced by Heidegger's preoccupation with pre-reflective engagement in the world more than with reflection about the world. To repeat the point made above, hermeneutics traditionally has been defined as the theory of the interpretation of text that is difficult to understand and thus is more inclusive than the understanding of text emphasized by Heideggerians. Within this broader framework, the information addressed in the grounded theory method is hermeneutic even when it entails reports on experience.

In closing, the present portrayal of methodical hermeneutics raises the provocative question of whether or not it is sufficiently robust to apply to all approaches to qualitative research. I recently expressed some tentative thoughts in this regard (Rennie, 1999), but, as pointed out there, to address this question properly would require extensive study indeed. Thus, in the interim, qualitative research methodologists will have to form their own conclusions.

## Notes

1. In order to deal with the complexity of the text, the notes or transcripts, etc., constituting the text are broken into units of analysis, or 'meaning units', to use the term employed by Giorgi (1970) to describe the same procedure in empirical phenomenological psychology. The size of the units is at the discretion of the analyst, but is seldom larger than a page of transcript.
2. There is a difference between the kind of universal, ahistorical objectivity quested for by Husserl and the objectivity having to do with local cultures. It is this second kind of objectivity that I have in mind when holding that objectivity is involved in a grounded theory analysis.
3. The notion of verification was stressed by the logical positivists, but even they came to abandon it (Christopher Green, personal communication, 1996).

4. Rhetoric has always involved the use of tropes and figures. In this regard, a trope is defined as 'A figure of speech which consists in the use of a word or phrase in a sense other than is proper to it; also, in casual use, a figure of speech; figurative language', while a figure is defined as 'Any form of expression which deviates from the normal; e.g., Aposiopesis, Hyperbole, Metaphor, etc.' (*Oxford Shorter Dictionary*). Plato emphasized these elements of rhetoric when attacking it on the grounds that their use in eloquent oratory has to do with the production of persuasive effect rather than knowledge, truth. In response to Plato, Aristotle (1954) maintains that the use of figures, such as metaphor, may effectively articulate inchoate meaning having to do with human affairs. Moreover, he points out that, in addition to tropes and figures, rhetoric may involve demonstration in the form of induction, including the use of examples. Accordingly, although this kind of demonstration involves probability and is not as strong as the application of a logical syllogism, it has to do with knowledge nevertheless, and its use contributes to making rhetoric more than the clever use of words for effect (see also Vickers, 1988).
5. *Verstehen* has been translated to mean both 'understanding' and 'knowing how and knowing that'.
6. Among those of the three formative methodical hermeneuts, it is Dilthey's approach that comes closest to the present one in terms of induction. Dilthey's way of doing historical interpretation has been described by Rickman (1961) as follows:

In the interpretations which men of the past and, indeed, whole ages, have given to their lives and actions lies a firm starting point for the historian and, in grasping it, he can unify historical method. Of course, if matters are as Dilthey suggests, we cannot first establish the facts scientifically, collect, arrange and interpret them and afterwards exercise our historical imagination on them. There must, rather, be a pendulum movement between the processes. Having got hold of some facts we try to glean from them some imaginative insight; this will help us to arrange these facts and to discover the relevance of others. In the light of the new facts we can test, and perhaps modify, our original imaginative conclusions. Thus, gradually, we widen and deepen our inquiry through the interplay of these complementary methods. Historical imagination helps us to decide what the relevant historical facts are but the imaginative reconstruction is, in turn, based on these facts. (p. 47F)

The interplay between facts and imagination advocated by Dilthey maps very well on to the interplay between induction and abduction formulated by Peirce. The effect of interpreting the approach Dilthey addresses in terms of Peirce's theory of inference, however, is to bring induction more centrally into the picture. Meanwhile, I can find no evidence that either Dilthey or Rickman attempted to apply Peirce's thought to Dilthey's methodical hermeneutics.

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