

Applicability of Grounded Theory Methodology in International Relations Studies

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Abstract: Engaging the Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) in International Relation (IR) studies can be a challenging choice for researchers and Ph.D. students. Considering that scholars in the IR field are familiar with certain traditional methodologies, the notion of engaging other approaches such as the GTM may attract strong ontological and epistemological questions. This article contends that the constructivist - and to a certain extent the pragmatist - versions of GTM can be a successful research methodology in IR qualitative research. Such choice, however, is constrained by a set of conditions. Guided by existing literature, these conditions were identified and discussed in the context of IR qualitative research norms and then applied in Foreign Policy (FP) decision-making process, a well-known approach in studying FP as a subdiscipline in IR. The article concludes that despite certain limitations, the methodology can be an outstanding option for IR qualitative research.

Keywords: Grounded theory, qualitative research, IR studies, interdisciplinary research

1. Introduction

IR discipline goes beyond the study of formal relations between states. It includes the study of all actions and interactions among state agencies, non-state actors, institutions, business firms, social media, and others. The phenomenon that IR is concerned with is complex because of its association with different social, political, and economic realities including trade negotiations, global and regional governance formation, and wars (Ainley and Brown, 2005). The increased need to analyze international politics and to understand the nature of relations among nations played an important role in the establishment of the IR discipline a century ago (Koliopoulos, 2017, p.1, 3 & 11).

The nature of the IR research made it an academic autonomous discipline. This autonomy did not restrict the discipline from continuously expanding its interactions to include emerging areas of studies such as economy, sociology, history, and political science. Yet, notwithstanding such interactions, IR studies in the last few decades have become more independent by having “*a distinct set of theories, methodology, and subject matter*” (Chatterjee, 2010, p.3). This autonomy is also characterized by its units of analysis (conflicts, drivers of international political economy, interactions with international organizations among others), and the domains/levels of analysis (powerful individuals and groups, state, and international system). IR scholarship also have a variety of subject matters such as conflicts, negotiations, foreign policy actions, and international trade treaties. The growing independency, however, did not prevent methodological traditions such as phenomenology, case study and research-specific approach to continue to be adopted by IR scholars, however, GTM is glaringly absent from these options.

This expansion of the use of GTM in other disciplines motivated the conduct of the current study. As such an aim is set to investigate as how GTM can be a successful methodology in IR qualitative research. This aim is fulfilled by achieving set of objectives. Firstly, IR methodologies are briefly overviewed; and secondly, GTM is succinctly explained and introduced. Thirdly, those conditions of the methodology that converge with the norms of IR are reviewed and discussed in the context of research paradigm, the role of the literature, the construction of epistemic frameworks, and method of data collection and sampling. And before applying the methodology to a specific area in IR i.e., the Foreign Policy (FP) formulation and implementation process, the paper incorporated the level of analysis problem with GTM, a keystone in any IR study. These objectives are conducive for (a) informing the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the study; (b) clarify the bases of methodological choice; and (c) ultimately, argue that GTM is worthy for IR researchers to consider although with some limitations.

2. Methodologies in IR studies: an Overview

The many great debates in IR reflected its theoretical and methodological evolution. Engaging certain classical theories such as realism and the rise of constructivism inspired IR scholars to elevate the debates to different levels. New debates continued to emerge and has reached the current, the so-called fifth level, in which discourses are centered on linearity and nonlinearity paradigms (Kavalski, 2007, p.445). The epistemology of the theoretical debates reflected preferences towards choices of methods. For instance, realists adopted positivistic methods, constructivists were in favor of the adoption of critical approaches, while behavioralists during the 1950s-1960s advocated the application of naturalist science methods (Benneyworth, 2010).

Methodologies in IR can be categorized into traditional, behavioral, positivist, and postpositivist. Traditional methodologies relied conspicuously on philosophy, international political history, and its epistemology was heavily dependent on experience and logic. In some cases, it converged with post-positivism, particularly when adopting critical analysis. The behavioral methodologies which favor the systematic study of IR phenomena, “*wanted verifiable hypotheses and quantifiable data,*” the aim of which is to produce an explanatory rather than normative research. The positivists who were motivated by the powerful assumption of the existence of objective reality, went a further step by adopting empirical approaches to construct a testable hypothesis. The ‘objectivity’ assumption was challenged by the emergence of new methodologies which claimed the role of subjectivity in gathering and analyzing data and interpreting studies’ results. The latter highlights the birth of post-positivism which included many approaches such as constructivism and postmodernism. Post-positivism reestablished attention to the critical and the normative approaches in IR (Chatterjee, 2010, p.4).

Within postpositivist qualitative research, IR borrows different approaches from social science although when surveying the existing literature, it appears that the IR discipline lacks rigorous self-contained and independent approaches. Add to this, “*the relative absence of research methods textbook*” (Lamont, 2015, p.14) imposed further constraints on IR scholars to broaden their investigation and, therefore, they continued to be restricted by methodological borders that create challenges to engage further theoretical debates.

Among the frequently adopted approaches, particularly in qualitative IR research, are phenomenology when the formation and transmission of certain norms are studied, case studies when the data collection and the analysis are centered on a specific case such as causes of civil conflicts (Creswell, 2011), and discourse and content analysis, but not grounded theory tradition!

Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) appears to be well established in different studies (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007a, p.1), but not in IR. Since 1967, debates involving the methodology were/continued to be centered around the emerging postpositivist paradigms regarding ontological and epistemological assumptions, and the associated methods of analysis. At first glance, these debates may, normatively speaking, give no reason to exclude IR qualitative studies from adopting GTM. However, the reality on the ground suggests a clear absenteeism of the methodology in IR research. This explicit void in knowledge necessitates answering many questions, the first being the obvious question of ‘why’ which, due to lack of relevant studies, is highly normative while other questions are the Socratic type such as how the methodology can be engaged in IR, on what basis, and under what conditions, and what kind of challenges and limitation such choice may imply. There is available literature, although not particular to IR, that can be engaged for comparative and critique purposes for these questions except for the question of why. To avoid introducing a highly normative paper, the article does not attempt to answer the latter question.

3. The Grounded Theory Methodology: An Overview

Grounded theory is a methodology commonly used in social science. The main objective of the methodology is to extract and construct a theory grounded in the data. The central premise of the methodology is that a theory about an epistemic problem/gap is institutionalized in the categorical data. By following certain systematic guidelines in gathering, synthesizing, and analyzing these data set of concepts that are logically bonded, a theory emerges and fills this gap. The methodology which adopts the inductive reasoning strategy, in addition, found its applications in a variety of fields of studies such as psychology and health care studies.

The emergence of the methodology returns to 1967 when authors Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss published their book titled ‘The Discovery of Grounded Theory’. The two scholars attempted to respond to ongoing criticism that qualitative research lacked positivist approaches with a particular reference to data collection,

data validation, and methods of analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.17). Since then, the two authors' 'invention' of the GTM became another tradition in qualitative studies (Evelyn, 1987). Following their publication, this methodology witnessed the emergence of two other versions: the post-positivist and the constructivist (Levers, 2013). These developments reflected the different ontological and epistemological premises among scholars apart from their aim of flexing the monolithic classical, the so-called traditional version. The emergence of new versions allowed the researchers to expand, adopt and engage the GTM in areas of different studies and disciplines.

Despite differences among GTM versions, the methodology looks at the data, breaks it down into parts, conceptualizes it, and then generates higher-level abstracted categories. Constant comparison between concepts ensures that all relevant data are analyzed. The emerging structure of the concepts and categories becomes a framework that conceptualizes the patterns of behavior of the phenomena under investigation. This replaces the conventional approach of constructing a conceptual or theoretical framework prior to data collection. GTM's developers are aimed at designing "*a well-formed bona fide methodology, not an excuse for not having one*" and a methodology that "*is rigorous and tightly procedural from start to finish*" (Glasser, 2014) to capture the most relevant related concepts explaining the investigated phenomenon.

The emphases of the GTM proponents on nursing and health care disciplines, which can be observed in their published books and papers particularly in the 70's and the 80's, did not form ontological, epistemological, and methodological obstacles for researchers to adopt in other areas of studies (Pettigrew, 2000). The methodology emerged as a feasible choice and gained tremendous appeal as a research strategy for many disciplines (Wells, 1995) and in different areas of investigations including tourism, education, management, business, decision-making studies among many others. Exploring the existing literature via advanced search engines, however, revealed that GTM became a choice for many students and scholars. Professors Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz underlined the expansion and the commonness of the use of the methodology among doctoral students. "*GTM is currently the most widely used and popular qualitative research method across a wide range of disciplines and subject areas....doctoral students have successfully completed their degree using GTM*" (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007a, p.1).

Parallel to this expansion, intra GTM debates among the different versions continued. These debates are centered around data analysis in terms of structuring the coding process and constructing categories introducing new types of codes, possible different explanations resulted from adopting certain epistemic positions to the types of reasonings such as inductive, deductive, and abductive, and differences in ontological assumptions. The different versions of GTM, however, still share many common grounds such as the methods of sampling, saturation, the objective of extraction of a particular process, the role and (partially) position of the literature review, and the need to explore the nature of interactions among actors engaged in the process (Timonen, Foley and Conlon, 2018, p.3-4). Devoid of engaging with these intra-debates, the article includes differences and commonalities among the GTM versions with respect to their applications and compatibility in IR research. The aim is to broaden the investigation and thus strengthen the paper's argument.

4. GTM-IR and the Research Paradigm: Limitations

Like other disciplines, the research paradigm in IR is critical in directing the investigation. The paradigm influences the study's epistemology, ontology, and method and methodology, and thus, it is vital to articulate the study's paradigm (Gringeri, Barusch and Cambron, 2013, p. 762). In quantitative research, for instance, positivism is associated with scientific methods while qualitative inquiries are associated with constructivism, feminism, pragmatism among other paradigms. On the methodology level, phenomenology, narrative research, ethnography, case studies, and grounded theory offer well-established platforms for the investigation of qualitative research (Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p.259). GTM, and despite being defined as a methodology, it includes a set of methods in cases of sampling, analysis, and trustworthiness techniques. These methods are among the common grounds of the different versions of the GTM. These versions, however, advocate a different paradigm within the qualitative inquiry.

IR qualitative research is pluralistic. It allows the engagement of diverse analyses and approaches in the investigation process. The constant emergence of new levels of inter and intra debates among IR scholars, gives some degree of freedom of methodological choices. These debates, in addition, feature the differences

regarding ontological and epistemological stands. For instance, realists (adopting rational choice approaches and assume objective reality) versus constructivists (critical method and allow subjectivity) debates.

Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss were enthusiastic to introduce a qualitative research methodology that fits the positivist paradigm (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007b, p.33). Their Classical Grounded Theory (CGT) methodology design is driven by powerful assumptions such as detaching the researcher from the collected data which influence the process of investigation; prior knowledge is not desired/required as it may contaminate the researcher's thinking during the investigation process. Therefore, as the two scholars contend, and despite being qualitative, such an approach helps the researcher to maintain objectivity. The scholars, in addition, explained that collecting qualitative data and the development of categories can follow similar methods to those in quantitative studies, such as surveys, and that qualitative data do indeed have dimensions and properties like numerical data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.193).

Positivists' paradigm is associated with the scientific method, testing hypothesis, measuring, numerical modeling building, and include statistical tests. Therefore, it is highly challenging for CGT enthusiasts to convince other scholars on how sharing certain similarities qualifies their version to become a qualitative and yet positivist at the same time. For IR this is a great challenge as the hegemony of adopting scientific (rational) methodologies in IR in many parts of the world continue to dominate scholars' choices, and this is not the reality of the western school only, but also the case of other emerging schools such as the Chinese (Eun, 2016, p.2-6). On the ontology level and despite the emphases of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss on the existence of the independent reality, apprehending it is never perfect. Thus, their version inevitably rests on a post-positivist ontology (Hallberg, 2006, p.7). Add to this, methods associated with positivism are mostly deductive (GTM is inductive) and are in favor of quantitative analysis. This represents a clear pitfall of GTM as a choice by scholars, including IR's. These metatheoretical debate no doubt complicates any IR research proposal as it generates numerous questions by examiners, peer reviewers of papers and may force the researcher to engage with broader unnecessary discussions to promote this version as a positivist one.

Years after working with Barney Glaser, Anselm Strauss worked with Juliet Corbin to flex the methodology. The two authors made it explicit that in GTM, as a qualitative approach of inquiry, subjectivity is inevitable. Their post-positivist interpretivism GTM model is based on the ontological assumption whereby the researcher is actively and constantly engaged with the data (Strauss and Corbin, 2015). On the epistemology level, the two scholars allowed prior knowledge to strengthen the research, in general and data collection, in particular. Therefore, on the paradigm level, Strauss and Corbin's approach forms no obstacle or variation to those in IR stated previously.

Professor Kathy Charmaz went a further step when she engaged the constructivist perspective, the main pillar of the fourth level debates in IR. Charmaz's version can be the optimum option when the subjective reality is well understood through the concept of 'knowledge is constructed'. This leads to a theory-building rather than accepting that reality exists independently, and thus, the role of the researcher is not to extract it, but to construct it (Charmaz, 2006, p.27). Constructivism brought a unique perspective to international politics' studies beyond what the realists' school offered. It opened a new way for interpretations which created a distinct leap in how IR is approached (Hopf, 1998) and established the path to the fourth debate in IR (Kavalski, 2007, p.449).

The synthesis of this section emerged from ongoing inter-paradigm debates among the different versions of GTM. It suggests some limitations when choosing a particular version of the methodology. Even though these debates are consistent with other disciplines in social science, the case in IR research seems delimited to constructivists' approach/s. Although paradigm choice is philosophical in nature, it will be challenging for an IR research proposal to be convincing when adopting GTM with an assumption of consistency with positivism.

5. The Position and Role of the Literature Review, and Epistemic Frameworks

When Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss introduced their version of CGT, they emphasized that developing a theory from data would be more successful without a *priori* assumptions (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.6 & 29). Although the two authors admitted that researchers do not approach reality as a *tabula rasa* (ibid, 1967, p.3), they discourage researchers from conducting literature reviews at an early stage of the study. Years later, Glaser's pointed out that researchers should not "worry" since "*literature isn't going nowhere*" (Glaser, 2010) because it will emerge at a later stage of the study. For IR research, this is a problem since the norm, regardless

of the study paradigm or methods (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed), is positioning the literature review, like other social science studies, at an early part of the thesis. In addition, being an interdisciplinary field, IR literature may introduce and open an early debate as to how to scan and filter the most relevant prior scholarships of the many relevant subfields that can elucidate and identify the gap in knowledge and help to set the study questions. This problem may impose constraints on Ph.D. and scholars in attempting to convince examiners and proposal funding agencies (Dunne, 2011).

Charmaz adopted an opposite position to CGT based on the impossible separation of existing and previous knowledge of the researcher and the investigation process. She maintained that researchers should not let this knowledge have control over the investigation process and to allow the free emergence of themes and categories (Sebastian, 2019, p.4). Constructivist GTM, in other words, allows the establishment of epistemic frameworks and by extension, the conduct of literature review in advance which is consistent with IR research norms. Charmaz's approach, in addition, encourages reflexivity, which can enrich the study with insights and broadening inter and intra debates among IR theories. Studies show that in the last few decades, reflexivity in IR scholarly has risen in prominence (Hamati-Ataya, 2020). The antithesis to this view, however, is that reflexivity will encourage subjectivity, a point that obviously brings the objectivity of explanations of the study into questions.

The literature review, in addition, plays an important role in articulating the research's questions (Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p.162). Therefore, delaying the review of existing empirical studies, as CGT emphasized and to some extent, the pragmatist version of what Corbin and Strauss suggested, may become problematic. The latter's version adopted a vague position on the issue of development of the research question at an early stage of the study. The objective is to let the emergence of data have its role in generating the most relevant questions. In the constructivist GTM, Charmaz explained that data gathering is influenced by the questions, for instance, by the type of data and method of sampling (Charmaz, 2006, p.15). Delaying the development of the research questions similar to the literature review may contradict the supervisory committees' expectations and hence, forms challenges to the researcher and raises all the questions indicated above.

On the epistemic frameworks, Barney and Strauss informed that since the aim is to develop a theory, having a theoretical framework is not part of their methodology. Initial data analysis guides the researcher to make early judgments without the need for frameworks. The authors maintained that researchers could begin with a *"partial framework"* of a set of concepts with the aim of *"designating a few principals or gross features of the structure and processes in the situations that he will study"* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.45). Such a position may demotivate IR scholars as conceptual and theoretical frameworks have a distinct place in their research because of their enabling power of analyzing different issues, organizing thoughts, and setting the most relevant research questions (see for example McClellan 2015; Kavalski, 2007; Klotz, 2008; Curini and Franzese, 2020; Bennion, 2015). The conceptual framework in qualitative research represents the vertebra of the research epistemology and it is subjected to two general conditions. Firstly, it must be convincing as being the most appropriate/relevant to explain and interpret the analyzed data. Secondly, it links the framework to the ontological assumptions and the research methodology in a compatible way to integrate the study's paradigm.

As a pluralistic field, IR research is rich with theories and depends on many concepts from different disciplines. Therefore, the absence of a conceptual framework may raise analytical and methodological questions particularly during the early stage of the research. To prevail over a such challenge, it might be necessary to adopt the spiral relation promoted by Charmaz to open the way among data collection, theoretical sampling, emerging findings, and discussions (the emerging theory) on one hand, and the constructed conceptual framework on the other. The framework will be subjected to constant evolution until the emerging framework reaches the point of equilibrium where relevance to the findings and the discussions becomes highly evidenced (Charmaz, 2006, p.24, 76 & 101), and such a reflexive approach does not contradict emerging IR qualitative research norms (Hamati-Ataya, 2020).

Corbin and Strauss, however, adopted a midground position between CGT and the Constructivist. They established a normative view that allows prior knowledge before and during the data collection to enhance sensitivity, to confirm the significance of initial concepts that appeared in the literature for better comparison with the emerging concepts. On the theoretical frameworks, the authors discouraged their use since the ultimate objective is to develop a theory rather than testing those in existence. For IR scholars, this suggests that it is left to them, with some flexibility, to choose to have theoretical frameworks since Corbin and Strauss do not

have a dogmatic position in this regard. This flexibility is necessary for IR scholars and students to “*meet the requirements and expectations of committee members and universities*” who are in favor of maintaining IR research traditions (Strauss and Corbin, 2015, p. 50- 52 & 314).

6. Data Collection, Sampling, Coding and Analysis, in the Context of IR Research

In GTM primary data, irrespective of the methodology version, relies extensively on interviews. The methodology also allows for other sources of data (secondary) such as participant observations, documentary sources, videos, documents, diaries, memoirs, journal papers among many others (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.163 & 175; Strauss and Corbin, 2015, p.37 & 43; Charmaz, 2006, p.13-40). These sources of data are consistent and compatible with IR qualitative research, for instance when conducting elite interviews and analyzing official documents in subdisciplines such as security studies and foreign policy (Leander, 2008, p.5 & 24). Despite such compatibility, the complex relationship between the data collection and the research questions may suggest a clear disadvantage of the CGT. In addition, the level of analysis, which is a very well-known pillar in any IR research may add other constraints. This issue is discussed in a subsequent section.

GTM promotes theoretical sampling. It is the process of choosing the most relevant participants to gather data. The degree of sampling’s relevancy is guided by analysis which is conducted along with data gathering (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003, p.18). Researchers however may start with what they perceive as the most appropriate samples and then proceed to theoretical sampling until saturation. The latter is reached when no new categories emerge from the analysis and thus, collecting additional data becomes redundant. In ‘The SAGE Handbook of Research Methods in Political Science and International Relations’, author Virginie Van Ingelgom, advocated Glaser and Strauss’s principle of sampling saturation to IR qualitative research “*to uncover diversity and context, rather than a large number of participants with the same type of experience*” (Ingelgom, 2020, p.1196). Therefore, if the collected data sourced from interviewees in the IR qualitative research, normatively speaking, theoretical sampling approach allows the diverse IR phenomenon to be captured within well-defined boundaries and simplifies the process of borrowing/filtering of many concepts from other disciplines.

Being part of the methodology, for IR research, data collection and sampling form a new understanding because both data collection and sampling are methods, not methodologies. IR’s studies, like others, mandate having methods. In any research proposal, having some of these methods as a part of the methodology may raise questions and concerns by committees and Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). The IRB often follows certain standards and protocols to evaluate and approve research proposals (Strauss and Corbin, 2015, p. 42). Therefore, stating and clarifying this issue is essential for successful proposals.

GTM, in addition, consists of coding and analysis methods. Each version adopted a certain coding process. The shared zone among the versions’ coding is allowing constant comparison between emerging codes (Sebastian, 2019, p.4) which develops categories signifying patterns that describe the process under investigation. This ‘process’ forms a major part of what IR qualitative research is aiming at, i.e. the extraction of different factors associated with the process. This falls in the heart of IR constructivists’ research (Theys, 2018). However, the generalizing judgment of the compatibility of the methodology to IR qualitative research necessitates the answer to an important and leading question related to the levels of analysis.

7. The level of Analysis Challenges and GTM

Methodologically, and in terms of levels of analysis, IR studies are fundamentally different from other areas of social sciences (Singer, 1961; Finkel and Strauss, 2012), particularly at the system level. Choosing the appropriate level increases the “*capacity to explain the relationships among the phenomena under investigation*” (Singer, 1961, p.79). It also helps to determine the possible/particular unit/units of analysis. The IR research mandates an early decision on the level of analysis, the domain in which investigations are carried out. Engaging the level of analysis, in addition, grants researchers some degree of freedom from constantly attempting to conceptualize what international ‘is’ by allowing them to shift the epistemology and the international system from merely an ontological into a methodological (Temby, 2013, p.18).

In his essay titled ‘International Conflict: Three Levels of Analysis’, David Singer (Singer, 1960, p.461) argued that in IR studies and despite the need for the three levels of analysis, it is essential to determine the unit of analysis within the particular level. The individuals’ levels, for instance, is not an independent variable but rather those conceptualized processes and events e.g., in the form of foreign policies by decision-makers. These units are to be treated as key variables that explain the way/how the IR phenomenon is perceived by the policymakers. In

this way, Singer shifted the role and assumptions of levels of analysis from being ontological as Kenneth Waltz proposed (Waltz, 1959), into a methodological. Singer's point, however, might be more effective at the individual and state levels. A study with an aim to develop a phenomenological model, for instant, mandates gathering data relevant to policymaker's perceptions, lived experience, personal observations, and belief (Singer, 1961, p.88). Studies with such aims and at these levels, therefore, resonate constructively with GTM features. On the system level, however, acquiring this type of data may not be available or feasible. At this level, common data in qualitative IR research includes documents, audio and video records, international events, interviews already available in the media of high-profile individuals e.g. heads of international organizations, etc. GTM does allow for these data to be included as a secondary source particularly for literature comparison, but the primary data, as stated previously, are gathered and analyzed verbatim from participants' interviews. This also denotes good news for IR research at individuals' level since it represents a shared zone with other fields in social studies engaged successfully GTM since 1967.

Determining/choosing the level of analysis whether at the system, state, or individuals, therefore, plays an important role in defining the type of data to be acquired and analyzed; it is an important factor that directs the study's finding. For instance, categorical data related to the human agency, or the political system might be inadequate to explain the associated phenomena at the system level. Similarly, when the research problem is associated with large-scale events such as inter-state conflicts then the system level appears to be the obvious choice. However, the researchers may look at it differently when the scope of the study changes, for example, if the purpose of the study is to understand the relation between the leadership style and the regional/international conflicts then the level choice becomes problematic and may require a more sophisticated approach to address the multiple level compatibility issues.

When the prime unit of analysis is a phenomenon and a process takes place at/within the state level, the scenario seems less rigid. The collected data, in this case, is well-suited for the coding and the constant comparison which the methodology provides (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). It is 'well-suited' because further shrinkage of the domain of analysis facilitates the extraction of the concepts by capturing its forming components. This is the foundation upon which the grounded theory is constructed.

8. Engaging GTM in IR Subfields: Example of Studying Foreign Policy (FP) Formulation and Implementation Decision-Making Process

Engaging the GTM in an IR study at the individual, groups, and state levels opens the way for upgrading studies from substantive areas into system-level theories. For example, studying feminism and foreign policymaking may explain certain aspects of state behavior that are rooted in its social (domestic) structure, which then finds its way into the international arena in the form of a policy. The gender/feminism issues differ among societies, thus importing concepts based on empirical studies conducted elsewhere may not be helpful to understand the 'state-specific' complex gender-FP relation because of their inherited historical, social, and socio-political distinguishing factors (Bordo, 1990). The latter, in addition, highlights a level of complexity that makes the development of a testable hypothesis almost impossible; therefore, investigating this issue inductively at the individual, groups, and maybe state levels becomes an unavoidable strategy. The emerging theory can then be taken to a higher level by conducting comparative studies between the states.

As a subfield of IR, FP studies are approached differently. The study of the decision-making process of the FP formulation and implementation is one approach whereby the research aims at drawing an holistic picture of the process that drives the state seeking opportunity/responding to the external reality. The policy decision is made by powerful individuals and groups in different institutions. Therefore, the level of analysis is limited to the state, groups, and individuals. The FP process includes "*choosing actions outside the state boundary for achieving goals*" by adopting "*means, goals, values and different instruments which the government uses in making relations with different countries*" (Adnan, 2014, p.657). Choosing the appropriate action follows a decision-making process which is the prime unit of analysis during the FP's life cycle and is highly influenced by surrounding socio-economic and socio-cultural factors (Almaas and Johnson, 2015). Thus, the study of the FP decision-making includes three major aspects compelled to be conceptualized: a process, the role of interacting actors, and the influencing factors.

The FP decision-making re/presented in a model/s explains the policy formulation and implementation process. Models are not theories, but a partial representation of them (Leijonhufvud, 1997, p.193). Concepts and

categories emerging from constant coding represent high-level abstractions, i.e. theoretic coding in CGT, axial and selective coding in the pragmatist approach, and focused coding in the constructivist version. These concepts represent high-level categories that emerged from constant coding and comparisons and they consist of many components e.g. lower-level codes. *“There are no simple concepts. Every single concept has components and is defined by them”* and *“there is no concept with only one component”* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1990, p.15). Around these high-level categories and the other emerging concepts, the models of FP formulation and implementation are developed. Models, as stated, are part of the ultimately emerging grounded theory. The latter includes those factors influencing and shaping the decision models and the policymaking actors.

FP decision-making studies are concerned about factors influencing the policy. Some of these factors are existing realities and labeled as objective determinants (Wanjohi, 2011), others are known as subjective. The latter may include leadership styles, psychological, certain socio-cultural, beliefs, etc. GTM which was developed initially by sociologists, no doubt, resonates positively with such FP influencing factors. The methodology's focus, like other disciplines, is not limited to those influencing factors, but on how these factors interact with the policymaking process. These factors which take the forms of categories, concepts, and other components are extracted from processing (coding) the data directly rather than examining patterns of meaning, the common approach of thematic analysis.

Similarly, the role of actors engaged in the policy process at different levels can be extracted. As a qualitative methodology, GTM additionally guides the researcher to conceptualize policy actors' ontology and epistemology i.e. it captures their understanding of the surrounding reality. Their quality of understanding and perceptions of the objective determinants, for instance, is translated into a particular rational, sometimes emotional level of readings which ultimately influence the policy (Singer, 1961, p.86). GTM goes a further step by allowing the comparison of the behavior of policy actors, groups and individuals, at different times (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.149). In this way, it allows psychological, socio-cultural, and even belief systems' influence on the FP process to be investigated and theorized.

Notwithstanding this promising picture, conducting FP decision process analysis is not without its limitation. Confining the data at the individuals and groups level suggests that the study's boundary is the particular state's FP. In other words, it promotes a state-specific case study. A comparative study of a group of states' FP decision-making process forms an obvious challenge for the scholar when collecting data in terms of scale and maybe access. For such a case, developing a formal theory becomes a challenge and therefore, researcher may be compelled to shift the study towards building a substantive theory instead (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 149; Strauss and Corbin, 2015, p.50- 52 & 314). The immediate consequence of such a path is limiting the scope into a substantive area of investigation, extensive reliance on primary field data collected by the researcher, and less (if not) engagement of existing empirical data.

On the level of conceptual/theoretical framework, which was explained previously, the study of FP decision-making imposes additional constraints. The subjective factors allow for a wide range of concepts to generate from coding. Psychological issues, for example, open the way to include numerous motivational factors as sources of biases when the policy is selected. A prior explanation of certain psychological concept from empirical studies in the context of policymaking bias and partiality become inescapable. Therefore, CGT's advocating of having a loose or no epistemic framework in advance becomes problematic, while the other versions, especially the constructivist through its invitation to adopt the spiral relations (moving back and forth) can offer a good solution for such a challenge.

Other aspects of the methodology offer no obstacles for the study of FP formulation and implementation and are consistent with the general principles of any qualitative research. This includes a method of sampling, member checking, and reaching the degree of saturation. (Ingelgom, 2020, p.1196).

In this example, three conditions for adapting GTM are met (a) having process and interactions of factors and actors; (b) the level of analysis is limited to groups and individuals with direct implication on the necessary data gathering method (interviews), and (c) there is constant interaction between the process and the surroundings. Despite some limitations, adopting the methodology is possible with a particular reference to the pragmatists and constructivist versions. Furthermore, under certain conditions and purposes explained above, the study of FP decision-making may consider the development of a substantive theory rather than a formal.

Decision-making studies with GTM (see for example Fenwick, Chaboyer and St John, 2012; Halimi, D'Souza and Sullivan-Mort, 2014; King and Snowden, 2020) uphold the above conclusion. Although using different case studies, the associated published scholarly research maintained those key points indicated with FP example in this section. Fenwick, Chaboyer and St John (2012, p. 53 & 59), for instance, found that GTM helped to explore those aspects influencing the decision-making process when studying self-identifying and conceptualizing self-management. Similarly, by adopting GTM, Halimi, D'Souza and Sullivan-Mort (2014, p.263) explored how cognitive judgements of consumers are influenced by their beliefs about the product. For the individuals to reach a decision, they go through simple and complex judgment processes. Exploring and analyzing the decision-making process in these studies emerged from purposeful theoretical sampling (at individuals' level) encouraged by GTM authors, and most importantly, developed themes (for examples: consultation, provide role view, agent for military; hostility, level of involvement, building boundary etc.). These themes explain a 'process of actions' which is (a) the essence of any decision-making study, and (b) the focus of any study conducted with GTM. These actions are taken by powerful agents which explain why such studies naturally are conducted within the level of individuals and groups of humans.

Dissimilarities between FP decision-making and other decision-making studies, in the context of methodology, are mainly the investigation of domain specific interactions and the unit of analysis. This is an advantage for FP and by extension IR scholarship, because existing studies in other disciplines became an establishment or evidence to a successful choice of the GTM in IR studies under the conditions outlined.

9. Conclusion

This paper is aimed at filling a gap in research methodology: the applicability of the grounded theory methodology in international relations studies. Following the dialectical approach, the aim is fulfilled by engaging existing literature. Supported with an example the paper conclusively showed that under certain conditions, embracing constructivist and pragmatist versions of the methodology in IR research is feasible and promising. More specific, the article introduced the main characteristics of IR qualitative research methods and methodologies, and then conducted a comparison with GTM's key components, whereby discussions were established in the areas of consistency and inconsistency between IR qualitative research methodologies and GTM versions.

On the paradigm level, the adoption of pragmatic approach opens the way for IR scholars to be flexible with respect to objectivity claims by CGT by accepting some level of subjectivity. Such paradigm shifts, may promote the assumption of 'theory construction' which is preferable choice when designing constructivist IR research proposals, a major pillar of the fourth level debates in IR.

Discussions regarding the role and position of the literature review and epistemic frameworks suggest that CGT is not consistent with IR qualitative research norms, which is not the case of the other versions. Constructivist GTM, and to some extent the pragmatic embraced a flexible position. For IR research, and to avoid the risk of raising unnecessary questions by IRBs, maintaining the norm of conducting an early literature review and the establishment of conceptual frameworks is possible when employing constructivist and pragmatist versions. Such a choice requires the employment of reflexivity strategies which might form challenges to least experienced researchers.

Methods associated with the three GTM versions such as data collection, sampling, and data coding and analysis form no contradiction to IR research. These methods, in addition, may offer new insights through the data coding process which directs the investigations towards the development of substantive or formal theory. Determining the point of saturation of sampling offered by the methodology is highly important for IR studies due to its nature of being interdisciplinary which allow gathering large amount of data; saturation delimits this problem and hence produce research with more focus scope.

Assessing GTM-IR research compatibility mandates the engagement of the problem of levels of analysis. The main conclusion in this regard is that adopting the methodology is encouraged when the primary data is interviews. This can be the case of individual and to some extent the state levels. At the system level, when the main source of available data are documents, the adoption of any version of the methodology is not recommended. Treating the level of analysis methodologically, David Singer's view is an advantage for GTM

choice since it clarifies and affirms the appropriateness of the selection of the unit/s of analysis and forms of the collected data.

The example of the FP decision-making process illustrates how GTM can be applied in this IR subfield, where conditions of GTM are met. This included the need for extracting an exist process from data provided by policy agents, investigating the nature of their interactions, and possible factors influencing these interactions. The methodology in this case, adds an advantage as it reconfigures the human agency-structure relations. This advantage, however, is not challenge free since breaking down the policy process into finite elements (concepts and their components) opens the way for complicating and broadening the domain of investigation by inviting other disciplines, such as psychology, to become part of the integrated theory.

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