Grounded action: achieving optimal and sustainable change

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Grounded Action:
Achieving Optimal and Sustainable Change

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Abstract: Grounded action is the application and extension of grounded theory for the purpose of designing and implementing practical actions such as interventions, program designs, action models, social and organizational policies, and change initiatives. Grounded action was designed by the authors to address the complexity and multi-dimensionality of organizational and social problems and issues. It extends grounded theory beyond its original purpose of generating theory that is grounded in data by providing a means of developing actions that are also grounded (systematically derived from a grounded theory).

1. The Roots of Grounded Action:
The Real World Context of Grounded Theory[1]

Grounded theory is primarily an inductive research method that was developed in the mid-1960s, by Barney GLASER and Anselm STRAUSS (1967). As they pointed out, before their discovery of grounded theory, methods of social research focused mainly on how to deductively verify logically elaborated theories. They suggested it was equally important to have a method by which theories could be systematically generated, or "discovered," directly from data.

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[1] We are assuming that the reader has a general familiarity with grounded theory. References on grounded theory are included at the end of the article.

A rigorous, inductive approach to theory development that provides a "controllable theoretical foothold" (GLASER & STRAUSS 1965, p. 268) and gets at what is really going on in action scenes and contexts is a crucial tool for developing effective, sustainable solutions to social and organizational problems. Grounded theory fits this bill. As GLASER (1998, pp. 4-5) notes:

> "…fields with high impact dependent variables, variables that deal with learning, pain or profit, began looking for a methodology that gave them answers that fit, worked, were relevant and easily modifiable to constantly changing situations… A methodology was needed that could get through and beyond conjecture and preconception to exactly the underlying process of what is going on so that professionals and laymen alike could intervene with confidence to help resolve the participants' main concerns."

The power of grounded theories in real world contexts has been apparent since the method evolved out of a study of death and dying in hospitals, conducted by GLASER and STRAUSS in the mid 1960s. Their grounded theories of "awareness contexts" (GLASER & STRAUSS 1964) and the "death trajectory" process (GLASER & STRAUSS 1968, 1970) that emerged from this study had important implications for improving the way in which health care professionals manage the personal care and organizational aspects of dying patients and their families.

One of the earliest grounded studies is PAPE's (1964) study of high job turnover amongst young nurses. PAPE discovered that, although it was a serious problem for them, health services administrators had failed to understand the source of low retention rates among young nurses. They incorrectly attributed it to factors within the work situation – what would ordinarily be viewed as "job dissatisfaction" – which as PAPE discovered were irrelevant to the nurses' decisions to quit their jobs. As a result the administrators' retention efforts were ineffective. Using grounded theory, PAPE discovered what was relevant to the nurses. She conceptualized her discovery as "touring," which was related to personal rather than professional factors. As PAPE (1964, p. 37) portrayed it:

> "What makes them different from workers migrating in search of greener job pastures is that, for them, a job is merely the way to support themselves decently while they see the sights, sample the social life, have a bit of fun and then move on. These nurses do not follow any orientation to work as a central focus of living; their attention is directed to values outside the job environment and they use their work as a means to other, unrelated ends."

The nurses were able to indulge themselves in this manner because the high demand for their services provided them with the opportunity. PAPE's discovery framed the issue in such a way that high turnover of nurses could be seen as an opportunity rather than as a problem, increasing the potential for addressing the issue in creative ways.

Another example is SIMMONS' (1994) grounded action, participant observation study of the counseling/psychotherapy field which holds significant potential for improving the practice of working professionals in that field. The

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primary product of this study is a novel approach to counseling/psychotherapy that SIMMONS refers to as "grounded therapy." Grounded therapy is a methodological rather than preconceived theoretical approach to counseling/therapy that, as a form of grounded action, incorporates many of the methodological features of the grounded theory research method. Rather than applying extraneous, preconceived therapeutic interpretations, diagnoses, labels, and such to clients, the grounded therapy approach treats each counseling/therapy case on its own terms. Grounded therapy systematically generates explanations and interventions out of information (data) collected in an open-ended fashion. In this manner, interventions are derived that closely meet the requirements of individual circumstances, rather than being based on general clinical categories that are applied, often force fitted (GLASER 1978), to individual clients. Grounded theory studies by LEE of "doing time" in prison (1993) and CHARMAZ of men who are suddenly confronted with the onset of a serious chronic illness (1994) are other examples that provide useful, practical understandings and have high value in an applied context. Research by GREGORY (1996, 1999; KLEINER, ROTH, THOMAS, GREGORY & HAMELL 2000) and GREGORY and LEWIS (1996), in the oil and technology industries, are excellent examples of studies in which grounded theory provides greater insight into the dynamics of organizations as they specifically relate to managing diversity.[2]

2. Grounded Action:
Addressing Complex Issues in Context

Grounded action was designed specifically for the purposes of investigating and addressing the complexity of organizational and social problems and issues. We maintain that the key to understanding and addressing such issues is to systematically discover the basic social processes (GLASER 1978) underlying and driving them. Grounded action

> "…is a tool that allows a researcher to get at the essence of the core issues or problems [from the perspective of the people involved in the problem]. In this way the core issues generated…are [as close as possible] to the main issues of the participants because they generated them. This makes the 'action' generated by the research more likely to penetrate the nucleus of the problem and bring forth more lucrative solutions for all concerned." (MORRIS 2000, p. 18)

Many attempts to solve organizational and social problems fall short because they are not systematically derived from data nor theoretically sophisticated enough to address the multidimensional complexities inherent in the problems. Practitioners acting as change agents often fail to understand the importance of

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[2] These are but a few examples of grounded theory studies that have obvious practical implications. For other examples, see GLASER (1993, 1994, 1995, 1996).

systematically generating an explanatory theory grounded in context, prior to action planning. However, the development of a theory that explains and clarifies the underlying, usually complex, sources of a problem is critical. Actions that are not directly and systematically related to what is relevant in the action scene/context[3] are destined to fail at producing and sustaining the desired change.

3. Uniqueness of Grounded Action

Grounded action is unique and distinguishable from other problem solving approaches in that Grounded action contains an important distinction between the social or organizational problem or issue for which a solution/intervention is being sought and the research problem. When designing their research practitioner-researchers often confuse the two, focusing more on what they think "ought to be" than discovering and explaining "what is." This derails the discovery process right from the beginning and leads to a disconnect between actions and what is really going on. In grounded action we characterize the initial identified practical problem or issue as the "action problem." As discussed below, the first step in the grounded action process is to suspend the action problem.

Another important distinction made in grounded action is between the explanatory theory and the "operational theory." The explanatory theory is the core variable grounded theory, as it would be in any grounded theory project. The operational theory is systematically generated from and grounded in the explanatory grounded theory. The operational theory provides a grounded theoretical foothold for action planning and implementation (see below). Like grounded theory, grounded action is designed to maximize the number of discovered variables and their interrelationships in a given set of data.

Proposed solutions to complex problems must directly address the full complexity of the social systems and organizations within which they exist, including the likely consequences of actions. And importantly, they must include an understanding of the factors that *promote, inhibit, and prohibit change.* The failure to consider and understand the complex systems nature of a problem can result in problems of greater magnitude than the original problem of concern, often because of unforeseen and unintended consequences. For example, the policy makers who used the Coleman Report (COLEMAN 1966) as a basis for public school busing did not foresee "white flight" and all of its many consequences for American cities and surrounding countryside as they were transformed into suburbs. Nor were the difficulties experienced by (particularly

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3   We use the term "action scene/context" because data are not always collected from specific action scenes. For example, in her study of curriculum changes in accounting higher education, THIRU (2002) collected data from the broader context of accounting higher education, not just from one or several action scenes.

low-income) families of bussed children in maintaining involvement in their children's schools anticipated. In hindsight, it is easier to see that COLEMAN's research was far too narrow in scope to serve as a basis for an action of such great magnitude.

Grounded action is by its very nature a systems approach because it attempts to discover all (limited primarily by skills, time, and resources) relevant variables, including those that might undermine the intervention. In the course of doing a grounded action project the researcher/ practitioner invariably discovers multiple problems and issues, each with multiple properties and dimensions, being processed by participants in an action scene, all related to one or two core variables (categories).[4] The core variable approach to theory development, which grounded action borrows from grounded theory, provides for a multi level, well integrated, easy to understand theory that fits and is relevant to the full range of issues and problems being processed in the system being studied.

It is notable that seldom are these issues and problems the ones commonly identified. Participants usually understand the practical problems and issues they deal with on a day to day basis. But, because they experience them individually, they seldom are aware of or understand the latent patterns that underlie them, unless or until they are conceptually identified. For example, it is highly unlikely that the nurses in PAPE's (1964) study were aware that they were "touring," because each was making individual decisions that contributed to the latent pattern. However, had they been introduced to the concept, they would likely have gained new insights into their own choices and behavior, as well as the choices and behavior of their peers.

As with grounded theory, a theoretical advantage made possible by grounded action is the potential integration of micro (social psychological) and macro (social structural) dimensions of a problem. For example, BIGUS' (SIMMONS) (1972) study of milkmen cultivating relationships with customers shows how changing social structural (macro) factors (economic, technological and cultural) in American society transformed the retail milk industry from one involving mere delivery of a product to one centered around the need to "cultivate" relationships with customers (micro).

4. Doing Grounded Action

4.1 Generating the explanatory theory

The explanatory theory provides a theoretical explanation, grounded in the reality of the people in the action scene/context. The explanatory theory cap-

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4 The terms "core variable" and "core category" can be used interchangeably.

tures and explains the behavior relevant to the problems or issues at hand. As we suggested above, this is critical for grounded action because programs, policies, and such, will work as intended only if they are grounded in the realities that are relevant to and experienced by participants in the action scene/ context.

Generating the explanatory grounded theory involves the following steps:

4.1.1 Minimizing preconceptions[5]

Grounded action, consistent with grounded theory, uses a process of discovery that begins with as few preconceptions as possible. There are no a priori formulations of problems, issues, hypotheses, or theories. There are no a priori categories, concepts, ideas, etc. to make sense of a subject matter *before* data are collected or analyzed. There is no presumption of the *relevance* of a particular type of information, category, variable, etc. Nor is there either intentional or, if properly conducted, unintentional personal "investment" in a particular outcome or finding. Research questions are not identified in advance. Instead, the research process leads to the discovery of relevant questions in the data. To avoid theoretical preconceptions, consistent with grounded theory, grounded action integrates existing literature and research only after the generation of a theory is essentially complete.

Like grounded theory, grounded action can use qualitative and/or quantitative data. The nature and type of data to be used at various phases of a grounded action project is itself open to discovery. A project may begin with open-ended interviews, progress to observations, quantitative archival data, surveys, evaluation research, or whatever is indicated through the evolving analysis.

In both traditional applied research and action research, the question of who conducts and participates in the research is usually predetermined. Applied research is ordinarily conducted by professional, usually university based, researchers. Action research is customarily conducted by participants in the action scene. From the perspective of grounded action, before a project begins decisions about participation simply involve too many yet to be discovered variables (organizational politics and power, skill levels, training needs, managing research resources and time, etc.) to make predetermined judgments and decisions. In grounded action, who does or doesn't participate is secondary to ensuring that the research and the actions are *grounded and theoretically rich*. Decisions about who participates and at what level and in what ways are open to discovery.

For example, MORRIS (2000) began her grounded action dissertation research on the general topic of education professions because of a personal

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[5] For more detailed discussions of the issue of preconception in grounded theory research see GLASER (2001), particularly Chapter 6, and SIMMONS (1995).

curiosity about why so many members of her extended family had historically become professional educators. She began by interviewing family members. From this data she discovered a core category which she termed "fitting in." As a middle-school teacher, she decided to share the concept with her students. They became very excited because they recognized that fitting in was a central problem in their lives. At this point, MORRIS realized the potential of including student participation in her emerging project. She enlisted students to help her fine tune the topic and to interview each other. They formulated the action problem as "how to fit in and still be yourself." Through their participation in the research, the students gained understanding about a problem central to their social lives. They wrote a booklet about what they discovered, for distribution to other classes and schools in their district. In all, they gained a unique, valuable educational experience. Through her initial data collection and analysis, MORRIS *discovered* an important research role for the students – one that the students could do, with minimal training.

If the data and analysis indicate that involving stakeholders in developing ideas about how to implement and test actions would be useful and advisable (which is likely to be) then they should be incorporated into the process. This may even be done from the beginning, as part of the data collection process. For example when SIMMONS developed his "anger management" program (described below), he began by pushing preconceptions aside and asking the first group of participants, "If you were me, how would you do this?" The core categories and design of the program emerged from this initial question.

4.1.2 Suspending the action problem

The action problem is the social or organizational problem or issue for which a solution/intervention is being sought, such as why women and minorities do not pursue information technology careers, or why students perform poorly. It is the "purpose" for conducting the research. Action problems usually come from participants in the action scene/context, often from persons in positions of power or high status. Because it is natural and ordinary for participants in a research context or action scene to have strong preconceived (to the research) understandings, explanations, interpretations, perspectives, beliefs, ideologies, and so forth, as well as imagined solutions to problems they are processing, it is important to begin the grounded action process by *suspending the action problem*. It is important to treat all of this purely as data for constant comparison – not as a problem but as an opportunity.

At this point, the action problem functions only as a broad topic area, a general entry point into the research. For example, if one were interested in understanding and addressing the problem of poor student performance in middle schools, it would make sense to begin collecting data from that action scene. Certainly, it is important to remain open to the possibility of collecting data

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from other locations and sources, as informed by theoretical sampling and the ongoing grounded action process. However, you do not begin the study by "working" the action problem. You begin with open-ended observations and interviews of participants in the action scene/context, as is customary in grounded theory studies (other types of data such as archival documents, official statistics may be useful supplementary data). Additionally, there is no preliminary search of the literature as is commonly done in other types of research (GLASER 1978).

Eventually, before it is inserted back into the process, possibly in modified form, the action problem will be required to *earn its way* like any other element of a grounded theory (GLASER 1978). Notably, it may be discovered that the action problem as originally conceived is *the wrong problem*! To focus on the action problem will likely be misleading because it may be found to be of minimal relevance or merely a property of the discovered core variable, not the core variable itself. For example one of the authors (SIMMONS) was asked to develop an "anger management" program for a social services agency. Using grounded action, he discovered that the relevant core variables were respect and power, not anger. Anger was a consequence, not the core category. With this discovery, the program was designed around helping clients to understand and develop skills related to respect and power. In contrast, conventional anger management programs focus on anger by taking a pathologing, psychologizing, "blaming" approach that stems from the assumption that "anger problems" are usually, if not always, a psychological property of the individual, rather than a response to relationships or other types of life circumstances.

4.1.3 Discovering the research problem

The discovery of the research problem follows the process of discovering a core variable and generating and articulating a grounded theory from data collection and analysis, via the constant comparative method, through sorting, memo writing and generating a theoretical outline.[6] Rather than beginning with a clearly articulated research problem or question, grounded action studies begin with only a general topic area. This general topic provides hunches about where and how to begin data collection, but does not lead the research. It is only a jumping off point.

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[6] We do not go into the specifics of how to do grounded theory in this article. However, grounded action is rooted in grounded theory as articulated by GLASER (1978, 1992, 1998, 2001). Although there are variations between the method as articulated by GLASER and that as articulated by STRAUSS and CORBIN (1990), we leave these to the reader to explore. Our primary concern, in grounded action, is that the explanatory theory be grounded, meaning that it was derived from an epistemologically sound methodology for systematically generating theory from data.

As in grounded theory, the research problem is *necessarily* emergent, not preconceived. As GLASER (1992, p. 25) notes:

"… the research question in a grounded theory study is not a statement that identifies the phenomenon to be studied. The problem emerges and questions regarding the problem emerge by which to guide theoretical sampling. Out of open coding, collection by theoretical sampling, and analyzing by constant comparison emerge a focus for the research."

Above all, the research problem in grounded action must be about the main concerns of participants in the action scene/context. As GLASER (1998, p. 116) argues, "It is about time that researchers study the problem that exists for the participants in the area, not what is supposed to exist or what a professional says is important."

The research problem, as in grounded theory, is the discovered core variable. The core variable is the variable that accounts for the most variation around the main issues and problems being processed in the action scene/context.

For example, in PAPE's (1964) study of high job turnover amongst nurses, the discovered core variable is "touring." In LEE's (1993) study of prison life, the discovered core variable is "doing time."

4.2 Generating the operational theory

Once the explanatory theory has been fully developed by means of the grounded theory process, the operational theory is then generated. The operational theory is where explanatory grounded theory leaves off and grounded action begins. The operational theory serves as a rationale and model for action. In grounded action, the operational theory is systematically grounded in a well-integrated, multi-dimensional explanatory theory that is grounded in data. In turn, this keeps the operational theory grounded and it enables the operational theory to cover all relevant, important aspects of the action problem, as it is currently understood.

The operational theory can take the form of program designs, policies, calculated procedures, and such – whatever is indicated. It is a theoretical prediction about outcomes – what will happen if you take certain actions. In order for an operational theory to produce optimal and sustainable change, to the extent that it is practicable, *it must incorporate all important properties and dimensions of the explanatory theory*. If this is achieved, it will address the multivariate, systemic nature of the action problem.

The first step in generating an operational theory is to revisit the action problem in light of what has been discovered while generating the explanatory theory. The explanatory theory will be about the issues and problems being processed by participants. This will likely cast new light on the action problem,

which may consequently need to be dimensionalized, elaborated, clarified, and/or revised.

The operational theory is generated using a process similar to that used for generating an explanatory theory. This ensures that the operational theory will be systematically grounded. Analysis for generating an operational theory consists of constantly comparing all major components of the explanatory theory to all relevant properties and dimensions of the action problem, looking for indicators in the explanatory theory as to possibilities for optimal and sustainable actions toward mitigating the action problem. Of course, each aspect of the operational theory must earn its way. Because the action problem and explanatory theory have now been fully grounded and developed, analysis is selective around such questions as:

- What does the explanatory theory indicate the real action problem is?
- What are the desired outcomes of the action? This is a values-based question that cannot be fully answered by the explanatory theory. The answer may also vary from the perspectives of different participants in the action scene, which may present the grounded action researcher with ethical dilemmas (see below).
- What does the explanatory theory inform us about assigning priorities to these outcomes? For example, priorities may be determined by which outcome(s) need to be accomplished before others can be addressed, they may be determined by currently available resources, they may be determined by political considerations within an organization, and so forth.
- What does the explanatory theory indicate about aspects of the action problem that need to be successfully addressed to bring about the desired change?
- What does this particular component of the explanatory theory indicate needs to be done in order to mitigate this particular aspect of the action problem?
- What capacity does each person or role in the action scene/context play and how would they need to change to bring about the desired results? How could this change actually be achieved? What are the "pushes and pulls" (REGALADO-RODRIGUEZ 2001) in the action scene/context towards or against these changes?
- What is possible, given the current circumstances (available time and resources, skills of participants, internal politics, etc.)?
- What are likely outcomes of implementing the operational theory? What are potential worst case outcomes? How can they be prevented? If possible, fallback and recovery plans should be devised.

From the frame of the action problem, each of these questions must be asked in relation to each relevant property and dimension of the explanatory theory. This will produce a grounded blueprint for action. You may also discover a need to

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double back in the process to clarify or fill in portions of the explanatory theory, by doing more analysis, memoing and/or data collection.

4.3 Implementing the action

The action is the application of the operational theory towards solving the action problem. Like all other aspects of a grounded action project, all actions taken must earn their way; they must be ultimately traceable back to and supported by data. The calculated actions constitute an empirical test of the explanatory and/or operational theory. If actions are fully grounded in dense, rich explanatory and operational theories they should significantly mitigate the action problem. Although it would be tempting to end the process at this point, it is not advisable, because without relevant measures how are you to know if specific actions have worked?

4.4 Transformative learning

Grounded action *IS* transformative. It involves a process of continually discovering, learning, rediscovering, and relearning. During the action stage there is ongoing reflection on the efficacy of the action plans. Did they work? What is the status of the problem, issue, context or environment after implementation of the actions? What modifications and improvements can and need to be made for solutions to be optimized and sustained? Have the actions resulted in unforeseen and/or unintended consequences? How can what was learned be transformed into a process of continuous organizational learning? This process of reflection and learning is transcendent and involves a learning dynamic (MEZIROW 1990) in which there is a leap in "the ability to rise and go beyond" (PEARCE 2001) that which was previously known about a problem or issue. Reflection and learning continue to be grounded via the constant comparative method. Everything that is reflected upon and learned is constantly compared to what is already known and modifications are made only when they have *earned their way.*

Although grounded action is generated in a particular context for use in that context, because it is about understanding and discovering generic variables, it remains open to modification, application, and transformation in new settings. Grounded action is modifiable and cumulative, through meta-analysis. A grounded action meta-analysis involves the integration of multiple substantive theories useful for generating a wider understanding of the multi-dimensional, systems nature of social and organizational problems. Although you may never be able to cover and understand all aspects of a particular problem, you will come much closer with a grounded action meta-analysis. It will provide sufficient understanding to formulate creative, workable, doable, effective actions without having to "start from scratch." Applications in new contexts would

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require only verification of the extent to which the existing grounded action theory is relevant and useful in the new context, as well as the discovery of variations unique to that context so that actions can be modified, if necessary.

4.5 Evaluation

The evaluation phase of the grounded action process is a measure and reflection on the efficacy of the explanatory and operational theories and the subsequent action(s) taken to mitigate the action problem. Because it is often expected or required by managers, funding sources, and such, traditional quantitative or qualitative evaluation measures may need to be included. If these types of evaluation measures are taken, they should be treated as fresh data and incorporated into the double-back process and subjected to constant comparison. Expectations, requests or demands for conventional evaluation measures is itself data, also worthy of constant comparison.

Whether or not conventional evaluation measures are taken, it is important to continue doing interviews, observations, and constant comparative analysis, to measure the *process* of change, not just outcomes. There is seldom a point at which outcomes crystallize. The full grounded action process does not end when initial actions are implemented and outcomes are evaluated. The unfolding consequences of actions must be studied in process, both in terms of the effectiveness of the actions and the responses of participants.

The easy modifiability of grounded action makes it ideal for this task. As the consequences of actions unfold they must be assessed in relation to the action problem, so you must continue data collection and analysis, memo writing, and modification of the explanatory and operational theories, as indicated, to theoretically keep up with changes brought about by the original action.

Modification also involves reformulating and adjusting actions as indicated. Solutions cannot be static. They must evolve as the problem, solutions, and context evolve. Undiscovered conditions and unforeseen effects may surface. The action problem itself may have morphed into a different set of issues or problems.

Because organizations and systems continually change and evolve, even in the absence of change initiatives, it is sometimes difficult to know exactly when to close a grounded action project. Ideally, the grounded action process will become an integral part of the organization or system.[7] However, practicalities external to the grounded action research (e.g. resources, managerial decisions, etc.) may preclude this. In the absence of external requirements, the data and analysis will indicate when it is time to close a project.

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[7] For grounded action professionals who are hired from outside the organization or system, this means training participants in the minimal skills required to carry on.

4.6 Ethics

In addition to the ethical considerations of any form of research, because of the action orientation of grounded action, skilled grounded action researchers will be presented with unique ethical considerations. The two most likely ones are:

- Grounded action researchers need to consider the ethics of the original action problem, particularly when the research is commissioned by individuals in powerful positions who appear to have minimal consideration for the consequences of their actions on those over whom they have power. Grounded theory and grounded action are powerful. Skilled grounded action researchers should continually be aware of this in making decisions about how, where, and when to hire out their skills, and in some cases even to re-contract or terminate a project if discomforting ethical situations emerge.

- Desired outcomes may vary between different participants in the action scene; they may even be contradictory or mutually exclusive. This presents ethical dilemmas to the grounded action researcher who may, if only by default, be placed in the position of having to effectively "take sides" when planning actions. One option is to do what GLASER (in personal conversation) urges, "make your problem your topic" and treat this as data to be processed for a solution. Participants in action scenes/contexts are usually also stakeholders in the action problem and how it is addressed. Thus, when actions are introduced, stakeholders will assess their relationship to the action and act accordingly. Because the purpose of grounded action is action, which always involves some sort of change, no matter how righteous the action problem may be and no matter how well grounded and rich the explanatory and operational theories may be, they will likely be cast in a competitive frame by some participants. There is no way around the fact that when you introduce change into an organization or social system, fear, resistance, and opposition will likely occur from some parties and support from others. REGALADO-RODRIGUEZ (2001) refers to this as the "push-pull dynamic." It is important to view this as data to be analyzed – as an opportunity not a problem. However, if you have done a thorough job of devising actions that are based upon a grounded understanding and consideration of the roles of all participants, these types of issues will be minimized.[8]

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[8] There is no doubt, however, that these types of situations present ethical dilemmas, as we discussed earlier.

5. Why Do Grounded Action?

If any two words exemplify modern society, they might be "problem" and "solution." Everyone has ideas about what problems are or aren't and how we should or shouldn't go about attempting to solve them. We devote endless time, attention, and resources in our efforts to identify, define, prevent, and fix them. In one way or another, virtually all professions are engaged in this endeavor.

In our combined professional experience, we have seen many interventions, programs, action models, change initiatives and such come and go, mostly with disappointing results. Oftentimes when new actions are introduced, fear and loathing rush through an organization. Changes in job responsibilities and organizational structure, the requirement that individuals acquire new knowledge and skills, cynicism about past actions, the elimination of jobs, and such, lead people to focus on their immediate needs and fears. An intervention can represent positive opportunities for some, negative for others (GREGORY 1996).

The above sorts of circumstances may serve to undermine an intervention, even if it's a promising one. If these circumstances become chronic in an organization, rather than activities achieving their purpose, they can become the functional equivalent of digging holes and refilling them, reducing the effectiveness and productivity of the organization. The organizations may survive, but their goals and purposes remain elusive targets.

Perhaps as a society we are too optimistic in our belief that social and organizational problems can actually be substantially mitigated or solved. Be this as it may, we maintain that applying grounded action to social and organizational problems will produce optimal, sustainable, positive results in relation to previous approaches. For example, most research and actions on the issue of diversity in organizations has suffered from a one-dimensional perspective, that of responding to and correcting perceived discrimination and inequity in company hiring patterns and workplace practices. Racial and gender discrimination has been preconceived as the primary motivating variable in studies and programs related to diversity (COX 1990; GREGORY 1996, 1999; THOMAS 1991, 1992, 1996, 2000). THOMAS (1991 and 1996) attempted to expand the understanding and study of diversity to include dimensions other than race and gender and variables other than discrimination. His work called attention to an extensive number and combination of diversity dimensions and an equally extensive number and combination of variables. He recognized diversity as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, which could best be understood by developing a cohesive and comprehensive theory about the nature of diversity and its related dynamics. However, because of the continued focus on racial and gender discrimination and inequity, in spite of THOMAS' work, the study of diversity has not advanced far from its roots in the civil rights movement.

GREGORY (1996, 1999) asserts that a more complete understanding of the dynamics of diversity is still open to discovery. We maintain that the most effective means of doing this is to take a fresh grounded action approach by starting at the beginning. Like all grounded action research, this would involve suspending the issue of diversity as it is currently understood as an action problem, collecting and analyzing data, generating a grounded explanatory theory, more clearly articulating the action problem, then generating an operational theory from which optimal, sustainable actions can be derived. This may be a big undertaking, but we think a grounded action approach would be a productive way to address the issue.

The key to designing effective actions is that they must be grounded in what is really going on, not what you think, hope, or wish is going on. Thus the critical question always is "Is it grounded?" Anything that prevents, breaks or derails the grounding of explanations in data will diminish the opportunity to devise truly optimal and sustainable change.

Grounded action is an innovative approach to understanding and solving complex social and organizational problems, which systematically grounds and integrates data, analysis, theory, and action. As such, in the hands of well-trained researcher change agents, it is a powerful tool for producing effective, sustainable solutions.

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