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Reactions to Reading ‘Remaining Consistent with Method? An Analysis of  
Grounded Theory Research in Accounting’: A Comment on Gurd

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Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper is a comment on Gurd’s paper published in *QRAM* 5(2) on the use of grounded theory in interpretive accounting research.

**Methodology:** Like Gurd, we conducted a bibliographic study on prior pieces of research claiming the use of grounded theory.

**Findings:** We found a large diversity of ways of doing grounded theory. There are as many ways as articles. Consistent with the spirit of grounded theory, the field suggested the research questions,

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methods and verifiability criteria. From the same sample as Gurd, we arrived at different conclusions.

Research limitations: In our research, we did not verify the consistency of claims with grounded theory. We took for granted that the article authors had understood and made operational the suggestions of the founders of the method.

Practical implications: The four canons of grounded theory can be considered as reference marks rather than as the rules of the method. Accordingly, the researcher is free to develop his or her own techniques and procedures.

Originality/Value of the paper: This paper stimulates debate on grounded theory based research. On the other hand, it conveys the richness and the variety of interpretive research. Two similar studies, using similar samples and methods, arrive at different (divergent) conclusions.

Keywords: grounded theory, interpretive research, commentary

Paper classification: **Research Paper**

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## Introduction

This paper is a commentary on Gurd's paper '*Remaining consistent with method? An analysis of grounded theory research in accounting*'. This commentary is also the continuation of a piece of research that we published in a French academic journal, *Comptabilité Contrôle Audit* (Joannidès and Berland, forthcoming). Both papers conducted a similar bibliographic analysis, using similar theories and methods and somewhat the same sample. Notwithstanding, our conclusions differ significantly from Gurd's. The present commentary is not an assault on his work. It only aims to emphasise difficult points related to grounded theory as well as to raise questions and to stimulate debate.

Gurd found that most scholars '*have misunderstood or not applied the canons of grounded theory*'. We observed that none of the founders of grounded theory research really provided a normative framework. Rather, they left room for imagination. Gurd introduced the four canons of grounded theory exclusively. But we claim that grounded theory allows diverse ways of producing scientific knowledge. Yet, like Gurd we concluded that the consistency of grounded theory was questionable in some papers.

Our commentary is divided into two sections. First, we question the strong assumption made by Gurd that there is one way of doing grounded theory research. Second, we introduce the findings drawn from our survey. Consistency with grounded theory is manifested in the diversity of canons.

Remaining consistent with interpretive research?

Gurd assumes that grounded theory rests upon one of the four canons developed along the paper. The finding that none of the papers studied is fair to them evidences that he sees the four canons as exclusive ways of doing grounded theory. On the other hand, he admits that '*the grounded theory approach cannot be expected to be rigid and prescriptive, although there must be central tenets of the approach*' (p.126). Though a real effort directed at considering four variations, Gurd contradicts the claimed spirit of grounded theory. This research approach is supposedly open, whereas his is normative. This would leave no room for later developments of grounded theory. This would contradict the core argument of grounded theory. Gurd legitimates this, declaring '*I have been unable to find a single paper on grounded theory method which disagrees with these four tenets of the method. I have not found an accounting researcher who disputes them*' (p.128). Probably no researcher questions the paternity of grounded theory approaches. In our survey, every scholar doing grounded theory or writing on it referred to the authors quoted by Gurd. However, we do think that Gurd's reductionism does not allow better understanding of what grounded theory is.

Gurd draws on the technical evolutions of grounded theory and debates over three decades. Unfortunately, he leaves aside the trajectory of grounded theory thinking. Taking it into account would have probably helped him to avoid such reductionism and subsequent normative views. Parker and Roffey (1997) and Locke (2001) recall the context of the original monograph (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In 1967, two modes of research dominated academia. The MIT model consisted of theorising without any empirical observations. On the other hand, the Harvard model consisted solely of the verification of prior theories. Several radical pamphleteers suggested alternative modes of research; Glaser and Strauss were two of them. Like most of their counterparts, they did not pretend to provide a working set of techniques and procedures. It is only in the aftermath that they endeavoured to suggest practicalities, with Strauss and Corbin (1990) bringing wise insights into techniques and procedures. In the foreword to the 1998 version of the book, Juliet Corbin stresses

that the suggested protocol is neither comprehensive nor exclusive. It reflects how they had understood and practiced grounded theory for three decades. Nonetheless, this leaves room for variations and methodological innovations. In fact, the intent of the researcher and the purposes of the research do fuel grounded theory. Accordingly, teleology is the main criterion for assessing grounded theory approaches. It is not a single toolbox directed at solving research problems.

Gurd's paper purports not to be prescriptive or normative. But, on several occasions he notes that authors do not comply with the canons and stresses their inconsistencies. He sometimes happens to suggest alternatives to achieve compliance. For instance, he strongly argues that '*the research "questions" addressed by grounded theory are questions of process, and therefore [grounded theory] is more appropriate to "how" questions*'. Clearly, Gurd suggests which realms and research questions are appropriate for grounded theory. At the same time as he expresses normative views on what grounded theory is and how it shall be practiced, he recalls its social constructivist foundations (p132). Excluding types of research *a priori* from the scope of grounded theory seems not to be consistent with his understanding thereof. In fact, Gurd appraises social constructivist pieces of work on the basis of exclusive pre-established categories. Is this really consistent with his conception of grounded theory? We guess it is not. In the same vein, we have noted that on several occasions Gurd uses the same vocabulary as positivism and leaves aside that of social constructivism. We have noted that researchers '*explain*' and do not interpret. Is this a language abuse, or confusion between conflicting views on scientific knowledge? Or is it linked to the assumption that grounded theory is a method (a set of techniques and procedures) rather than a methodology (the interplay between ontological awareness, epistemological stance and methodological choices)?

Diversity of canons as consistency with grounded theory

In this section, we react to the content of Gurd's own research. Similarly to Elharidy *et al.* (2008), we attempt to draw on the practicalities of grounded theory in interpretive research. We have observed how scholars have positioned their grounded theory scheme within interpretive research. In that regard, we question Gurd's assumption that '*the lack of adherence to generally agreed canons of the method may bring into question the quality of the research and cast doubt on the findings*' (p.123). Our aim was to appraise the contributions of grounded theory to scientific knowledge nowadays; we were not interested in referring to normative models, therefore. We addressed the relevance of grounded theory *vis-à-vis* the purposes of the research. Accordingly, this section is divided into four sub-sections. First, we appraise the novelty of research questions addressed by grounded theorists. Second, we draw on the research protocols adopted. Third, we appraise the scientific contributions of grounded theory. Last, we observe how interpretive grounded theorists prove the scientificity of their research.

#### Novel vs. traditional research questions

In order to understand the relevance of grounded theory as a contribution to scientific knowledge, we first drew on the nature of the research question addressed. Strauss and Corbin (1990) considered that grounded theory could be utilised for novel as well as for traditional research questions. When the research question is traditional, the researcher is expected to justify why they are doing grounded theory. Supposedly, the researcher must justify that he or she investigates those questions beyond saturation. The likely intent is to bring other insights or alternative interpretations thereof. If the researcher's intent is not expressed, the relevance of grounded theory is not obvious and can be questioned. We observe that scholars have effectively employed grounded theory,

whether their research question is novel or traditional. Nonetheless, the researchers in our sample privilege grounded theory in cases where prior work is absent.

Scrutinising the factors influencing planning and control in a religious denomination (Parker, 2001; 2002) or in NGOs (Goddard and Assad, 2006) is quite new. So are the integration of social, ethical and environmental (SEE) disclosures into institutional investment (Solomon and Solomon, 2006) and the unpredictable relations between modes of production and management accounting and controls and culture in less developed countries (Wickramasinghe, Hopper and Rathnasiri, 2004).

In a few cases, the role of grounded theory can be questioned. For example, the relations of financial managers and the advocates of the mission in a religious setting (Lightbody, 2000) have already been addressed in prior works. This is also the case for the factors impacting on the implementation of activity-based accounting systems (Norris, 2002). More rarely, authors address traditional research questions. For instance, the content of accountability (Ahrens, 1996) and the impact of the cultural environment on the design and practice of controls in organisations (Efferin and Hopper, 2007) have been central in studies on accountability or in cultural studies.

#### Diverse ways and means of doing grounded theory

Gurd seems to consider interviews as the sole practice consistent with grounded theory. Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggested that (contemporarily discovered) ethno-methodologies could be applied also. Strauss and Corbin (1990) note that any other type of data could be utilised as well, including secondary data. However, we provide some support for Gurd by noting the prevalence of interview-based-papers in our sample.



To Gurd, scholars are very evasive regarding their conception and conduct of grounded theory. We observed that the authors specified in the methodology section of their papers how they would position *vis-à-vis* the founders and the canons of grounded theory. Two of them offer didactic developments on coding techniques and procedures (Norris, 2002; Goddard, 2004). Another one addresses the issues in doing grounded theory in accounting research in a rich appendix to the paper (Efferin and Hopper, 2007). The authors do not only evasively refer to grounded theory in a footnote!

To a lesser extent, researchers opt for ethno-methodology. Ahrens (1996) describes how he observed two British and German managers at work. Wickramasinghe, Hopper and Rathnasiri (2004) detail how they were associated with actors in their everyday practices all along the data collection process. In both cases, the scholars conducted post-observation interviews in order to fill gaps in their observations and to make sense to them. Both ethnographic reports were based upon anecdotes drawn from research diaries. Every single method referred either to Glaser and Strauss or to Strauss and Corbin. Accordingly, restrictive and rigid canons seem not to be consistent with the spirit of grounded theory. So far, we reason that Gurd has been very severe *vis-à-vis* the works included in his sample.

#### Contributions to scientific knowledge

Gurd focuses on consistency with the canons of grounded theory. In doing this, he unfortunately ignores the coherence of the approach. We would have expected him to point out the interplay between consistency with the four canons, contribution to scientific knowledge, and the criteria for trustworthiness in constructivist research. This section endeavours to fill that gap in Gurd's research. In fact, the founders of the grounded theory approach argued that it aims to develop

theories at the same time as it supplies detailed empirical studies. Parker and Roffey (1997) and Quattrone (2000) note that such an approach can also bring methodological insights into scientific knowledge. To our opinion, grounded theory has to be assessed on its ability to produce theoretical, empirical and methodological contributions. Technically speaking, ‘anything goes’, but the process must be in line with the specific contribution of grounded theory. The scientific criteria of grounded theory must also be relevant for constructivist research.

### Theoretical contributions

Every article in our sample aimed to generate a theory from data in an interpretive scheme. We noted that the discovery of formal theories is rare; rather, grounded theorists generate substantive theories or confirmatory theories.

Ahrens (1996) theorises accountability as the interplay between financial and operational issues, whereas prior works ignore non-financial items. Since then, most works on accountability have referred to Ahrens’ work and have *de facto* granted it the status of a formal theory. Wickramasinghe *et al.* (2004) also arrived at a formal theory - cultural, political and economic factors prevent the effective application of traditional modes of control in developing countries. When integrating issues of development, they can contribute to political emancipation and to democratisation. No prior works had considered economic development as an issue for accounting. Like Ahrens’ conclusion, theirs has been referred to in most works on accounting in developing countries (see for example the 2007 special issue of *Journal of Accounting and Organizational Change* on accounting in developing countries).

To a larger extent, grounded theorists develop substantive theories and call for further investigations. Lightbody (2000) enriches the sacred-secular-divide theory with the conclusion that financial managers are guardians of the church resources whereas ministers and parishioners are advocates of the mission. Parker (2002) refers to those findings and enriches them further, thereby confirming that Lightbody's theory was substantive. Parker's (2001) conclusions that planning and budgeting in a church setting react to community culture, resources pressure, consultative bureaucracy and compliance-oriented accounting information have been referred to only once. Parker (2002) calls for further developments of the substantive theory that he discovered in both papers. In the same vein, Solomon and Solomon (2006) found that private ethical, social and environmental disclosures contribute to public information. They do not reduce their research to the effect of traditional public disclosures. Efferin and Hopper (2007) conclude that cultures are complementary in multi-ethnic organisations and overlap controls. Goddard and Assad (2006) conclude that accounting and controls allow legitimating management in an NGO. Consistent with Strauss and Corbin (1998), these cannot be considered as formal theories yet; until further works enrich or confirm them, they are regarded as substantive theories. However, the contribution of confirmatory theories can be questioned. In our sample, for example, we are unsure of the actual contribution of Norris' (2002) conclusions.

### Empirical contributions

The most obvious empirical contribution of grounded theorists consists of rich description of ignored research objects. Lightbody (2000) and Parker (2001, 2002) claim that their research will bring insights into poorly known organisations, e.g. church settings. Wickramasinghe *et al.* (2004) report on the everyday life of accountants, blue collar workers and middle managers in a Sri-Lankan company. Similarly, Efferin and Hopper (2007) are concerned about the reader's understanding of

the traits of Sino-Indonesian ethnicity and the relationships between historic ethnic groups and ethnic minorities. The introductions to these papers display the authors' concern that the reader be able to imagine the organisation as if he or she were there. They all offer a large variety of empirical evidence based upon descriptions, anecdotes and quotations.

We noted that other works were more evasive or allusive regarding empirics. In these cases, the consistency of the approach with the spirit of grounded theory can be questioned. Indeed, why do grounded theory if the contribution to empirical knowledge is poor? We connected this to the fact that these studies dealt with better-known empirical contexts and none of them explicitly purported to contribute to empirical knowledge. Consistent with Glaser and Strauss and with Strauss and Corbin, novel empirical objects deserve to be brought before the academe. Accordingly, detailed descriptions are a significant contribution to scientific knowledge.

#### Methodological contributions

Very few papers do offer a methodological contribution. Ahrens (1996) and Efferin and Hopper (2007) offer two ways of approaching cultures in accounting research. Ahrens suggests studying cultures as empirical objects that emphasise accounting practices. Understanding contextual specificities contributes to the production of scientific knowledge on accounting objects. Efferin and Hopper diverge from Ahrens on the role of cultures in the cycle of knowledge production. To them, the researcher must theorise on cultural specificities before theorising on accounting. For that purpose, they suggest conducting trans-disciplinary research.

Methodological contributions to scientific knowledge have been made possible because the canons of grounded theory were defined very broadly. We assume that the reductionism in Gurd's paper

prevents the consideration of innovations in grounded theory. We do not dispute the four canons; like the scholars in our sample, we take them as extensible reference marks in interpretive research.

### Verifiability

Consistent with the large diversity in grounded theory discovery, we found a large variety of trustworthiness criteria, all of them consistent with a constructivist approach. We found almost as many ways of evidencing and verifying the conclusions of grounded theory-based research as research protocols. In regard to criteria, three dominate our sample.

The first criterion that we found is discourse analysis and coding. Gurd developed these issues very much in his paper. As the main criterion utilised, it is consistent with the canons of grounded theory. In our paper, we agreed with Gurd on that issue. Therefore, we do not detail it further.

In their original monograph, Glaser and Strauss stated that the reader, as the end user of research, must be convinced. Accordingly, the second most utilised verifiability criterion is plausibility and coherence. This is the result of comprehensive and convincing descriptions. In the pieces of work relying on plausibility, the reader was invited to imagine the organisation, to anticipate issues and reactions, and more generally to feel concerned with the story (Ahrens, 1996; Wickramasinghe *et al.*, 2004).

Lightbody (2000), Parker (2001) and Goddard (2004) stress the convergence of discourses. From individual discourses, they reconstructed an organisational meta-discourse. The persuasiveness of their research rests upon the coherence and the cohesion of individual's discourses within the organisation. Lightbody (2000), as well as Parker (2001), demonstrates the cohesion of managers

on the necessity of management devices and the cohesion of ministers on their rejection. Goddard outlines the convergence of local government members' stances *vis-à-vis* budgeting. All individual stances converge to the perception of budgeting as devices of transparency towards citizens. Persuasiveness cannot be taken for granted, however. It can be appraised only subjectively, either by the reader or by the researcher. Accordingly, there is a need for reflexivity from the researcher and from the other actors involved in the research.

Gurd incidentally evokes the subjectivity of research when explaining the divergence of Strauss and Corbin from Glaser and Strauss. To our opinion, this is a crucial issue in grounded theory-based research. Therefore, we further develop our findings here. In order to handle one's and the others' subjectivity, some researchers submitted their observations to the people met. Consistent with Glaser and Strauss, Ahrens (1996), Lightbody (2000), Wickramasinghe *et al.* (2004) and Efferin and Hopper (2007) seem to associate ethno-methodology and actors' reflexivity. In their methodology sections, the authors specify that they systematically discussed their interpretations with the actors who finally confirmed them. Confirmation consisted of the actors recognising themselves or recognising the organisation in the descriptions and the analysis.

In the rich appendix to their paper, Efferin and Hopper (2007) evidence their work with a double reflexivity, i.e. theirs and that of organisational actors. They specify that they did so because they were not allowed to tape-record the interviews. They went back several times to the actors and asked them at each time the same questions. They also submitted them their prior responses and let them confirm what they said early on. The reflexive capability of the actors outlined temporal discourse convergence and coherence. In doing this, Efferin and Hopper followed Glaser and Strauss' prescriptions. Reflexivity *vis-à-vis* the text consisted of considering organisational actors as literate readers; in that capacity they were privileged readers of the research. If they were not

convinced, or if they did not recognise the organisation, the research would have been assumed invalid. In all cases, they recognised themselves. The authors provided, along with the text, insights into these post-operation validations.

## **Conclusion**

Naïvely, we assumed that nobody gratuitously claims grounded theory. We took for granted that such claims corresponded to reflected positions. Although there is no single way of doing grounded theory, we noted that every author developed a systematic research protocol encompassing methods and tools for verifiability. In line with prior works on grounded theory, we considered that it is a philosophy and a label for a type of constructivist research. To us, the variety of uses of grounded theory evidences that it is a methodology rather than a method. Consistent with Strauss and Corbin (1998), Parker and Roffey (1997) and Locke (2001), we do believe that grounded theory is sort of a coherent and comprehensive *Weltanschauung*.

The diversity in the use of grounded theory is due to the plurality of possibilities at each stage of the research process. For each canon in our survey, we were able to identify several specific sub-categories. Admittedly, several pieces of work could be located in the same sub-category. The observation of the interplay between those sub-categories led us to conclude that there are as many ways of doing grounded theory as there are articles. Consistent with the spirit of grounded theory, it seems that the field suggests the research questions, methods and verifiability criteria. In sum, from the same sample as Gurd, we arrived at different conclusions.

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