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Finding the perfect fit – Paradigmatic choices for novice and experienced qualitative researchers.

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The Constructivist Credo

By Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba
Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press Inc., 2013

Rediscovering Grounded Theory

By Barry Gibson and Jan Hartman
Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2014

The choice of paradigm that academics face when conducting qualitative research is no easy task. From start to finish, methodological assumptions shape our research journey and our own epistemological outlook, so that our choice of paradigm speaks to us as social inquirers and says a lot about us to our readership. With this in mind, this review explores two recent publications aimed at seducing qualitative researchers to the theoretical paradigms they each advocate. Firstly, I consider Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba's (published posthumously) *The Constructivist Credo* (2013) and secondly Barry Gibson and Jan Hartman's *Rediscovering Grounded Theory* (2014). For this review, I will do my part to assess the validity and weight of these publications as research manuals. Once the inquirer has identified the 'perfect paradigmatic fit' that speaks clearly and loudly to their professional and personal choices, it will be unlikely that they will later drift from this epistemological stance. Hence, finding the right paradigm appears to be a crucial first step into any research journey and a decision that stays with us for a lifetime.

The Constructivist Credo (2013) is the result of a 'thirteen-year conversation' between Yvonna Lincoln and her late husband Egon Guba, and the product of countless seminars with their students. Over the years, this Constructivist duo would take notes from these seminars and tease out answers to their students' methodological queries, searching for concise and generalizable answers that may speak to researchers across any field. Initially envisioned as a 'Bible' to Constructivism, the *Credo* encapsulates 'conjectures' about the practicalities of adopting this paradigm. Honoring a plural voice, despite being published some five years after Guba's death, *The Constructivist Credo* is divided into 3 sections: the presumptions, the conjectures and lastly these conjectures at work. At the start of the book we are presented with several introductory pieces. Firstly, Lincoln sets the origins and purpose of the book, followed by an academic biography by Thomas A. Schwandt on Egon Guba, then a brief personal note from Guba himself on his 'Aim and Hope' for this publication, after which, we find a clarification about 'what this book is not', where the authors explain their vision for their *Credo*.

In Part 1 – 'The Presumptions' - the authors condense in just a few pages the ontological, epistemological, methodological and axiological presumptions of

Constructivism, a useful tool for Research Method students (and their tutors) as a means of capturing the essence of Constructivism. Part 2 presents us with ‘The Conjectures of Constructivism’. These 130 or so conjectures, clustered into 13 alphanumeric categories, are the product of the many seminars hosted by Lincoln and Guba. Here, they encapsulate many if not most of the issues that arise when conducting research underpinned by Constructivism and are immensely helpful as bite-sized aphorisms on the paradigm. Short and concise, these conjectures speak to every researcher at some level who has approached academic inquiry utilizing Constructivism. They are, however, not intended for the novice researcher with little or no previous knowledge on the paradigm. For weathered researchers, especially those that firmly embrace Constructivism, these conjectures are insightful and become helpful springboards for discussions on Qualitative Research Methods.

We then move on to Part 3 of this *Credo*, where the authors put their long list of conjectures ‘to work’ by paring these alphanumeric maxims to a ‘real life’ doctoral dissertation underpinned by Constructivism. Over half the book is dedicated to this rather specific doctoral thesis, where full excerpts are taken to highlight Constructivism in practice. To achieve this, the authors have sectioned off paragraphs with a horizontal line and signposted the alphanumeric conjecture that the paragraph refers to on the left-hand margin. In practice, this implies that the reader is forced to flick back and forth from Part 3 to Part 2 to see which conjecture the authors are referring to, making this a slightly stilted read.

The use of this exemplary doctoral dissertation underpinned by Constructivism is, nevertheless, immensely helpful for the novice researcher interested in adopting the paradigm. However, the level of detail for this particular publication pulls the reader away from a broader understanding of Constructivism in action. Although an interesting, well-written and extremely cohesive dissertation, the sole use of this original material made this book more of a Constructivist case study rather than the ‘Bible’ that it had originally set out to be. Instead of focusing on a single thesis and offering such lengthy and detailed material, the authors could have presented their conjectures via multiple illustrative cases and research settings. Considering their ultimate authority in the field, I would have been more interested in reading Lincoln and Guba’s immensely rich and insightful ‘thirteen-year conversation’ through a selection of various Constructivist-informed studies, presented as brief passages and linked more clearly to their abstracted conjectures. This, I feel, would have made for a more stimulating and thought-provoking exploration of the paradigm, making their case for Constructivism even stronger.

Moving on to Gibson and Hartman’s SAGE publication, *Rediscovering Grounded Theory* (2014) tells a similar tale of theory and practice. Aptly entitled ‘Rediscovering’ Grounded Theory, the first half of this book is dedicated to the principles of the paradigm and makes particular reference to Glaser and Strauss’ groundbreaking *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* of 1967, as well as Strauss’ *Theoretical Sensitivity* (1978), Strauss and Corbin’s ‘procedures and techniques’ for the method (1990), and an array of newer advocates in this field. The book goes into some detail to cover the pluralism of Grounded Theory as it takes the reader on an ‘intellectual journey’ of the paradigm. Although it covers the work of these various advocates thoroughly, noting also a rift in application of Grounded Theory in practice, this publication should (ideally) entice readers to explore some of this original material further: both authors share a curiosity for the complexity and depth of the method, a curiosity they hope to encourage in their readership.

Also the product of extended conversations over an 8-year span, in *Rediscovery* Gibson and Hartman aim to ‘cut through the current debates [...] by seeking out grounded theory in the context it was produced’ (p. 4). Therefore, after an introduction detailing the purpose of the book, and the sociological and philosophical context of the paradigm, the first half focuses on clarifying what Grounded Theory *is*, looking closely at: the theory behind the method, Constructivism in Grounded Theory, concepts and categories, and lastly coding. Here, the authors explore what the theory ‘should look like’ (p. 29), uncovering the principles of Grounded Theory from its origins to present day use. Closely referencing the original texts and critically evaluating their content, the first section sets the theoretical foundations of this textbook. In section 2, the authors turn our attention to the practicalities of *doing* grounded theory, and more importantly how to do it *well*. To ensure good practice, the second half therefore covers the issues of theoretical sensitivity, theoretical sampling and pacing, the practicalities of coding, memo-writing and thinking theoretically, sorting and integration in Grounded Theory, how to contribute to knowledge, writing theoretically, and lastly rediscovering formal theory.

The general structure and consistent layout of every chapter in *Rediscovery* will be particularly helpful as a Research Methods textbook: alongside the clear divide between theory and practice, every chapter includes an aim, bullet point learning outcomes, the body of work, concluding comments, a summary of what has been covered, suggested further reading, and endnotes. Clearly intended as an educational tool and classroom companion, chapters include ‘critical reflections’ (specifically geared at students) alongside numerous illustrative tables, boxes and diagrams. In the first half, the authors have dabbed the text with ‘questions’ that help the reader stop and reflect on the philosophical underpinnings of the method itself. In the second half, ‘skills and tips’ are interspersed throughout the chapters so as to make the method all the more tangible for those new to Grounded Theory. Unlike the extensive use of a single doctoral thesis in *The Credo*, Gibson and Hartman’s use of 3 different Grounded Theory cases is much more persuasive and purposeful: throughout the second half of the text, the authors have drawn on insightful examples from these 3 studies, making the link between theory and fieldwork realities all the more palpable for novice and experienced researchers alike. Gibson and Hartman conclude their book by highlighting their intentions to ‘reinvigorate grounded theory by rediscovering the context within which it was developed’ (p. 237), an aim I feel they accomplished well.

To conclude, both publications do their part to present their paradigmatic choice, although *Rediscovery* is more compelling in its breadth, depth and user-friendliness. The highly condensed conjectures of *The Credo* can lead to rich, new discussions on qualitative research, but may say very little to novice researchers unfamiliar with the paradigm. *Rediscovery*, therefore, goes further in providing a strong case for Grounded Theory: comprehensive in its scope and clear in its explanations, *Rediscovery* is both informative and appealing, leaving us as curious social inquirers hungry for more.