**Enabling a Turn Toward Relational Process Ontologies via Grounded Theory: Creating theories that perform better organizations**

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**Abstract**

We encourage fully enacting grounded theory (GT) and help enable organization science to make a turn toward relational process ontologies (RPOs). RPOs unify practice and philosophy and enable more positive aspirations for organizational futures. How researchers enact GT has changed over three waves, waves which we explore in depth in terms of theoretical mindset and practice. GT is presently inadequate for the complex theorization RPOs require, therefore we need a 4th wave of GT. Using an RPO of theory-as-historical we guide development of a 4th wave of GT. Theory-as-historical sees first and second order codes as serving different historical aims, thus second order codes do not have to build on first order codes. We discuss how 4th wave GT’s implications for new methods, questions, forms of knowledge, and insights that enable organization science to create theories that perform better organizations.

**Keywords:** complexity, epistemology, ontology, grounded-theory

**Introduction**

Recent organizational science research has taken a turn toward the question of ontology, which is the question of the meaning of being in the world (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). A process based theory (c.f. Chia, 1999; Chia & MacKay, 2007) takes this turn toward ontology by assuming “things are reifications of processes” (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013, p. 4). That is, when we think we measure something in practice we are really measuring is an overlap of processes. Typically this leads to an appeal to qualitative research as a means of understanding process (Cornelissen & Durand, 2014). Despite calls for qualitative research, organizational scientists often lack the simultaneously practical (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011), and philosophical (Tsoukas, 2017) mindset needed to develop the complex theory that process based ontology needs to understand “situated action” (Feldman, Pentland, D'Adderio, & Lazaric, 2016, p. 506). Such a theory takes seriously that at once people repeat processes for deeply ontological reasons those processes are never exactly the same twice (Gherardi, 2009, p. xviii).

As such, we contribute to a fourth wave of GT theorizing that is up to the task of taking a turn toward the multiplicity (D’Adderio, 2014) essential to process based ontology. To make this contribution we encourage a course of action where GT is both fully enacted and starts with a process based ontology. In particular, the course of action we chart is that of engagement with relational process ontologies (RPOs). RPOs are process ontologies which rely on the idea that being respectful of participants and their judgments (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2, 2000, p. 3; Van Maanen, 1998, p. xi; cited in Gephart, 2004, p. 445) can offer interpretive insights for others in a way that is embodied (Cunliffe and Copland, 2013) and aware of space, time, and the flow of agency (c.f. Barad’s, (2003, 2007) spacetimemattering; Boje’s (2015, 2016) antenarrative dialectics; and Hultin & Mähring’s (2017) subject positions). This means moving away from the common ground of existing waves of GT and into a mindset of relational discovery. This involves three key components: First, relational discovery in GT means allowing the data to drive the development of theory. Second, relational discovery in GT means that an organizational scientist should select samples and change questions as theory develops. Third, relational discovery in GT means developing functional theory using first order codes, abstractions that people in the phenomena find substantive, and second order codes, abstractions that organizational scientists find substantive.

Focusing on an RPO means moving outside of objectivist vs. subjectivist divide in ontology. Previous enactments of GT have been based on either an objectivist ontology, the idea that there is an objectifiable and stable world to be studied, or subjectivist ontology, the idea that we can only formulate subjectively situated sensemaking (Cunliffe, 2011). Our course of action thus draws inspiration from research that shows scholars can use the same terms but enact them in quite diverse ways based on their starting philosophical assumptions (c.f. Johnson and Duberley, 2015, 2003). The RPO we focus on is that of Roy Bhaskar (1993), who positions theory-as-historical. In doing this, Bhaskar presents formal theories not as summations of functional theory, but rather as serving distinct agendas, agendas set by historical power and domination. Thus, while second order codes may use first order codes for the purposes of discovery, so too may first order codes use second order codes, and both use data in ways that take different aims.

Our course of action is explicitly not to a normative return to GT or a naive acceptance of Bhaskar, but to a mindset of relational discovery necessary to develop grounded theory after taking the process turn in organizational science. In order to help organization science develop a theoretical mindset able to engage RPOs we ask the question “how can we create theoretically solid ground and grounds for theory discovery?” Fundamental to this question, we first answer “What is Grounded theory?” First, GT as it is often enacted without the theoretical ground it was originally envisioned to have. Second, GT is often enacted in a way that lacks the discovery of theory that originally justified it. Therefore, GT often has no ground and contains no theory. In addition to this bold revelation we also ask the question “how can we bring GT theorizing up to the task of discovering the complex theory that process based ontology needs?” These questions help us contribute implications for new methods, questions, forms of knowledge, and insights that enable organizations science to create theories that perform better organizations (D’Adderio, & Pollock, 2014).

**1st Wave GT, objectivist ontology enacting data-then-theory**

In the 1st wave of GT, organizational scientists start with data and from there discover theory. This is done while assuming an objectivist ontology. It leads to testing tentative hypotheses qualitatively. Glaser and Strauss (1967) claim that going from data to theory enables social scientists to discover the objective truth underlying our social world through iterative encounters. Below we explore some assumptions in the 1st wave of GT.

**Assumptions**

The 1st wave of GT was built on the idea that everyone has a slice of social-life that they can report on (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 6-9). People share parts of this slice of life with others, which enables them to communicate, cooperate, and share objective meaning (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 37). Because of this, one can develop working hypotheses about that social world, and then test them by seeking further evidence (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 39). This leads to iteration between data, first order codes, and second order codes. First order codes lead to functional theories, which are abstractions that are recognizable to persons involved in the phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 101). For example, if we studied people who run businesses we would use codes familiar to them and code some as managers and others as entrepreneurs. Second order codes lead to formal theories, which are theories that reveal the deep structure of sociological phenomenon, which may not be salient to persons involved in the phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 104). For example, if we classify some people who start new businesses as motivated by false consciousness, it may not make sense to the entrepreneurs, but it might make sense to Marxist sociologists. This theoretical mindset is reflected in the 1st wave of GT’s assumptions about what constitutes theoretically solid ground and grounds for theory discovery.

**Theoretically solid ground.** In the 1st wave of GT theoretically solid ground is found in data that is recognizable. This applies to both first and second order codes. The 1st wave of GT’s first order codes come from looking closely at the slices of life that seem to be shared by participants. Thus, the organizational scientist is discouraged from simply providing examples of first order codes, but instead is encouraged to develop out of data first order codes that constitute the parts of a functional theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45). For example, if entrepreneurs have a functional theory of new venture opportunities, the organizational scientist would be discouraged from providing descriptions or quotes that simply provide examples of what participants call new venture opportunities. Instead, the organizational scientist would be encouraged to code data that explains what constitutes a new venture, what constitutes an opportunity, and what it means to strike upon a new venture opportunity. The 1st wave of GT uses these first order codes to develop functional theory and thereby build novel second order codes for use in formal theory.

Second order codes use first order codes to create formal theory level abstractions of the data. In this way, theoretically solid ground for formal theory is built on summating functional theories. Thus, the organizational scientist is discouraged from fitting first order codes into existing formal theories, but instead is encouraged to discover theories while avoiding the confirmation of existing formal theories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 34-35). For example, if there is a formal theory of opportunity motivation, the organizational scientist is discouraged from simply using that formal theory to explain the functional theory of new venture opportunities. Instead, the organizational scientist is encouraged to discover new formal theory, perhaps one of “negative possibility space” by combining functional theories of “risky opportunities”, “difficult paths”, and “competition filled industries”. In this way data are used as a basis for grounding theory when it can be used to develop first and second order codes that seem objectively true to life.

In the 1st wave of GT, the historic power and influence of existing formal theory is ignored. This means that new second order codes are discovered, without historical problematization, out of first order codes. First order codes are justified by how recognizable they are relative to the qualitative data that support them. This is limiting in that alternative readings of the data in developing first order codes can lead to a lack of confidence in second order codes. This limitation leaves the organizational scientist vulnerable to empirical or intuitive dismissal, which is the opposite of a point used to justify GT (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 53). Further, recognizably related formal theory may already exist, threatening to make the discovery of second order codes the uninspired putting of “old wine in new bottles” (Ballinger & Johnson, 2015, p. 318). Attempts to overcome this objection can lead to not fully enacting GT thus leaving GT as a means of data comparison instead of a fully enacted theoretical mindset and methodological practice. This problematic way of knowing informs questions of what is seen as reasonable grounds for theory discovery in GT.

**Grounds for theory discovery.** Grounds for theory discovery in the 1st wave of GT are a mix of objectivist pragmatism and symbolic interactionism (Locke, 2001, p. 20). The pragmatic grounding of theory on an objectivist ontology can be seen in acceptance of first order codes as the proper basis for second order codes. In this way, shared slices of life reveal the only ground of interest. This is like seeking a formal theory of entrepreneurial opportunity by looking at each first order code entrepreneurs use as a piece of a puzzle to be put together. This pragmatic realism is shaded by symbolic interactionism. In this way, the symbolic meanings shared between persons constitute objectively observable symbols, such as words, gestures, and intonations (Locke, 2001, p. 20). This is like taking each first order code entrepreneurs use and dismissing any piece that does not fit with the other pieces when they do not point to some second order code.

Taking as ground for theory discovery that which is shared between persons allows for relatively safe discoveries. In this way, the 1st wave of GT is well suited to the development of valid and reliable instruments by which to objectify second order codes. For example, if entrepreneurs tend to carry debt, an indicator of negative cash flow can be obtained by using objectified measures of debt carried. Since entrepreneurs can answer questions about their how their debt level influences opportunity seeking a second order code for a formal theory of “cash based opportunities” can be developed. This theory can then be used to explain covariation between how much debt is taken on and how many sales are made. This ease of objectification, however, distracts from the fundamental values of inspiration and discovery that justified GT in the first place (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 235).

**Practice of GT**

In practice, GT may seem immediately at odds with conducting research in an applied discipline such as organizational science. While first order codes themselves may seem relevant to an applied field, nothing about second order codes implies they will lead to formal theory of interest to organizational scientists. However, organizational scientists still often use GT. Thus, we present three guiding examples of the 1st wave of GT from organizational science.

**Examples.** By combining three guiding examples of GT we can reveal limitations in the 1st wave of GT while also showing the strength of theoretical insights generated by GT. To do this, we will show how exemplar cases, often cited for their use of GT, lack some basic aspect of GT, and yet exemplify many aspects of GT. It is important to note that we speak only to the methods as published. Further, most exemplars never claim to use GT, even though they are often cited for their methods by those engaging in GT. In what follows we show how Reeves & Turner’s (1972) attempt to advance a theory of batch-production organizations follows much of GT, but how it is limited by not dynamically choosing who to interview based on emergent theory, a process we call theoretical sampling. We show how Gephart’s (1978) autoethnographic, ethnomethodological, work on sensemaking during a degradation ceremony follows many of the tenants of GT, but does not dynamically develop theoretically relevant questions at the time of observation, a process we call constant comparative analysis. Finally, we show how Light’s (1979) work on the deep-structure of professional training as a complex “whole system” phenomenon is limited by engaging only a predetermined “black box” from formal theory and thus does not engage in discovery of formal theories, a process we call code comparison. In all cases, however, our examples of the 1st wave of GT use GT’s theoretical frame. That is, be it focused on realism (Reeves & Turner, 1972), process (Gephart, 1978), or holism (Light,1979), they all take for granted the importance of recognizability and objectification when reflecting on existing data and deciding if the analysis has reached a point where the puzzle of discovery is as solved as it is going to be. Theoretical saturation is what we call the process of reaching the point where the puzzle of discovery is solved. We say that we use these terms as such because, while we feel these are the obvious definitions one would gain by reading Glaser and Strauss (1967), much of the literature in management uses these terms in ways we find spurious. While each example paper is presented for its lack of some critical element of GT, it is important to note that the research goals of each paper are not always the same as those found in Glaser and Strauss (1967). For example, while Gephart (1978) does not cite Glaser and Strauss (1967), the paper is often cited for its exemplar use of GT. This confusion re-emphasizes our point that the coherence we offer is needed.

**Theoretical sampling.** Theoretical sampling means sampling from new sources of data while theory emerges (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theoretical sampling means allowing research to drive what to sample next. In this way, the organizational scientist spirals outward from an initial engagement and surveys the social landscape, allowing a sense of its typology to emerge. For example, coming to an entrepreneurial incubator and, because of a desire to understand how it is experienced, seeking ways to get involved with ventures, and selecting the next venture based on experience in the previous venture. Reeves and Turner (1972) fail to do this. Instead, Reeves and Turner (1972, p. 82) admit that “few theoretical criteria for selection were evident” in their sampling, instead they simply consult an organizational chart and walk the shop floor. In the incubator analogy, this is like deciding to engage with a pre-determined set of ventures no matter what is learned along the way. It is important to note that this is a problem endemic to an objectivist world where reviewers expect data to test theory. In such a world, an organizational scientist’s sense of what is legitimate would often demand a semblance of randomization or a-priori hypothesizing, thus harming the goal of theory discovery. On the other hand, Gephart (1978) created a database by which to compare columns of data with each other, allowing findings to guide which data to compare next. This is like talking to many entrepreneurs in an incubator and shuffling through interviews differently as meaningful structures emerge. Similarly, Light (1979), while adopting a hypothesis-testing objectivist vocabulary similar to that of Glaser and Strauss (1967), remains open to emergent theory driving sampling, saying “error can, within holistic data, become a significant source of insight.” (p. 553). This is like looking at sales while talking to startups and allowing unexpected sales changes to lead to an investigation of a venture. Constant comparison is where the theory that guides theoretical sampling comes from. Constant comparison consists of constant comparative analysis and code comparisons.

**Constant comparative analysis.** Constant comparative analysis means engaging the data as it is collected, comparing it against past data, and emerging with new questions throughout the process of data collection. This requires letting data drive what questions to ask next. In this way, organizational scientists are open to new vistas, hidden back roads, and constantly keep an eye on changing terrain. This is much like walking into an entrepreneurial incubator and going into one industrial group only to circle back and go another, comparing the two, and choosing the one more wanted for wear. Gephart (1978) admits that “The data in this study were collected as part of another research project (Gephart, 1975, p. 562) for some two years before this paper was written. Field notes recording conversations were not analyzed or examined from the time of their production until the present paper was begun...” This is like taking keen notes of everything as one encounters in an incubator dedicated to a single industrial sector, but not considering what other industries may be of interest until the time one has to engage in the field expires. It is important to note that this is a problem endemic to analyzing archives of data, and that a great deal of the heavy lifting for theory discovery can also happen through code comparison. On the other hand, in Reeves & Turner (1972, p. 82), “as each study progressed” they conducted unstructured interviews. A lack of structure in interview questions allows new questions to unfold over time. This is like engaging an incubator until running into a potentially groundbreaking new technology and following the people within that one firm for a while. Similarly, Light (1979, p. 553) abandon questionnaires because they “will always produce answers, which then get quantified and characterized as ‘hard data’ regardless of how irrelevant they are.” This abandonment of more formal instruments is like entering a entrepreneurial incubator and not asking for sales and marketing reports, instead of focusing on comforting business analytics, allowing the people, their ideas, and embodied interactions to guide discovery. It is useful to speak of constant comparative analysis as a separate process, but it is inherently intertwined with code comparison and theoretical sampling. For example, while Gephart (1978)’s auto-ethnographic study was unable to ask new questions or make new observations, it was able to iterate between archives to be sampled, and ask new questions of the data. Next is code comparison, which is where the theory comes from that leads to asking new questions.

**Code comparison.** Code comparison means taking an emergent code and comparing it against new data and previous codes, and doing so throughout the data collection process. This requires letting data drive which theoretical codes to consider next. In this way, organizational scientists are open to new ways of thinking about what they are experiencing. This is like learning to define some firms as entrepreneurial, others as managerial, and iterating back to remove some observations formerly coded as entrepreneurial or managerial from their categories after developing the concept of a lifestyle business. Light (1979, p. 553) claims to focus on the value of observation for allowing “one to develop hypotheses, test them, alter them, and retest them while the study is going on” thus yielding “categories [that] emerge from what is actually happening rather than from artificial, preconceived notions.” While this is precisely what code comparison is supposed to get at, Light does so without being open to discovering second order codes unrelated to Light’s pre-determined “black box.” This is like deciding that you are going to study entrepreneurial firms and fitting any lifestyle business found into some predefined entrepreneurial firm category. It is important to note that this is a problem endemic to applied research, as often something that emerges may seem to take the organizational scientist, as one editor put it, “too far afield” for gatekeepers at top journals (Bamberger & Pratt, 2010, p. 666). On the other hand, Reeves & Turner (1972, p. 82) engage in a “constant comparative method” which “resulted in the development of categories used to describe the data.” This is like comparing entrepreneurial firms and calling some service oriented and some price oriented because such distinctions are what matter to stakeholders. Similarly, Gephart (1978) “became interested in organizational succession and realized the as yet unanalyzed field notes might contain data concerning succession. Armed with the theoretical concepts of social rules, organization, and status degradation, the field notes and formal documents were analyzed in the hope of generating low-order theory.” This is like starting with the concept of core self-evaluation and deriving the lower order concepts of entrepreneurial self-efficacy, locus of control, and self-esteem. This sort of theory discovery ends when theoretical saturation is reached.

**Theoretical Saturation.** Theoretical saturation is when an organizational scientist reflects on the data, codes, and comparisons, collects further data and asks further questions, but does not emerge with new ways of seeing things. A scientist can never objectively reach theoretical saturation because new ways of seeing are a function of imagination. Thus the limits of theory discovery are the limits of imagination. This is like getting involved in participant observation in a startup firm. It is possible to explore entrepreneurial firms in a nearly infinite number of ways, to get lost for months, years, or a life time in just one new venture, comparing all the social dynamics there are to be seen. At some point the scientist must step out of the field and return to share new theoretical insights. In our reading, theory discovery is an ongoing project, a constant forming of ideas, and a seeking of meaning through and within the ideas of others. Reeves & Turner (1972) relied on a realist perspective, reaching theoretical saturation because of an assumption that three studies would be enough. This is like deciding that looking at three entrepreneurial firms should be enough to figure out if a new business model is yet undiscovered. Gephart (1978) relies on a process perspective which recognizes fundamental limitations in the writing of qualitative research “First” an organizational scientist starts with a “major interest”, “Second” viewpoints are “explicated and negotiated”, “Third, only a limited amount of data [can] be presented in a paper,” and fourth organizational scientists must exercise selectivity. This is like setting out on a 1) comparison of new ventures that are 2) of interest to other entrepreneurship studying organizational scientists such that 3) only those new venture observations which organizational scientists can learn from are presented and 4) that presentation is selectively guided to a theoretical point. Light (1979) relies on a holistic perspective, recognizing that “one needs continuous data that measure each stage in [a] process.” This is like going to an incubator, noticing the stages of a new venture, and staying long enough to see some firms go through all the stages. As we will see, what constitutes theoretically solid ground and grounds for theory discovery change across the 2nd and 3rd waves of GT.

**The Evolution of GT**

In the 2nd and 3rd waves we see a more a-la-cart approach to GT. In this way, it is both easy to point out how the concept of GT, from the perspective of its initial formulation, is often used in name only. To do this we draw on several articles cited regularly for their apparent use of GT. Each paper has parts of it that are central to their wave of GT, inconsistent with the discovery of theory, and yet anticipate the emergence of a 4th wave of GT. To begin we look at the 2nd wave of GT.

**2nd wave GT, objectivist ontology enacting theory-then-data**

The 2nd wave of GT starts with theory and uses data to expand it. Here formal theory categories are assumed to be both true, in that they are not false ideas, and real, in that they represent that which acts in the world outside of observations of them. Using this mindset organizational scientists seek to answer “what is there” by looking for agreement. This mindset allows Eisenhardt (1989, p. 548) to dismiss “conflicting reports” as simply “one person’s assumptions about another’s motives or opinions.” In this way, many codes are decided before a study begins, questions asked to find examples of those codes, and examples fit to the theories organizational scientists started with. This leads to redrawing constant comparison not as a method for data collection and theory discovery, but as an after the fact data analytical tool. A tool often used to uncover a middle ground between theories, ground that was known to exist before the study began. This is similar to going to an incubator, knowing others assume that the there are two kinds of new venture, fast growth and slow growth, measuring many new ventures, and returning to one’s office to analyze the data. Upon analyzing the data confirming what one thought those growth speed observations: there is a third type of new venture, moderate growth, then claiming to have used GT’s “constant comparison” for the analysis. An objectivist ontology enacting theory-then-data influences what 2nd wave of GT calls theoretically solid ground and grounds for theory discovery.

**Theoretically solid ground.** Theoretically solid ground in the 2nd wave of GT consists of examples of pre-determined theory. This “exampling” is argued against by Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 5), avoided by Kram’s (1983) attempt to gain meaning out of relationships, but spoken of by Kram and Isabella (1985, p.115) as what the “research team agreed to in advance to cover” so as to “insure that the resultant conceptualization of peer relationships would be both comprehensive and compelling” (156). Here the intent of a first order code is to help develop compelling research. In this way Kram and Isabella force the data into expected slots, expanding functional theory to fit formal theory. This forcing of round data into square holes is precisely one of the things Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 37) intended to enable scientists to move beyond. What the 2nd wave of GT sees as valuable for a second order code is not that it be discovered, as in the 1st wave, but rather that it “stretch a concept to its limits and its depths, in an effort to ensure that the categories and theory developed are well integrated” (Kram & Isabella, 1985, p.116). In this way second order codes conform to the expectations of gatekeepers and fail to challenge existing thinking in meaningful ways. This the conduct of scientific inquiry as though it is improvisational theater where each new contributor should agree with all that has come before.

The use of exampling hastens the speed at which an organizational scientist can reach theoretical saturation. In fact, in 2nd wave GT, knowing the categories ahead of time helps reduce how many observations are needed, allowing a single codebook of questions to be created and used for finding evidence for expected categories. Continuing this line of thinking, 2nd wave GT provides participants with first order codes. For example, Kram and Isabella (1985) define a significant other by asking for “two relationships with colleagues which you feel support your personal or professional growth” (p. 114). By defining a significant other for the participants, they at once speed up theoretical saturation and avoid potentially distracting inquiry into what it means to be in a relationship. This is like deciding to go to an incubator to study value propositions and defining them as “that which customers pay for” thus ignoring the potentially distracting indirect benefits to customers, and value the firm proposes to workers and key partners.

**Grounds for theory discovery.** Grounds for theory discovery in the 2nd wave of GT are whatever can help fit data to a pre-determined theory. Eisenhardt (1989) produces this form of knowledge based on “replication logic that is, a series of cases is treated as a series of experiments” (p. 545). Further, using constant comparison to discover theory is replaced with “criteria similar to those other organizational scientists have used for defining strategic decisions.” (p. 546). In this way, the finding sought is verified by fitting data to existing theory. This is like defining a new venture as a new money making organizational structures that involve people; and then finding those qualities in the world to confirm the existence of new ventures, even if those qualities are also shared by new non-profits and not shared by new ventures operating in at a loss. Eisenhardt’s (1989) questions were based on 16 structured questions and minor supplementation with what “seemed fruitful to pursue during the interview,” thus overlooking any sense of comparison between responses. This is like saying we have a sixteen-point check list for what we think a new venture will look like, should look like, and everything important to what a new venture is: but organizational scientists can add a note next to their checklist if it seems fruitful. Despite this, the legitimating language of GT is used, insinuating that the first order code of “a general view of the strategic decision process within the firm” had “emerged” from data, even though that emergence was decided upon ahead of time via the questions asked before data were collected. In this way Eisenhardt (1989) insinuates research behavior that appears as legitimate as GT, without the difficulties of engaging in the effort of discovery. This is like saying one did a total audit of an entrepreneurial venture by checking the earnings statement, then justifying not going through the effort of the stated analysis by saying it is well known that earnings statements come from accounting ledgers. Despite these limitations, the 2nd wave of GT comes with the benefits of ease and simplicity.

In the 2nd wave of GT what an organizational scientist believes is assumed to be true. This leads to creating groups expected to confess to theory (Kram, 1983), sampling designs intended to assure needles can be found within hay stacks (Kram & Isabella, 1985), and the artificial creation of a singular story around which theoretical sensemaking is to take place (Sutton & Callahan, 1987). This leads to a few easy to read cases where exampling is justified as “cross-checked facts” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 547). This makes research easier and simpler to engage in. In exchange, the 2nd wave of GT trades off certainty for uncertainty and complex knowledge for conjecture. The 2nd wave of GT is marked by what Locke (2001, p. 115) calls a “crisis of representation”, a return to a time before GT when exampling and fitting were the essence of qualitative research. This crisis occurs during a time of advancement, where qualitative research has gained legitimacy, in part because of a deeper engagement with phenomenon the 1st wave of GT encouraged. Attending to these limitations and the general question of representation, the 3rd wave of GT moves into a subjectivist ontology while maintaining a theory-then-data stance.

**The 3rd wave of GT, subjectivist ontology enacting theory-then-data**

The 3rd wave of GT is built on starting with theory and finding insiders’ and outsiders’ views of functional theory, uncovering existing formal theories that may apply, and adding additional codes to existing formal theories when it will make sense to gatekeepers. By the 2nd wave GT had become so different from Glaser and Strauss (1967) that when Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi (1994) brought back in the concepts of formal and functional theories, they explicitly said they were adding the concepts to GT. This is because during the 2nd wave, GT had become simply a way to refer to the use of data to find examples and confirm pre-determined theory. In comparison, 3rd wave GT locates functional theory within social networks of meaning, at once independent of any one person and co-created by the persons involved in mutual understanding (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 83-86). This is like classifying new ventures by looking at the different ways stakeholders engage with the new venture, and emerging with categories such as investment opportunity, and work place. The 3rd wave’s answer to the question of ontology is that the meaning of being is embedded within a person’s subjective sensemaking of events (Charmaz, 2006, p. 196).

One of those persons is an organizational scientist and that person’s subjective sensemaking of events includes engagement with formal theory (Charmaz, 2006, p.154). As Gioia et al (1994, p. 367) said “we tend to discount firsthand experience and interpretation in favor of a purely theoretical view, a stance that is not only elitist, but also potentially misleading.” Here formal theory categories are just another valid form of subjective interpretation, only special in that they carry weight and speak to the interests of fellow organizational scientists. In this way theory becomes arbitrary. This is like studying new ventures, taking existing industry codes and value propositions definitions, looking for new value propositions, and being open to the potential need for new industry codes. In this way, it is justified to bring existing theory codes into research, as they constitute some part of the organizational scientist’s arbitrary, but authoritative, interpretation. Similarly, discovery of new formal theory is possible through juxtaposition of “first hand account with a grounded theoretical analysis aimed at uncovering the underlying dimensions of the dynamics involved in the case” (Gioia et al, 1994, p. 367). That is, formal theories are built on summing functional theories. This is like looking at new ventures while assuming that a stakeholder’s way of engaging the firm, such as investment or work place, can be summated into how we should define value propositions and industry codes.

**Theoretically solid ground.** Theoretically solid ground in the 3rd wave of GT is research which both offers examples of existing theories and which safely adds new ideas that can be fit to work alongside the existing theory. Bacharach, Bamberger, and McKinney (2000) start with the idea that they will study peer-based and union-sponsored member-assistance programs in the airline industry, functional theoretical classifications that are accepted without consideration of data. Similarly, sampling is not driven by theory, instead Bachrach, et al, (2000) study flight attendants because of the convenience of the sample in its representativeness, scope, and ease of data access (Bacharach, et al., 2000, p. 709). Further, the formal theoretical classifications sought after, in this case boundary management, were the driver of something they use the terms “theoretical sampling” and “constant comparison” to refer to. Despite saying these words, there is no evidence of constant comparison presented, and they explicitly described not conducting theoretical sampling. However, by saying these words they gave themselves leave to “identify theoretical categories and make comparisons across categories well before the formal process of data analysis began” (Bacharach, et al., 2000, p. 711). In part, before data was collected. This is a kind of improvisational theater, where in a team practices the same formula over and over so they know a great deal of what they are going to say and do well before they start.

The use of safe theory helps assure that the audience for the research is wide. In fact, in the 3rd wave of GT, knowing what scholars want to hear about ahead of time helps get past journal gatekeepers. Moving from an objectivist ontology in the 2nd wave to a subjectivist ontology in the 3rd wave of GT, allows for the organizational scientist to be seen as a simple interpreter free from the ability, and thus obligation, to discovery theory. In this way theory becomes an arbitrary game of agreement. This however has a cost: a large number of dead ends. By not having a sense of discovery around which to build a concept of theoretical saturation, the term becomes a stand-in for when an organizational scientist starts hearing “the same information again and again” (Bacharach, et al., 2000, p. 710). This is particularly likely to lead to stale findings when, as in Bacharach’s et al.’s (2000, p. 712) case, “in nearly every case, peer counselors focused their discussion and analysis of their own case management around the issues of boundaries and tactics.” By not allowing theory to be discovered, but instead impressed upon the questions and expectations of organizational scientists, an easily understood, dead end study can lead to “an almost natural framework” from the perspective of the organizational scientists. This is like going into an incubator, seeking only to find out information about new ventures that use different nanotechnologies, examining only nanotechnologies, and expressing how interesting it is that nearly every venture studied involved nanotechnologies. Following this line of thinking, GT simply becomes a method for engaging in data analysis, located separate from the actual definition of questions asked, sample obtained, or theories considered.

**Grounds for theory discovery.** Grounds for theory discovery in the 3rd wave of GT is that which is most familiar to the organizational scientist. Sonenshein (2009, p. 225) produces this form of knowledge based on “triangulation of multiple sources of data” that is supposed to be “useful for answering ‘how’ types of questions about phenomenon in their natural contexts”. This ground is built assuming both functional and formal theory. For example, at the functional level Sonenshein (2009) assumes the importance of positions (i.e. store manager, retail clerk, etc.) and participation levels (i.e. participating/not). These grounds are justified on claims that “I used a constant comparison method, moving between the data and themes to build a grounded theory” (Sonenshein, 2009, p. 225). However, the basis of selection is the ease of Sensemaking afforded the interpreter, who can hide under the cloak of gaining “insight into the meaning construction processes” (Sonenshein, 2009, p. 226). While, in fact, the intent was to “inform broader theories of strategic change implementation” (Sonenshein, 2009, p. 225), a formal theory selected for organizational scientist familiarity. This thus begins to fall in line with the problem of simplicity stated above: at once seeking to “capture first order terms used by informants and summarized with quotes” (Sonenshein, 2009, p. 225) and fit first order codes to examples that fit alongside formal theory. To improve fit, constant comparison is replaced with “peer debriefing to bounce ideas off of outsiders and get their perspectives on the data” (Sonenshein, 2009, p. 226). This is like going to an incubator, only studying the size and growth rate of new firms, confirming people who start new ventures think of firms as having different sizes, and that people who study new firms care about growth rate.

The use of familiar theory helps the organizational scientist feel at ease with how to think about and seek qualitative data. This ease comes at the highest of costs: theory developed in this way will often be either trite or wrong, and almost certainly irrelevant when applied to any functional matter. We can see this when Sonenshein (2009, p. 226) presents some of his findings in a “three-hour feedback session with senior managers [who] agreed with most of my findings and helped to elaborate explanations.” By not having some grounding outside of confirmation of existing functional and formal theory, Sonenshein (2009) derives findings that are not only obvious to practitioners, but also in need of further elaboration. This makes it clear that Sonenshein’s (2009) study used participants to confirm functional theory instead of discover it. It is important to keep in mind that the examples used here are often cited for their use of GT, and are well regarded. In fact, Sonenshein’s paper is, in our view, one of the best qualitative papers to be found; but interesting and grounded are distinct concepts.

**Successful developments and specious claims**

In each wave organizational scientists are successful in developing theoretical insights that anticipate 4th wave GT. In each wave, there are also specious and misleading claims of having used GT. These often occur within the very same examples we used above.

 **Successful development.** It is easy to point to instances of theoretical development and insight along the three waves of GT. In the 1st wave of GT each example we presented also anticipates the development of 4th wave GT. Reeves and Turner (1972, p. 82), for example, anticipate the relational nature of the 4th wave of GT saying “Disparate items of data, which may not be quantifiable or scalable, can nevertheless be related to each other”. Similarly, Gephart has many such breakthroughs, pointing out the political importance of friendships, for example by referring to one person as “closest friend…” and others as “not regarded by him as friends…” (1978, p. 561). He also anticipates the relational processes that drive the 4th wave of GT by seeking to “minimize the possibly one-sided nature of descriptive accounts” (p. 562). Further, Light (1979, p. 552) anticipates a turn toward ontology saying “of course, those running the program are sure they know how the program works; after all they designed it and run it. But this may be the biggest deception of all for the deep structure of the program may be quite different from what its designers assume it to be.”

 In the 2nd wave of GT Kram and Isabella (1985) successfully anticipate the 4th wave of GT in three different ways. First, gender and peer relationships of numerous kinds are taken as potentially problematic influences on any observation (p. 113). Second, they actively seek “participant’s emergent thoughts and feelings at different times” (p. 114) which recognizes embodiment, temporality, and emotional change over time. Third, they took peer relationships as their core unit of analysis (p. 115), anticipating the centrality of relational processes.

 The 3rd wave of GT (Gioia, et al., 1994, pp. 367-369) anticipates much of 4th wave GT. First, they recognized the importance of a “process used to fashion understanding by the participants themselves, to avoid the imposition of alien meaning upon their actions and understandings”. Second, they “take seriously our responsibilities as organizational scientists to articulate how the informants’ views are informative” and thereby “give uncommon attention to the insiders ‘common sense’ representations of their experiences and interpretive world view.” Third, and of the greatest importance to the development of RPOs for the 4th wave of GT, “The knower and known are interdependent in this process of understanding.” Despite these advancements there are specious or misleading claims made in example articles.

**Specious claims.** In the 1st wave Reeves & Turner (1972) claim to use constant comparative analysis, but admit that sampling was not based on theory and that the study started with its theoretical ends in mind. This means that theory was not discovered through constant comparison. In the 2nd wave Eisenhardt (1989, p. 548) offers a misleading claim, saying “I combined analyses and induced propositions using methods for building theory from case studies” and then cites Glaser and Strauss (1967). While it adds the legitimacy of a GT citation to the work, it also implies that these case studies are a kind of GT. In the 3rd wave Sonenshein (2009, p. 225) cites Glaser and Strauss (1967) in claiming to use constant comparison, while never changing questions asked or engaging in theoretical sampling.

From the perspective of the 1st wave of GT, Eisenhardt (1989) and Sonenshein (2009) both, at times, engage in an entirely contradictory analysis. There are three key factors that reveal this. First, both focus on a case method, either trying to “confirm or disconfirm” inferences (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 545) or “triangulate multiple sources of data” (Sonenshein, 2009, p. 225) thus covering up the unsuitability of each for GT discovery. Second, both use data to verify theory, with Eisenhardt (1989: 548) saying “each case was revisited to see if the data confirmed the proposed relationship” and Sonenshein (2009, p. 226) using an independent research assistant to “verify the presence of these issues.” Third, both do not update questions or participants based on the development of theory, but instead use “criteria similar to those other organizational scientists have used” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 546) or ask over two hundred people “four questions covering topics about employees’ feelings about change” (Sonenshein, 2009:, p. 225)

It is within the context of success and specious claims that we propose the development of a 4th wave of GT, a wave built on relational process ontologies. While there are many RPOs, our analysis focuses on the RPO of Bhaskar (1993), whose work seeks to separate the ways researchers make sense of the world from the underlying ontology of the world (See appendix A for an overview of RPOs). We set upon this course of action to answer our research question: “how can we bring GT theorizing up to the task of discovering the complex theory that process based ontology needs?”

**4th Wave GT, Bhaskar’s RPO Enacting Theory-as-Historical**

There are many ontologies, many ways of being in the world (c.f. Boje, 2014, p. 53). Each person has access to their own slice of life, and as they enact any moment of that world they relate their life with others’. This is what Schutz (1972) described as a life world. This at once recognizes the need to look directly at performative dynamics and socio-material situations in the (re)presentation of process based ontological theory (D’Adderio, 2014). Within this relationality, individuals experience two kinds of time: immediate and distant (Schutz, 1972). In immediate time, there is that which was just experienced, and that which one immediately predicts might happen. In the distant horizon of time there is that which has become a historical memory and those things in the future toward which one aims in the long term. For example, while engaging an incubator for entrepreneurial firms one may consider what one might do should a failing firm be found, or think of a time it the economy turned south and how some value proposition designs survived better than others. When there is an intense situation distant time horizons start to close in and the immediate becomes much more salient. For example, the distant horizons which hold ideas of failing firms and potential economic downturn close in immediately when a billion dollar lawsuit emerges. Scrambling to deal with a lawsuit, only immediately past experience and immediate predictions of the future matter. In our example, seeing a billion dollar lawsuit may lead to both a functional theory of “how to survive a billion dollar lawsuit”, and formal theory of “the alienation of inventors from intellectual property and why it leads to lawsuits”.

 According to Bhaskar’s (1993) RPO, first order codes and second order codes relate differently to the same evidence. This is because they have distinct agendas, agendas set by historical aims (Suddaby, 2016). Historic aims, here, are manifest out of the role of political power and its ability to form our automatic assumptions (Žižek, 2012; Suddaby, Bitektine & Haack, 2017). Functional theories describe first order codes in a way people experiencing the phenomenon care about, and formal theories explain second order codes in a way people interested in changing deeper social mechanisms care about (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 11). For example, a functional theory of a lawsuit is about what to do, given what is at hand to deal with a lawsuit. A formal theory of a lawsuit is about how to change the circumstances that may lead to a lawsuit. This difference in historical aims leads to different parts of evidence remaining untheorized. This untheorized part of the evidence is the negative ground upon which formal theory is built (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 23). For example, both functional and formal theories of a lawsuit might leave the concept of law itself untheorized.

This does not imply that there is only one way the evidence can be used to justify a first or second order code. Indeed, seeing theory-as-historical opens theory itself to the many ways of studying historical embeddedness (c.f. Vaara & Lamberg, 2016; and Hatch & Schultz, 2017). Instead, of one right way, one person may allow one part of the data to remain untheorized while another may allow another part of the data to remain untheorized, even when working from the same data (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 32). For example, one person might choose to theorize lawsuits in a functional theory and ask what kind of lawsuit a particular survival strategy works for. Thus aiming lawsuits avoidance policy at avoid billion dollar lawsuits. Similarly, in explaining why lawsuits occur in a formal theory, a person may question the importance of only theorizing lawsuits because of an uncovered historical aim that avoids minimizing lawsuits payouts overall. Thus aiming lawsuit avoidance policy at paying off a few smaller suits. Thus we see that formal theory is not necessarily built on functional theory, but rather both take aim from different histories.

In taking aim from different histories, organizational scientists may choose vastly different things to leave untheorized, and thus arrive at vastly different agreements on what to call grounds for theory (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 56). In the previous example, those taking aim at a functional theory of lawsuits against entrepreneurial firms may make the payout as something that exists on a continuum, seeking to move toward the least negative outcomes. On the other hand, those aiming at a formal theory of a lawsuits may leave the payout untheorized, simply seeking to lawsuits of any kind.

Despite this, because both functional and formal theories are built on theorizing from the same data, it can seem that one should be built on the other. Indeed, honestly engaging this mode of theory discovery is the stated goal of much of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2000). In this way, theories can pass-through meaning from formal to functional or functional to formal theories, becoming a problem when this is done in unreflective ways. Unreflective passage of meaning can lead to compromise formations, such as simple exampling (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 103). For example, formal theory may never ask how to gain working capital in general because the importance of venture capital investment is passed to the formal theorizing about working capital acquisition by the functional theory of venture capital investment. Similarly, a functional theory of working capital acquisition may never be discovered if formal theory only passes through venture capitalist preferences.

This helps reveal the misrepresentation that sits at the base of authoritative formal theory, an idea that Bhaskar (1993, p. 237) calls “there is no alternative.” There is no alternative seeks to distract from the potential for different theories that use the same grounding data in different ways. This means that historical aims are interweaved into, and thus can be critiqued for their interaction with, authoritative functional and formal theory (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 344). The path forward, then, is to recognize the “normative climate of oppression” brought on by authoritative theory and revealed when we recognize theory-as-historical (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 374). In recognizing the norms of oppression that come from historical power, the goal of theorists should be enabled to develop new theoretical ground in such a way as leads to greater freedom for those coming from different ontologies. Thus integrating the ethical what, who, and how of practice (Jarzabkowski, Kaplan, Seidl & Whittington, 2016) and philosophy (Tsoukas, in press). For example, if existing theory is rife with white male privilege, and authoritative theory benefits the historical power of white males, who so often work as venture capitalists, the role of organizational scientists can be to reveal this normative climate of oppression. Existing venture capital scholars will, of course, call their normative climate of oppression values-free, perhaps dismissing observations of oppression as overly normative. What the 4th wave of GT seeks, however, is to enable organizational science to make a turn toward RPOs and thus to create theories that perform better organizations (D’Adderio, & Pollock, 2014).

**Objectivist, subjectivist, and RPO theoretical mindsets**

The way an organizational scientist engages in the discovery of functional and formal theory is based on the organizational scientist’s theoretical mindset. We have presented an objectivist ontology that enacts data-then-theory (1st wave), an objectivist ontology that enacts theory-then-data (2nd wave), a subjectivist ontology enacts data-then-theory (3rd wave), and a relational-process ontology that enacts theory-as-historical (4th wave). The first three waves are clearly not ontological in nature; but, as Cunliffe (2011) points out, they do make ontological assumptions, which then motivate the mindset with which they engage in GT. A 1st wave GT study of a new venture incubator would start with going into the incubator, and end with a theory of the incubation. A 2nd wave GT study of a new venture incubator would start with a theory of the incubation, and end with finding examples of observations that fit the theory of the incubation. A 3rd wave GT study of a new venture incubator would start with a theory of the incubation, and end with conveniently interpreting the theory of incubation to be lacking the organizational scientist’s pet theory of everything. A 4th wave GT study of a wooded area would start with questioning why studies of the incubators seem to serve questions like “which technology can externalize otherwise internalized environmental costs?” instead asking “how can we stop destroying the environment?”

**Methodological implications**

**From distrust to confidence.** The 1st wave of GT implies that organizational scientists can come to data with no assumptions about the meaning of what they encounter. This leads to potentially questioning what is found. The 4th wave of GT allows us to see that there is a danger in this: a loss of trust in theory. Regardless of the GT wave, one should make the historical aims of studies explicit. Further, in the 4th wave of GT one can now problematize the historical aims of previous theory.

**From neglect to inspiration.** The 1st wave of GT expressly avoids consideration of contribution. Despite this, nearness of observations to existing theory pose the danger of journal gatekeepers calling what is discovered new wine in old bottles. The 4th wave of GT reveals that what gatekeepers may call objectively old wine is based on historical objectification of subjective interpretations. Therefore, regardless of GT wave, it is important to avoid being overly clear in formal contribution upfront, thus allowing organizational scientists to come at GT research with an eye toward inspiration. Additionally, in the 4th wave of GT it is critical that where objectified theory has silenced hearing from different ontologies, those persons’ voices are enabled.

**From uncertainty to certainty.** The 1st wave of GT attempts to avoid and overcome the organizational scientist’s sense of ethics regarding what is being studied, to whatever degree reasonable. The 2nd wave of GT implicitly assumes no ethical stance already present in the theoretical conversation. The 4th wave of GT seeks to reveal that the subject matter itself already comes with an ethical stance, therefore raising uncertainty as to the ethical grounds upon which such studies are founded. Regardless of GT wave, theory needs to identify the ethical stance already present in the theoretical conversation. In addition, in the 4th wave of GT the ethical stance of research can be directly interrogated, thus enabling research that takes an intentional ethical stance.

**From conjecture to complex knowledge.** The 1st wave of GT tries to get around intellectual ease and a desire for simplicity by starting with a complex phenomenon and deriving codes from that data set. However, at no point is the organizational scientist encouraged to move beyond the various theories a person with the life-experience of an organizational scientist might find authoritative. The 2nd wave of GT explicitly allows for multiple theories, intersecting them and intentionally iterating between them until a simple story emerges, thus maximizing ease of sensemaking. The 4th wave of GT helps reveal that the simplicity and ease of multiple theoretical lenses comes at the cost of maximizing the amount of shared conjecture that finds its way into a study. Regardless of GT wave, the overlapping of theoretical lenses needs to be undertaken with a critical eye toward the danger of supporting one lens with another. Furthermore, in the 4th wave of GT simplifying conjecture can be problematized by bringing historic complexity to the knowledge that can be gained through an emergent theoretical lens.

**From dead ends to new directions.** The 1st wave of GT explicitly avoids consideration of audience during initial data collection and analysis. Despite this, what other scholars find accessible and interesting are the eventual criteria against which gatekeepers make their judgements. The 3rd wave of GT seeks to use those criteria to guide research, limiting first how the data is interpreted, and later which data is collected, in an attempt to appeal to a wider audience. The 4th wave of GT indicates that this comes at the cost of theory that serves to add marginally to existing theoretical dead ends. Regardless of GT wave, bringing the process of change into context can help overcome theoretical dead ends by providing an explanatory context for the sort of novel and unusual findings that are sometimes ignored (Suddaby & Foster, 2017). Likewise, in the 4th wave of GT, sharing what occurs to those who experience the world in different ways is expressly intended, a critical goal being to changing the views of the audience, thus providing the sorts of new context needed to reinterpret previous dead ends.

**From irrelevancy to applicability.** The 1st wave of GT is about avoiding initial relevance, focusing on intuitive sensemaking, and providing a discovered-theory approach to understanding data. Despite this, the ability of make sense of the data’s interpretation is a basis upon which gatekeepers make their judgments. The 3rd wave of GT, on the other hand, starts with how sense is made within the academic conversation and uses that knowledge to directly interpret the meaning of what those within the context say, leading to much of the data focusing on things that, outside of fitting examples to existing theory, are irrelevant. The 4th wave of GT recognizes that when sensemaking is the basic criteria used for judging GT, much of the data that is easy to make sense of will be irrelevant to the people being studied. Regardless of GT wave, it is important to show how what the organizational scientist finds comports with the world of the people being studied. Similarly, in the 4th wave of GT it is important that the organizational scientist argue for her or his beliefs about what is important to the people studied, all the more when it defies how scholars presently make sense of the phenomenon. One mindset difference builds on the last, and every new way of undertaking GT enables the next. As we have seen, each of the 4th wave GT differences in mindset has implications for method in all waves of GT. Each of the 4th wave GT differences in method leads into new questions, forms of knowledge, and insights enabling theory that performs better organizations (D’Adderio, & Pollock, 2014).

**New questions enabled by the 4th wave of GT**

The 4th wave of GT sees through the question implicit in writing for recognizability “Which stories would my audience like to hear?” and moves into questions of “Why do we trust some stories and not others?” or “What are the historical aims that allow stories to get heard?” The 4th wave of GT reveals the role of subjective objectifications in questions of “What is the contribution?” and asks instead, “What are the neglected ways of seeing this?” or “What are the ways theory is self-reinforcing in this context?” The 4th wave of GT shows how a desire for speed implied in asking “What will my readers accept as legitimate?” leads to uncertainty and instead directs us to ask “Why are people being harmed and how can we help?” or “Who is being harmed and why don’t we already see it as wrong?” The 4th wave of GT reveals that an intent to develop easy and simple theory by asking “Where is there theoretical agreement?” distracts from the much less conjecture prone question of “How can we develop more complex theories?” or “Whose way of thinking has authorized the simplification of this theory?” The 4th wave of GT shows us that searching for a wide academic audience leads to asking “What can I say that will be in line with what has been said?” but this question is asked at the risk of running into numerous dead ends, and instead the question should become “What is different now and how is that change a potential new direction?” or “What historical aims can help give voice to different ontologies?” The 4th wave of GT recognizes that when the goal of research is to make sense to other academics we risk irrelevance, particularly when answering questions like “Where can I find examples that fit with existing theories?” instead we should always ask: “Where is there a new interpretation that is applicable to helping those being harmed?”

**New knowledge enabled by the 4th wave of GT**

The 4th wave of GT enables those engaged in other waves of GT to embrace new ontologies. The 1st wave of GT must allow categories to emerge from the data from constant comparison, instead of simply glossing over emergence. The 2nd wave of GT should allow existing theories to fit the data, instead of trying to force data to fit expected theories through exampling. The 3rd wave of GT should take a deeper look at the oppression of ontologies that enabled the emergence of the theory it seeks to add marginally to. The 4th wave of GT offers the opportunity to constantly compare not only categories that emerge from data, but also historical categories that lead to what is perceived as data. In this way, the 4th wave of GT escapes the assumption that there are unique categories, assuming instead that it is the perpetuation of historical aims that give some theories their authority, at the cost of silencing other ontologies. The 4th wave of GT is about revealing different ways of being, giving voice to the disenfranchised, and recognizing that what history treats like little people can be a source of unending positive action.

**Example from 1st wave.**By seeking out different ontologies, the number of questions and kinds of informants needed to answer those questions expands. This would have allowed Reeves & Turner (1972) to move beyond non-theoretical sampling, via internal motivation to gain the knowledge that various samples could provide. Similarly, constant comparative analysis might have lead Gephart (1978) to collect new data as gaps in analysis emerged. Finally, theoretical code comparison would have allowed more of the data to take precedence in Light’s (1979) study, at once revealing that the “whole system” that Light sought was impossible, and freeing Light from marriage to a predetermined “black box” that needed to be investigated. Shifting the 1st wave of GT into theorizing based on RPOs would help reveal when and why historic forms of knowledge could be challenged.

**Example from 2nd wave.** The knowledge produced in the 4th wave of GT could root out the exampling provided, for example, by Kram and Isabella (1985) and replace it with greater certainty, without a reduction in speed. Instead of focusing on databases of preconceived importance, what is important could emerge from the data as it is reviewed and analyzed, with an eye toward confidence in processes. This means the abandonment of certainty, and the embrace of a firm historical understanding of power relations. Similarly, the ease and simplicity offered by Eisenhardt (1989) can be maintained, as it is easier to accept an emergent code than it is to force data into a theory; which at the same time can lead to more complex theory.

**Example from 3rd wave.** In its best form the 3rd wave of GT will no longer lead to dead ends when a respect for different ontologies is incorporated. For example, Gioia et al.’s (1994) desire to avoid the “imposition of alien meanings” can be answered by recognizing that what is seen as alien is simply a matter of different historical aims. In this way, any dead end is self-deconstructing, moving forward only requires digging in a theory’s historical aims.

**New theoretical outcomes enabled by the 4th wave of GT**

The kind of new theoretical outcomes the 4th wave of GT seeks out are those that shed light on different ontologies. The 4th wave of GT allows organizational scientists to move toward confidence, inspiration, certainty, and complex knowledge by moving in new directions, and holding onto a deep concern for applicability. We use examples from each of the first three waves to explain.

**Example from 1st wave.** New theoretical outcomes are possible in our examples from the 1st wave of GT. Reeves & Turner (1973) could inquire into the historical aims that define what a shop floor is, or that led to the construction of the organizational chart they consulted. On the other hand, such new knowledge is not always that deeply hidden, as in Gephart (1978) where a theoretical take on the meaning of friendship and historical power in ceremonies of degradation seem almost already written. In either case, such knowledge can aim at the intent of Light (1979) who sought a more holistic account that avoids the (pre)fabrication of theory.

**Example from 2nd wave.** The 4th wave of GT offers new theoretical outcomes for studies conducted under the auspice of the 2nd wave of GT. Those who have developed their own research based on Kram and Isabella (1985) could create new theory that critically reflects on the historical aims surrounding the concept of relationships. This would thus enable the deeper sense of relationships these organizational scientists seek to understand. Similarly, the embodiment of historical power flowing through Eisenhardt’s (1989, p. 548) “observations of a day-long strategy-making session” could become fodder for seeing strategy as a three-way negotiation between reifications of the environment, present political will, and historical influences over functional theory. This, thus allows for both more certain and more complex theoretical outcomes.

**Example from 3rd wave.** Finally, new theoretical outcomes that the 4th wave of GT can offer the 3rd wave of GT preserve sensemaking, but are also directly applicable. For example, the wall of irrelevancy Sonenshein (2009, p. 226) ran into in his three-hour feedback session, where no participant was surprised, can be overcome by engaging the deepest levels of structure. The 4th wave of GT not only maintains, but improves our ability to make sense of the data by abandoning the idea that second order codes must be built on a combination of first order codes. The 4th wave of GT does this by recognizing that functional and formal theory emerge from different historical aims, thus allowing for sensemaking that also advances applicability. Having presented the 4th wave of GT as a course of action enabling management to take a turn toward RPOs, we now move on to some forward-looking conclusions.

**Conclusion**

We have shown where scholars claiming to enact GT often use examples to fit data to theory while ignoring historic power relations. This leaves scholars without theoretically solid ground and thus no grounds for theory discovery. When theory is not allowed to emerge from the data, theories both fail to reveal any particular slice of life and fail to reveal the historic aims that drive theorizing. This has left GT unable to engage in the task of enabling management to take a turn toward RPOs. The RPOs of 4th wave GT stand alongside, not in opposition to, previous waves of GT, by addressing different questions and contributing different forms of knowledge.

By thinking of theory as historical, the 4th wave of GT also allows organizational scientists to reveal complexities (D’Adderio, 2014) within common functional and formal theory. More importantly, the 4th wave of GT explains why such complexities should be of deep concern to management scholars. Specifically, because historic aims are essential, but untheorized, parts of previous theorizing. Further, historic complexity adds complexity to inadequate theoretical simplifications (Tsoukas, 2017). In addressing theory in this way, the 4th wave of GT allows for theories that contribute in ways unseen in the first three waves of GT.

The 4th wave of GT contributes an extension to the forms of knowledge that constitute theoretically solid ground and grounds for theory discovery. In recognizing the role of historical aims in previous formal theory, the 4th wave of GT opens previous grounded theorizing to alternative readings. Similarly, the 4th wave of GT contributes a means by which to explore where the concept of function comes from in functional theory thus enabling us to ask: “For whom does the theory function?” There are many RPOs, we have selected but one: Bhaskar’s. Despite this, we think further developing the 4th wave of GT to embrace other RPOs would be quite valuable. In this we seek a full enactment of GT. One that iterates between slices of life, building ideas slowly, and respecting that there are many ways of being in the world. We call for integrity in the theorizing process. Thus, we foresee future research that embraces spacetimemattering (Barad, 2003, 2007), engages in antenarrative dialectics (Boje, 2015, 2016), and shares the multiple ways people can exist in subject positions (Hultin & Mähring, 2017). Thus, our primary advancement is to explicitly justify and call for research that intends to create theories that perform better organizations (D’Adderio, & Pollock, 2014), thus creating a world where people have more positive asperations.

**Appendix A – Seven Relational Process Ontologies**

1. RPO1 - Mary Parker Follett's 'relational process ontology' is being rediscovered (Stout & Love, 2014, 2017). She did pioneering work in systems theory in the late 1800's, early 1900s that was subsequently ignored by the wave of Tayloristic Scientific Management (mechanistic systems) and by open systems. Follettian RPO1 has interweaving of social and material aspects in the ‘Law of the Situation.’ Her work begins with revisions to Hegel’s dialectic. Her solution is to harmonize dialectical differences by a network of interacting local groups in the community, and local networking groups working through differences in public and business organizations. Since ‘social’ and ‘material’ are treated as interactive, intra-active, and interweaving rather than inseparable (or entangled as in RPO3), the Follettian RPO1 fits with Substantialism paradigm (RPO4). The Situation is treated as ‘agential’ and the ‘invisible leader’ of participative decisions. Conflict resolution is by integrative unity. The focus on power is to enact ‘power with’ as an alternative to ‘power over’ in Tayloristic central planning and managerial hierarchy of command and control. Like Follett, Arendt (1958), has an RPO, one that is quite different from Heidegger, and other sorts of ontologies we are reviewing here.

2. RPO2 - Heidegger's relational process ontology, rooted in Heidegger (1962), a text that begins and ends with problematizing Hegelian dialectics for having a linear construct of temporality, and being too ideal about synthesizing thesis and antithesis forces. Heideggerian RPO2 has been ably applied in the strategy-as-process standpoint (Chia, 1999; Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013; Chia & MacKay, 2007). It is also prominent in (Boje, 2014) and is basis of antenarrative theory of ‘fore-caring’ (Boje, Haley, & Saylors, 2016; Boje, Svane, & Gergerich, 2016). ‘Fore-caring’ includes fore-having, fore-conception, fore-structuring, and fore-sight. Heideggerian RPO2 lacks the focus on the political found in work by Arendt (1958) and Follettian PRO2.

3. RPO3- Karen Barad's (1998, 2003, 2007) sociomateriality of entanglement inseparability of social with materiality, called 'agential realism’ which relies on spacetimemattering (all one word). For Barad ‘social’ and ‘material’ are in an inseparable entanglement, ‘intra-activity’ rather than an interaction of separate entities. Barad eschews Hegelian or any dialectic, but Žižek (2014) in his opus work on Hegel, reviews Barad’s agential realism standpoint, and makes some wiggle room for a dialectic of materiality with discourse. Wanda Orlikowski and Susan Scott applied Baradian PPO3 to organization systems (2007, 2010; Orlikowski and Scott 2008). Their work has fostered a counter-ontology approach called ‘Substantialism’ (Slife 2004).

4. RRO4 - Substantialism sociomateriality Substantialism argues that social and material (especially information technologies) are independent and separable in organization systems. (C.F. Slife 2004; and the special issue edited by Cecez-Kecmanovic et al., 2014, p. 809). Substantialism is 180 degrees opposite to Baradian RPO3, and is unrecognizable in Deleuzian ontology.

5. RPO5 - Deleuzian (work by Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) develop a rhizomatics ontology that is quite different from the prior four. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) have a chapter on spatiality, in which they relate Benoit Mandelbrot's multi-fractal theory to their own rhizomatic ontology. Deleuze would reject Substantialism.

6. RPO6 -Søren Brier's - Søren Brier is a Peircean scholar. Charles Sanders Peirce, an American Pragmatist philosophy (along with John Dewey, William James, and others, see Boje, 2014), who builds upon Hegel’s triadic, producing many more triads of his own. We embody matter and energy that is physical, chemical, biological, and spiritual. In the middle of Brier’s (2010) Star Model is the observing system (e.g. an awareness apparatus), which gives the storytelling account of reality using various methods to capture the dominant narrative. Brierian sociomateriality integrates Charles Sanders Peirce's semiology with the autopoiesis of Luhmann's (1995) cybernetic systems theory. In Star Model, each organization recreates itself in response to the waves of the four domains (1. Matter/Energy, 2. Life/Living System, 3. Inner Life/Consciousness, and 4. Sense/Meaning of the Social). Brier says, “I believe that we should ground our culture(s) on embodied human living (personal as well as interpersonal), i.e. on semiotic intelligence as part of both living nature and human culture, rather than only on the physical science and the worldview behind it” (Brier, 2013, p. 222). This has an as yet unexplored link to Follett, in that Follett was in the ‘Cambridge Intellectual’ group that included Peirce as well as Dewey, James. Follett's later work is therefore influenced by Peirce, but comes before that of Luhmann (1995). Follett does have an original systems notion of self-organizing, co-power, and conflict integrative differences that has yet to be integrated in RPO6. Brier, by contrast, develops a cybersemiotic dialectics out of Peirce’s philosophy, and combines it with Luhmann’s autopoietic typology of cybernetic systems.

7. RPO7 – Roy Bhaskar - Bhaskar (1993) developed a lifetime of work rescuing Hegelian dialectics from its errors, in ways that he contends run counter to Heideggerian ontology. Despite his criticism of Hegel, Bhaskar picks up the idea of a dialectical process theory of identity-in-difference and ontological transformative being – nothing – becoming dialectics. To some extent, the Hegelian dialectics thus shines through in the kinds of dialectics Bhaskar (1993) could bring to GT: 1) Alterity: A dialectic of the otherness and difference that builds the stratified levels of Marxist ideological super structures; 2) Nothingness: A dialectic of absence, revealing how what is ignored matters when things change, transition, or transform; 3) Alienation: A dialectic of social isolation, a dialectic which can reveal our social unification as being dismissed or ignored, giving voice to local cultures on a global scale, revealing the marginalization of the peoples on the periphery by those in the center, integrating fragmented agency through unity; and 4) Voice: A group of dialectics that bring agency back to the now-totalized periphery, that increase mutual recognition and respect for identity differences, that seek unity through diversity and recentralize transformative praxis, regressing against the status quo to create a stalemate against oppressors and thus a way to access different ontologies. In these ways, the Bhaskar’s RPO offers ground and theory GT can use. Grounded theory plays in what Bhaskar (1993) calls the sub-individual psychological level, reduces the individual biological level to cognitive and language skills, and has yet to venture into remaining levels of scalar reality (Bhaskar, 1993):

1st Sub-individual psychological level

2nd Individual, biological level

3rd Micro-level (e.g. ethnomethodology)

4th Meso-level (functional roles of capitalist and worker)

5th Macro-level of whole regions or whole societies

6th Mega-level of whole traditions of civilizations

7th Planetary level of whole cosmos

**Appendix B – GT Waves outside of Management**

First wave GT (1967-1993) commits induction fallacy by doing qualitative method to generate theory propositions out of practice that go untested and ignore historical context (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It relies on the epistemic fallacy, which is conflating what we can know with what is. It fails Karl Popper's critique of inductive logic for failing to do falsification or verification of inductive propositions. Glaser and Strauss (1967, pp. 2-3) say “the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research” is an idea they picked up from Merton, for whom the meaning of ground is non-theoretical social practice, out of which theory can be generated.

Second wave GT (1990-2009) adds deductive fallacy of logical positivism reductionism. It makes relies on the fallacy of positivism. It applies existing theory frameworks, and then uses positivistic coding to fit in interview and observation content into abstract schemata. Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 21) gave GT a hermeneutic facelift. Theory and practice are said to build in a reciprocal relationship with one another. This ‘reciprocal theory/practice’ approach was relatively short lived.

Third wave GT (2006-2017) tries to rescue 1st and 2nd waves (still unfurling) with ‘social constructivism’ epistemology (Charmaz, 2006). Mills, Bonner, and Frances (2006, pp. 27-28) prefer a social constructivist turn in GT, and accuse Strauss and Corbin (1990) of never addressing which paradigm (i.e. positivism, interpretivism, hermeneutics, etc.) underpins their thought. This is the social constructivist fallacy, an assumption that people are not ignorant of the historical power dynamics that aim their taken for granted assumptions. Annells (1996) noticed early on how GT’s postmodern (social constructivist) turn had begun to break with symbolic interactionism and other sociological theories. 3rd wave GT continues to dualize.

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