Article

Reflections on the Use of Grounded Theory to Uncover Patterns of Exclusion in an Online Discussion Forum at an Institution of Higher Education

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Abstract

This article reports on an example of grounded theory methodology used in a case study to describe power inequalities among participants in an online forum at a higher education institution in South Africa. Critical poststructuralist theory informs the study as it investigates how hegemony influences the strategic interaction of participants. An interpretive analysis through coding procedures uncovered elements of intensified exclusion, inequality, and oppression. This took place within a virtual space which is theoretically idealized as an equalizer and promoter of freedom of speech. The process involved in the eliciting of voices and in the analysing and interpreting of subjective accounts is described to give an account of disillusioned experiences with a potentially liberating form of technology. The article contributes to qualitative methodology in applying the generic paradigmatic conditions within grounded theory and illustrates both the interrelatedness and the cyclic nature of the conditions within the specific paradigms of participants.

Information systems theorists construct an idealistic view of effecting equality and democracy through information technology (McGuire, Kiesler, & Siegel, 1987; Moor, 2007; O'Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003). However, higher education institutions (HEIs) do not escape reproducing discourse domination by making use of internet technology. Čečez-Kecmanović, Moodie, Busutill, and Plesman (1999) reported how a university brought about organizational change by a seemingly democratic process of consulting faculty through the use of the Internet and email, but the eventual decisions were made ignoring expressed concerns. Consulting through email and the Internet, therefore, only appeared democratic and gave a superficial air of managerial care.

Information communication technology (ICT) can contribute to and be instrumental in the democratization of an HEI, through such avenues as encouraging and promoting free speech. Nevertheless, the potential inherent to ICT can create insufficient transparency, inequality, and domination, which not only characterize undemocratic management styles but also are experienced in oppressing interactions amongst employees. The narrative countering the presumed idealism inherent in online discussions is consequently researched in the case study described here.

Academic members at a semi-rural HEI in South Africa established an online forum to voice their opinions on issues they considered important to their lives in general. Examples were the impact and expectations of socio-political change on a formerly mono-cultural institution and interactions with students and management. This forum theoretically offered the opportunity for all participants, whether academic or administrative, to share their opinions online. The forum also served as an alternative space where issues that did not have channels for expression elsewhere could be raised. Ideally, the opportunity to practise free speech and interact with colleagues would provide unlimited potential for expression, as it seemed an equal space, where honest opinions could be expressed freely (Fernback, 1997; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). Online participants were free to speak their minds while experiencing the readers' reactions face to face (Moor, 2007).

This article appraises the use of grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) relating to the analysis of participants' discourse in an online forum, named "Have your say." Theory was built from an analysis of the subjective accounts and perceptions of participants about their interactions on the forum and the offline consequences of their online participation. The location of grounded theory in the interpretive framework in this study meant that the building of theory was an interpretive process in which the meanings of the participants and the researchers were co-constructed. The position of the researchers was as influenced by their own philosophical orientation as the participants' world views influenced their own perceptions and interactions (Hughes & Jones, 2003; Klein & Myers, 1999; Urquhart, 2001). The philosophy inherent to interpretation and the theoretical framework of critical theory formed the foundation of the study and also influenced the findings formulated after the analysis. The objective of the research was to understand the subjective positions of the participants as they interacted and assumed stances of oppression in their presentation of issues, arguments, and experiences through the forum text, as well as through their reflections on their participation in interviews with the researchers.

The research questions were: (a) Why and how did participants exclude each other? (b) Which patterns could be established that indicated the inclusion and exclusion of participants? and (c) How did the conditions in the methodological paradigm of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) illustrate the barriers to the attainment of respect and understanding according to the ideal of the communicative model of discourse (Young, 2000)?

The choice of the interpretivist view enabled the researchers to understand the subjective positions of the participants, while the paradigm offered by grounded theory enabled the researchers to identify hindering and facilitating conditions of reaching understanding and respect among forum participants.

This article explains the selection of specific participants, the researchers' position, the considerations which determined the interviews, and the choices made concerning the context of the study. The researchers further describe the different stages of coding and offer a graphical illustration of the paradigm of grounded theory in discovering the interrelated and cyclic nature of exclusive elements. Finally, the researchers reflect on the inclusive or exclusive elements in all the conditions of the participants' paradigms.

The Collection of Data

In this section, the researchers declare their own research position and their choices of participants, interview questions and style, forum text, and offline contextual data. Both online and offline data are incorporated in the study, because together they offer a holistic picture of the participants' "expanded ethnography" (Beneito-Montagut, 2011).

Choice of the Thread and the Interviewees

The research started with a textual analysis of a thread on racism in the online forum. This discussion was chosen because it comprised a considerable number of participations (n=24) expressing different viewpoints and employing divergent styles of presentation. The participants also included people who regularly participated in previous forum discussions and who opposed each other in declarative ways and, consequently, formed prominent identities within the forum. Based on this rationale, participants in this thread were also chosen as the participants for interviews. While the forum text could be described as a micro-context, the interviews form part of a larger context that enabled the researchers to understand the power exerted from within and around the discourse (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak, 1996). At the micro and meso-levels, the text's syntax, rhetorical devices, and reception were considered, and the researchers focused on how power relations were enacted (Barry, Carroll, & Hansen, 2006). The online data were procured by an inquiry in the text (i.e., the thread), while the offline data (i.e., interviews, observations) provided the real life context of participants. The interviews offered the opportunity for participants to relate, in their own terms, how context influenced the production of their participation. The online and offline data eventually offered "multiple meanings and experiences" (Orgad, 2009) that emerged in and around the discussion forum.

Research Ethics: Achieving Reliability and Validity

The researchers obtained ethical clearance for the research from the HEI, as well as informed consent from all participants. After verbatim transcription of the interview text, the participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts and sign off on the accuracy of the transcription. On request from participants, the researchers deleted sections of the verbatim transcripts of interviews because the participants felt uncomfortable with some utterances. In order to protect the identity of the research participants, pseudonyms, which indicated their gender, were used.

The study was largely an interpretive process, and the constant making of reflective notes also contributed to the validity of the findings. The reflections related to Young's (1996, 2000) tenets of communicative democracy—the theory that supported the study. The researchers used the principle of crystallization (Ellingson, 2008) to enhance the reliability and validity by using more

than one source of data to inform the study. The data sources comprised the texts produced by the participants, researchers' reflective and observational notes, and confirmative interviews with the participants.

At the start of the interviews, as a point of departure, the researchers provided the participants with a copy of the forum discussion on racism. Certain parts of the text served as an introduction to certain questions, thus offering opportunity for reflection, as well as eliciting subjective views from participants on their own participation while lending a meta-cognitive and meta-emotional approach to the study.

Interaction with Participants

The objective with the interaction during the interviews was to create a feeling of rapport with the participants (Charmaz, 2006) and conversation support which resembled a social encounter between the interviewer and interviewee (Packer, 2011). The participants were free to express their feelings and persuasions, with the interviewer taking on the role of an empathetic listener, encouraging the participants to explain their positions and convictions. Instead of having readers for their "performance text" (Denzin, 1999; Van Doorn, 2011), the participants had a face-to-face audience who participated in a comfortable interaction.

Some questions were generic, such as the motivation to take part in the forum, support and resistance to their participations on and offline, the reasons why they ended their participation, their views on the potential influence of the forum, and their views on other participations. In addition, a different set of questions was devised for every participant, focusing on his or her specific issues. If certain consequences to their participations were important, participants were asked to relate to those incidents. In this respect, the study partly used narratives as a method of inquiry (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

In this article, the data analyses of four participants are discussed, while the findings also consider the data of other participants. The participants are known by the pseudonyms Beth, Susan, John, and Stephen. The men are South African: Stephen is white and English speaking, while John regards himself as politically black and speaks Afrikaans—both representative of minority cultural groups in South Africa. The two women, Susan and Beth, are like the interviewer, white Afrikaans-speaking South Africans, representing the majority cultural group on the campus. The limited inclusion of offline data is justified by the scope of the primary research question (Hine, 2009), which seeks to determine how and why participants exclude one another. These biographical data are considered relevant in that they explain given contexts not constructed within the forum but which explain online and offline interactions in important ways.

The Analysis

The analysis outlines the three stages of grounded coding, namely the descriptive, axial, and selective stages of analysis. During the descriptive analysis of the verbatim interview transcripts, the text was analysed with codes that served as semantic units, which were later clustered into categories (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Descriptive analysis formed a useful initial approach to the data as it offered basic categories (Saldaña, 2009) on which the further analysis of the text was based. Urquhart (2001) described these types of codes as the providers of context because they provide a comprehensive description of the phenomena under study.

The axial stage of coding, namely the clustering of categories of descriptive coding, was marked by a more abstract organization and interpretation of data (Hughes & Jones, 2003; Urquhart,

2001). Figure 1, developed from the axial coding stage according to a selective coding structure (Strauss & Corbin, 2008), indicates the categories' interrelation on an abstract level:
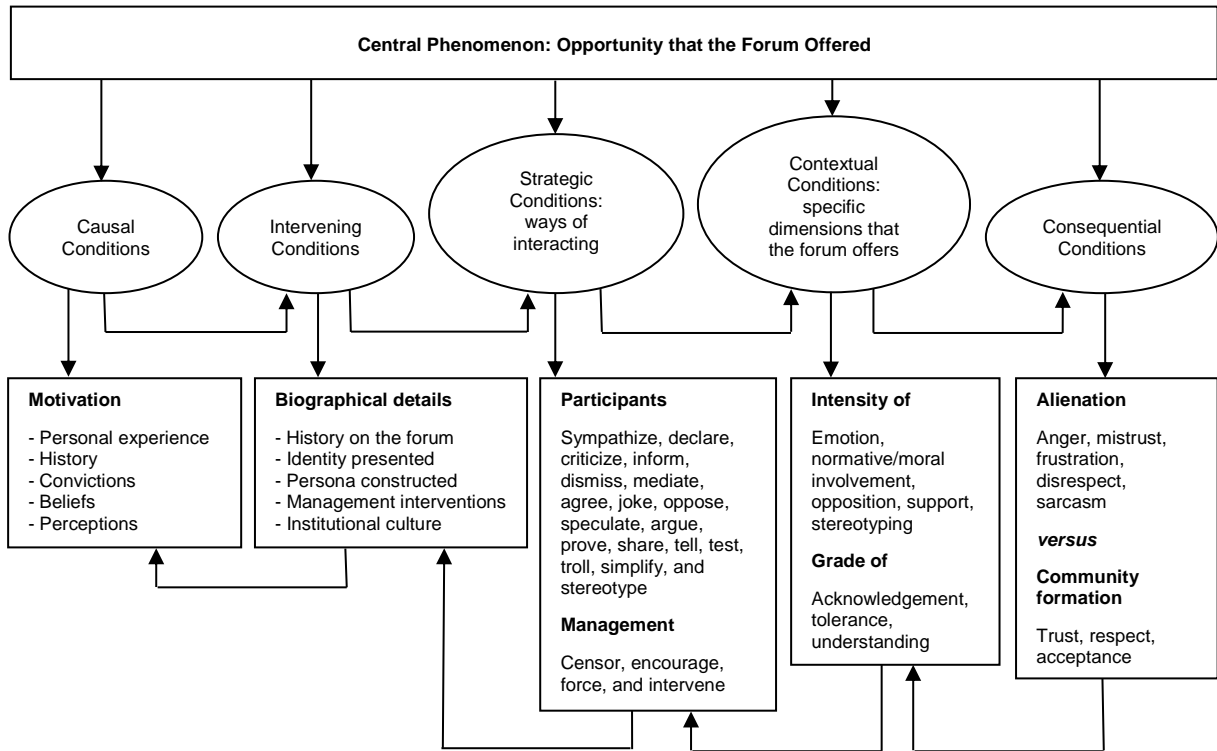

Figure 1. Paradigm of selective coding (based on Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

The central phenomenon, which is the "opportunity that the forum offered," indicated that the participants assigned a certain role to the forum and this role expressed their ideals. The idealisation or opportunistic idea of the forum served as a central theme throughout the other elements of their participation, such as their motivation, strategy of participation, and consequence of participation.

Causal Conditions

The causal conditions of the paradigm are translated in the analysis to the motivation of participants. These were noted as the participants' personal experience, history, and convictions, and their beliefs, perceptions, and expectations of the forum: in short, the ideology of participants as informed by their personal contexts. While the researchers probed into the motivation of participants during the interviews, the textual analysis provided insight into the strategies of interaction.

Intervening Conditions

The paradigm labels the context of the participants as intervening conditions, which can be translated as participants' perceptions of their immediate context; experience of institutional culture; identities or persona constructed on the forum; and experience of managerial interventions in the forum.

Strategic Conditions

The strategic conditions are understood as the strategies of interaction, which were diverse and ranged from poking and joking to mediating and minimalizing. The strategies that management used while interacting with participants ranged from offline praising to online censoring of contributions. Figure 1 denotes that the motivation and the consequence of interaction equally influence the interaction strategies participants employ. The interaction strategies are articulated according to the identity formed online, the choice of a certain style in which to interact, the perceptions formed of other participants, and the role of offline institutional interventions.

Contextual Conditions

The contextual conditions are translated as the specific context of the forum, which was characterised by different dimensions. The dimensional character of the contextual conditions of the forum was interpreted as the intensity of emotion in the support or opposition, acknowledgement or dismissal, understanding or intolerance (i.e., the inclusion and exclusion) of ideas and persons.

Consequential Conditions

The consequences of all the elements in the paradigm could be translated as either alienation from the forum or the formation of community in the forum. Alienation leads to termination of participation and is accompanied by feelings of anger, mistrust, frustration, and disrespect. Those participants who experienced an accepting community in the forum would ideally experience trust, respect, and understanding, which would again inform and influence all the other elements in the paradigm (see Figure 1). The consequence of participation could either be to terminate online interaction or to pursue participation and stay involved in the discourse.

Strategy of Interaction

In the following section, the paths shown in Figure 2 are applied to the discussion of four participants' online and offline interactions. Figure 2 represents the strategic conditions (strategy of interaction) as the focus of the paradigm:
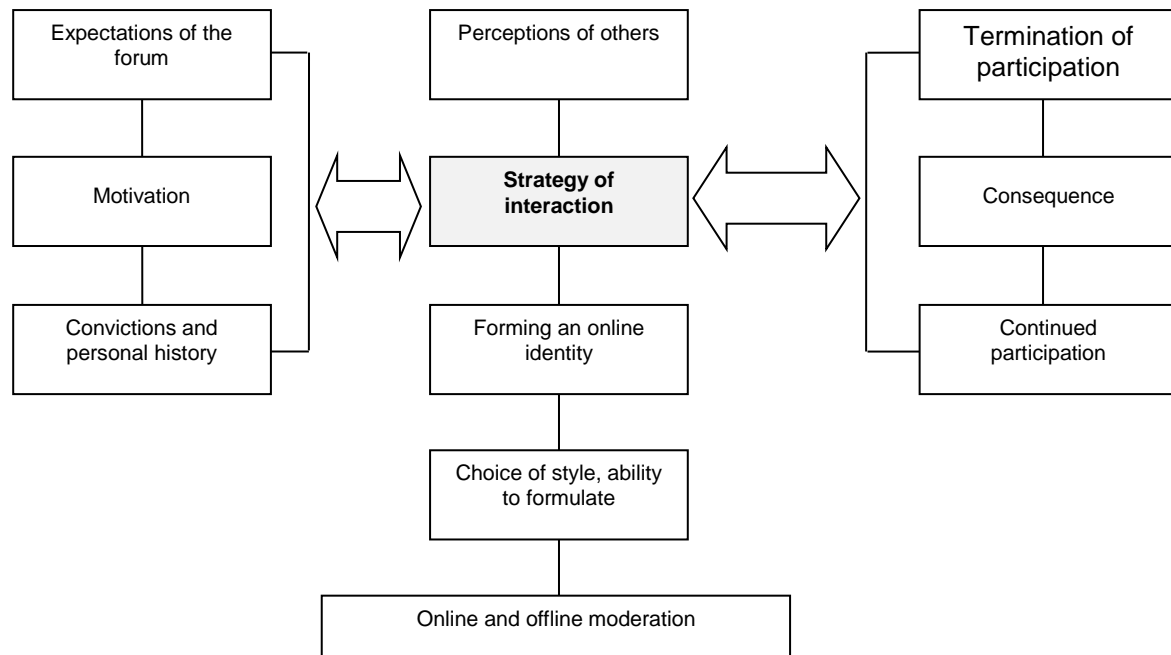
Figure 2. Adaptation of Figure 1.

Participants' titles in the paragraph headings serve as an indication of the identity they constructed for themselves in the forum.

Beth introduced and named the thread "Racism, the other side."

Beth: The fundamentalist.

> I am so tired of always hearing how racist is everything which has white in it (schools, universities, working places, civil service, army, and society). How many times is being boasted in the public domain with what Western civilization has achieved, about the innovation, scientific discoveries and progress? No, everything Western is bad, only exploits and is racist. I am tired of living apologetically because I am white and my ancestors arrived here 300 years ago and brought civilization. As I have said before, it is time that everyone asks themselves what racism really is. To accept backwardness, low standards and the accusation that everything white is bad and everything black is justified and good just because the majority of the community accepts it, is unacceptable to me and I will expose it and fight it even if I am accused of racism. (Beth, online forum posting)

John: The challenger.

Strategy of interaction: choice of style → online moderation

John adopted a strong confrontational and declarative style in his forum participation, which mirrored the strategy of using oppositional language (you–us, white–black) of Beth. It also mirrored the same strong form of criticism:

> With your bitter racist remarks and quasi academic references, Beth, you are opening a can of worms about your and other white colleagues' similar ideas about us, your black colleagues. Your research and convictions do now prove that black people are of a lower cognitive ability than white and Asian people. Your stream of logic (very dubious I have to add) lead me to the conclusion that black colleagues therefore 1. have to be very thankful that we are tolerated on your white, Western piece of pride of a university, 2. are not of the same intellectual ability as white and Asian colleagues 3. must not complain about the racism and other unwanted spin-offs of the western framework of thinking. (John, online forum posting)

The criticism of Beth's "stream of logic" conformed to the forum's context of high internal criticism and the imposition of its own norms, something which Stephen introduced in the thread in response to Beth's post (see below *Stephen: The "lone Englishman"* to compare). A certain standard was expected from academic participants, which in Stephen's mind, Beth failed to meet. As Stephen preferred argumentation, he especially expected his opponents to conform to his style of participation, and those who supported his line of argument, such as John, also conformed to the same form of criticism he practised.

Strategy of interaction: online identity → perceptions of others → termination of participation

In the interview, John highlighted his political identity as black and defined the dominant culture of the campus as politically white. John seemed honest in the identity he created in the forum. He viewed himself as someone who problematized life and raised issues. He also appreciated strong reactions to his views instead of polite silence, which he attributed to members of the dominant culture on the campus:

> John: I just went in with who I am, and I think the impression which people could now get of the identity which they could contribute to me might be one of an angry person who do not understand the whole context of the place, and not the traditions and culture and not the necessary respect for what is going on here, as a troublemaker, I think that identity could have been formed in the minds of some.

> Researcher: And would you be able to live with that?

> John: No, I am not a troublemaker, I do not see myself like that, I see myself as someone who goes about with life in a critical way, and who troubles things which people find too comfortable, because real life is not such a untroubling, deadening existence.

John equated the white culture to hegemony and his white colleagues, in this sense, to representatives of the hegemony he wished to oppose. When his white colleagues did not meet his expectations by supporting his views on hegemony on the forum, John risked having a negative identity—that of troublemaker—attributed to him.

The analysis of the quotation which follows offered a glimpse of the interrelatedness of the categories as shown in Figures 1 and 2. John's offline identity corresponded with his online identity: he perceived himself as a black man in confrontation online and offline with the hegemonic character of the university. He experienced himself as excluded in two ways: by way of his race and by way of his opposition to hegemonic practices on and off the forum. He opposed these practices alone and ran the risk of being identified as a troublemaker, creating conflict on

the forum. He opposed hegemonic practices without the supportive participation of his white colleagues on the forum. His expectation of his colleagues' offline behaviour was therefore not met and he consequently ended his participation:

> John: Mmm, before I stopped participating, I started chatting with white colleagues of mine, I regard myself as politically black [pause] uhm, you know we are all fucked up by apartheid, in colour and in terms of where we went to school, were born, to use those type of things as point of reference when we look at the world, and I saw that my colleagues, who share verbally with me the stuff that I am writing, but they do not participate themselves [pause] and I told them, how will I, who carries the mark of an outsider, although I am an insider here by virtue of my employment here, how will I as outsider ever touch people in their deepest being with the stuff I am writing, because I can be brassed off as a bitter, young black little man [pause] not part of the dominating Afrikaans culture, culture is a dirty word, let's say hegemony [pause] so I started writing less, because I saw that personally the hegemony, which they say they do not support, the oppressive and exclusionary types of practices and declarations, that they do not write, and well, let me stop writing, let the Afrikaners [white descendants of mainly Dutch and other European settlers] fight among themselves [pause] and the lone Englishman, Stephen, let him, he has time to write, I did anyway not have that much time to write.

The hesitancy of John's colleagues to support him could be ascribed to the style of interaction he employed in his online participation. He also did not seem to be critical of the style he chose. In this way, he subconsciously demotivated and excluded possible responses.

Motivation → strategy of interaction

This category groups the data that related to John's convictions, which informed his participation in and expectations of the potential of the forum, for example as a rectifier of wrongs or as a mouthpiece for social justice. John described his grounding in and experience of social justice and his sensitivity to political oppression as his motivation for protesting instances of the condoning and practice of hegemony on and off the forum:

> John: What incited me specifically, was when I saw some people, who write on the [forum] in a way which is not respectful to others who are not of the same religious background, of their educational level, of their social stature, mmmm, yes things like that incited me and, as I came from a strict [pause] not totally strict, good grounding in social justice, and worked and lived before I came here, could not remain quiet, it was like a red rag in front of a bull.

It is a logical deduction that John's history of participation and his personal convictions led to the choice of a declarative strategy. The "red rag in front of a bull" aptly described his choice of interaction with Beth, whom he addressed in the thread.

Susan: The sharer.

Motivation → choice of style → consequence

Susan's style was cautious and corresponded to her motive for participation: she wanted to share an experience to test whether her view of an incident, which could be interpreted either as racist or rude, was acceptable. Her motivation for this specific interaction was to have clarity about her experience of the incident:

Researcher: Your motive was, you just wanted to throw your story in the pool?

Susan: Throw it in the pool and see what people say, do they experience it too? I wanted an answer, I wanted to see if there are other people who have the same experience and if they [pause] uhm, would have reacted the same as I did, and if they would have seen it differently, and what would have been their reaction, was my reaction normal or not?

Susan attributed a therapeutic role to the forum, as the reaction to her telling of the incident also supported her interpretation. She absolutely resisted expressing judgments about racism on the forum because she experienced the topic as sensitive. This style of interaction was much more *inclusive* because the responses Susan received were less declarative and more mitigating.

Expectations of the forum.

As her demeanour was marked by cautiousness, Susan did not expect much of the forum other than representing an outlet for daily frustrations. In her opinion, great expectations of influence on a management level would undermine the success of the forum:

Susan: There are certain things [on the forum] which should be taken seriously [by management], but does top management of the university really have time to look around on the [forum]? No, they don't. That is why there are other forums for people to [pause] have their say, to raise serious issues and to say, this is what bothers me, this is what I want you to pay attention to, there are other ways to make people aware of things which [pause] uh, upset you, make you miserable, and then you can get constructive feedback from management.

From her status as administrative staff, she acknowledged the perception of limited power of people in her position to alert management to issues of importance on the forum:

Susan: My opinion is, is that, when there is something really important which becomes serious, which one say, almost becomes scary, then it is the administrative staff which brings those things under the attention of managers [pause] top management does not have the time to read [the forum], but I think administrative staff tell them, go and have a look, go and read quickly … but it is not the forum's place to force decisions, yes, it is not the forum to cause decisions to be made, it will never be a success if that is what people expect [of the forum].

From her assigning a therapeutic role to the forum, one could intuit Susan's frustration with the insufficient influence the forum had on management, which casts light on her sense of the exclusive character of management:

> Susan: It is literally so, stand in a soundproof room and shout.
>
> Researcher: Do you see the forum like that, as a soundproof room?
>
> Susan: Yes.
>
> Researcher: Where you can only shout?
>
> Susan: Yes, a stuffed pillow and hit it, have a pillow fight, get rid of that which [pause] how shall I say, make you angry in a sense, make you bitter later on, things which you cannot. Get it out, get it over with.

In spite of her disappointment with management's exclusive overlooking of issues presented on the forum, Susan did not terminate her participation.

Stephen: The "lone Englishman."

Motivation → strategy of interaction → consequence

Stephen viewed the forum as a space where arguments could be practised and tested. His style was generally informative and impersonal, except in his confrontational interaction with Beth in which he *alienated* her by employing a declarative style and used rationalistic devices to minimize her arguments. In his reaction to her comments on the thread, he set the stage by criticizing the quality of her arguments and evidence. Later in the discussion, Stephen stated his opposing normative position to Beth by stereotyping her. Stephen portrayed a definite distance between his life view, and consequent way of acting, and Beth's. He assigned emotional attitudes to her, describing her, in contrast to himself, as dictatorial, ungrateful, and uncaring. Beth became synonymous with that which everyone in the discussion opposed strongly as immoral, and he accused her of racism:

> And people like you, that have been ungrateful and uncaring about who has been paying the price for you are understandably unhappy that it is now being paid on your doorstep so that you can no longer avoid seeing it. (Stephen, online forum posting)
>
> Unlike you, I do not propose to dictate what the solution to the approach to the necessary transformation of higher education in a post-colonial world should be, or rather how it should be done. (Stephen, online forum posting)

Every discussant who took sides against Beth consequently assumed an exclusive higher morality. Any opposition to the norm or shared morality was regarded as weak with insufficient evidence and reflected on a participant's dubious and racist character. Stephen focused on her being insufficiently informed, with doubtful sources of information and deficient argumentation. The larger part of his participation is marked by the presentation of information that illuminated certain aspects of Beth's inadequate knowledge, thereby educating her and the readers. His language bore evidence of an emotional attitude defined by the security and authority afforded by his informative style. This also made clear his bias. He described her as under-informed, minimized her evidence, and judged her as incapable and not positioned to make authoritative statements:

> And of course, as usual, you are perpetrating the fiction of the "west" achieving its ascendancy in isolation and creating the impression that while the "west" rocketed

through enlightenment and industrialization the rest of the world was unable to follow as a result of some species of inherent backwardness (this is a clear implication of your trotting out the wonders of western achievement) ... It is clear that you are informed in your estimation by little to nothing more than your "Hoerskool" [High School] history lessons ... You should not make such apparently authoritative statements from such a woefully under-informed position. (Stephen, online forum posting)

His informative sociological insights were appreciated and praised by male participants (such as John and Francois). There were, however, instances where his style was exclusive. Susan did not have the same appreciation and referred to Stephen's participation as difficult to grasp: "I do not always understand what Stephen says." One could conclude that the community was created for the informed (like Stephen). Those who did not follow his arguments (like Susan) or did not construct arguments in the way he condoned and preferred (like Beth) were therefore excluded. In hindsight, Stephen viewed his participation as dissenting and described it in the initial stage of his interaction on the forum as *trolling*, in which he identified certain aspects of the university's culture that he found unacceptable and strange. In retrospect, his opinion was that the motive for using this technique was to raise participants' consciousness and lead people to question the status quo. He viewed his trolling in the forum as counterproductive, leading to the intolerance of readers. He concluded that his trolling stereotyped his online identity as disruptive and dissenting, making him unpopular, something which he should avoid:

> Stephen: I think in some ways it was sort of slightly more a sophisticated form of trolling, really, it was at first then I pop up and say this prayer stuff is terrible, all this religion is crap, we should get rid of it and people immediately I think see that as an extremist position and you know, that coloured the rest of my commentary, and if I can do things over again, I possibly wouldn't be as hard about, hard core about as when I started.

Online identity → perceptions of others

Contributing to the negative and exclusive effect of his trolling, Stephen felt that other participants viewed him as unmoving, someone who did not engage with issues and who did not have room for opinions different from his own. In contrast, he saw himself as reasonable and willing to listen to others.

Stephen saw his main opponent, Beth, as someone who did not engage with opposing arguments because she did not interact, learn, or change her attitude. He interpreted the conciliatory tone she employed as lip service, because she did not gain insight or undergo fundamental change. He viewed her postings as the voice of a populist without original thought of her own. This was useful for conducting a debate, but it also demonstrated her courage and in a way her naivety. She presented old evolutionary ideas in her explanation of the development of races and he viewed her contributions as academically naïve. He criticized her presenting of cases that he interpreted as racist and unconvincing owing to the insufficient information she offered.

Stephen criticized another female participant as she, like Beth, unconsciously accepted a grand racist narrative. Stephen regarded race as an easy explanation for her feeling of victimization because he believed that her encounters with black people and the ensuing feelings of victimization were informed by racial stereotyping. Stephen realized that his attitude towards Beth was patronizing, and he guiltily referred to his treatment of her as "hermeneutic bullying." He was aware of the power play between John, Beth, and him. He acknowledged that normative positions on human rights and academic discourse allowed power to participants like him.

Stephen, however, did not care that Beth was insulted in various ways because of their moralistic positions. During the interview, he acknowledged defensively and a bit vaguely that he had attempted to interact with Beth in a positive way.

Expectations of the forum.

Stephen strove to move the consciousness of forum participants to the Left. This aspiration concurred with his initial idealism that an online forum should bring about change. His opinion was that serious discussions on the forum drew management's attention and, consequently, resulted in structural changes. He posited that management did not take seriously popular discussions where everyone could contribute, and that it seemed that the influence of serious discussions on a structural level was undermined by the "democratic" characteristics of the forum. Stephen believed that any discussion therefore, however serious, rendered the forum itself powerless.

Stephen received support via email for his views, while his colleagues, although they initially disagreed with him, praised his courage and convictions. The rector of the HEI also regularly encouraged his participation—a gesture that he appreciated. Although the overt reaction to his positions was positive, Stephen perceived his support as minuscule.

Online and offline moderation.

Stephen felt that management's censorship of forum contributions weakened and eventually excluded the notion of free speech. The intervention of the institution shut down conversations on emotionally uncomfortable issues and narrowed the topics discussed on the forum. He also maintained that other discussions on the forum (such as religion and hostel culture) had racial undertones. He thought discussions on these topics could be under threat and participants in the threads could be prosecuted institutionally. He, therefore, preferred discussions not to be censored, especially those relating to uncomfortable issues. He was, however, neither conscious of the negative effect of his online arguments nor of his prescriptiveness.

Findings

The Significance of the Interrelationships Between Conditions

The interrelationships between the conditions demonstrate the intricate cause and effect in the interplay of the different stages of participation, such as motivation, interaction, and consequence. Although these conditions were broadly the same across the different paradigms of participants, each condition was differently articulated within each specific participant's paradigm. The causal conditions of a participant's paradigm included a participant's motivation to take part in the forum, which again was based on the specific convictions and ideology the participant holds. Although participants held different convictions and their personal histories are diverse, their choice of participatory strategy was generally similar. The stronger their sense of exclusion concerning institutional practices and dominant discussions, the more their participations were characterised by declarations and strong wording in their opposition of participants. It was therefore not strange that the emotional nuances of their participations were the same, such as in the case of Beth and John. While addressing each other in a similar way, the motives for their strategic interactions were quite diverse. It is interesting to note that the feelings Beth and John experienced became internalised in their strategies of interaction. If John, for example, felt belittled and stereotyped, that was exactly the action he employed in the way he addressed Beth.

Table 1

Diverse Motivations and Similar Exclusive Strategies of Interaction

Participant	Motivation and ideology	Exclusive and shared stances, emotions, and strategies
Beth	A religious fundamentalist, conservative perspective, experience disrespect from liberals to own value system	Stances: declarative, confronting, condescending Emotions: threatened, indignant, angry Strategy: stereotype, belittle
John	A human rights perspective, experience disrespect towards non-dominant cultures	Stances: declarative, confronting, condescending Emotions: threatened, indignant, angry Strategy: stereotype, belittle

Like John and Beth, none of the opposing participants reached any understanding. The cyclic process of exclusion showed that interaction only served to estrange participants. Motivations and objectives became stronger and resulted in participants denouncing each other. The termination of participation as a consequence was defined by the fact that no understanding, and eventually no mutual respect, was reached. The opposite was also true: those who felt excluded and started interacting because of this feeling of exclusion ultimately used the forum in such a way that they became excluded from the forum itself and felt even more excluded in their interaction with the non-virtual environment. Beth, who wanted to oppose dominant voices, excluded herself and became a marginalised voice. The objective of participation eventually undermined the outcome of participation. Exclusion as motive became exclusion as consequence and the effort to oppose dominant voices resulted in becoming a more marginalised voice.

The analysis of the interrelationships and interdependencies between conditions in the participants' paradigms contributed to a deep understanding of the dynamics in elements leading to, interacting with, and effecting of the cyclic process of the exclusion of participants.

Inclusive and exclusive causal and intervening conditions.

The motivation of participants was morally inspired and the forum was generally idealised as a rectifier of wrongs. Participants would use the forum to

- indicate institutional hegemonic practices;
- influence the sentiments to the Left;
- oppose and indicate the intolerance of the liberals;
- mediate opposing parties; and
- share their own experiences with other participants.

These objectives were informed by ideologies or theoretical paradigms participants adhered to, which were the principles associated with social justice, human rights, and liberalism versus conservative-fundamentalist thought. The specific ideology and cultural and socio-political history of a participant related to the causal and intervening conditions of the paradigm of participation. John was motivated by his grounding in social justice and categorised himself as politically black; Beth regarded herself as a fundamentalist and she cherished the perceived positive values which characterised the institution; Stephen was motivated as a liberal to indicate oppressive traditions and customs within the institution which were a remnant of the older political regime; and Francois was used to a culture where people were not inhibited to speak their minds freely.

John and Stephen, and their opponent Beth, reacted strongly to the status quo of the university as they experienced themselves as alien to the campus culture. Apart from feeling excluded from the dominant culture, they also found it incongruent to their moral convictions. Their feelings of exclusion were, ironically, based on opposing ideologies.

The motivation of participants directed the strategy of interaction they chose. Their degree of idealisation of the forum also had a direct effect on the consequence of their online interactions. Susan's motivation to participate in the forum was more inclusive and her contributions developed some ideas alternative to those of the other participants. Susan wanted to submit her story to the forum and ask others to judge it; she refrained from venturing into the declarative strategy of judging her own experience while pointing out racist attitudes of others. Her motive concurred with the fact that she regarded the forum as the rectifier of wrongs.

Exclusive strategic conditions.

As the main participants (Beth, Stephen, and John) either felt excluded from the institutional culture or insulted by the dominant voices of the forum, they resorted to a declarative strategy of interaction to phenomena or people they opposed. The strategies they employed are described by the verbs in Table 2, columns 1 and 2.

Table 2

Exclusive and Inclusive Strategies of Interaction

Exclusive strategy	Exclusive or inclusive strategy	Inclusive strategy
Patronise	Troll	Sympathise
Declare	Joke	Share
Criticise	Flame	Tell
Dismiss	Provoke	Advise
Minimalise		Question
Stereotype		Compliment
		Trust

The positions of trolling, joking, and flaming (see column 2) indicate that there was conflict in judging these strategies to be either exclusive or inclusive. The "trolling" that Stephen referred to

in an interview emerged in an indirect way—he did not address someone specifically, but "trolled" aspects of the institutional culture that he considered absurd and irrelevant. He referred to his trolling in the interview by remembering that he had said: "this religion is all crap." He reverted to joking about the religious convictions held by theologians. Joking also served as a form of narrative and did not fall under the argument-evidence form of "ideal speech." Although Herring, Job-Sluder, Schenckler, & Barab (2002) perceived flaming and trolling negatively, the effect of these actions in the forum was either exclusive or inclusive. In this respect, a reappraisal of flaming is necessary (Turnage, 2007). The question is whether flaming and trolling contributed to moral discourse. One has to question whether a strategy is inclusive if it is efficient, for example if it invites more participation. A declarative strategy, such as the one used by Beth, invited more declarative strategies. In this respect, the strategy could be judged as efficient because it promotes discourse. The problem with the strategy was that it did not promote understanding, and therefore it could be regarded as exclusive. It also seemed likely that a declarative strategy, when combined with a distant, non-interactive, informative, and rational style, would smother discourse.

The mediating participations were not declarative and brought a different nuance to the thread. The motive of these participants (Peter and Susan) was not to oppose other participants, but rather they brought a narrative or a story to the discussion and addressed one of the non-mediating participants (Beth) in a friendlier way. The mediator (Peter) complimented Beth by ensuring her of his trust in her well-meaning intentions, and he questioned the negative consensus the other participants held. Column 3 lists the inclusive strategies the mediators employed.

The declarative strategy enforced the insistence on point of view, bringing polarisation, disrespect, and hostility to the discourse, while the mediating strategy led to self-reflection but did not ease the prevailing hostility. It is clear that more insistent mediating strategies would bring mutual respect and understanding to the discussion—as the aim of democratic discourse (Young, 1996).

Exclusive consequential conditions.

The exclusion participants experienced related to their respective motivations and interactive styles. Participants acting from an ideological stance were inclined to assign idealistic roles to the forum, and they acted opportunistically. Their declarative participations served as a strong testimony to their convictions. The consequences of their interactions on the forum related to

- fear, mistrust, hostility, and indignation;
- disappointment and frustration; and
- saturation and termination of participation.

John and Stephen feared the attribution of negative characteristics, such as being troublemakers and uncompromising. Because Stephen assigned an idealistic role to the forum, to influence the sentiments of participants to the Left, feelings of disillusion and disappointment followed. Beth felt that she stated her convictions and that her participation became saturated. She also felt indignant that the morality she exercised was not appreciated and that she was perceived as immoral. In both the cases of Stephen and Beth, the power they tried to exert over each other eventually became feeble and ineffective. Stephen reflected that he would have taken another approach and he would not have been as "hard core as when [he] started." Beth was not ready to revisit her strategy or opinions: "I had my say, I said it clearly, for those who listened, they did hear, for those who did not listen, they did not hear."

Exclusive contextual conditions.

The contextual conditions of the axial paradigm were characterised by different dimensions. Inclusion and exclusion could intensively be exercised and experienced in the support or opposing of ideas, the acknowledgement or dismissal of participants, and the understanding or intolerance of participants.

These forms of inclusion and exclusion were practised from within and from outside the forum through internal as well as external moderation. Although internal moderation facilitated a power play between participants, external moderation created a moral incongruence and overrode any expectations concerning participants' potential influence and their ideals of free speech. Not only did the external moderation terminate the building of moral discourse, but it also seized or disembodied (Van Doorn, 2011) the online life of participants. The opportunity to criticise elements outside the domain of the forum text, those spheres in which the forum text was embedded such as the institutional sphere and its location within a larger socio-cultural context, was therefore limited. The only realm of criticism, however limiting, was within the forum.

The possibility of conducting offline moral discourse with managerial participants was stifled through censoring of management. The absence of management's participation in the forum created a playfield for "the people" with no real effect on matters which concerned them. Even if the discourse could foster morality and the moral development of its participants, this was far removed from achieving structural changes and the required accountability from actors in the larger spheres that the forum touched.

Cathy (the unofficial moderator and member of management), who played the part of moderator when she described it as a "therapeutic space," indicated the limited influence of the forum. She valued the forum in its opportunity for management to observe how staff members felt, what the vox populi was. Unfortunately, this potential of the forum caused it to become a Foucaultian panopticon (Rouse, 2003)—a way to observe, identify, and control dissidence.

The only option of authored participation was therefore the first hindering element in facilitating the equalizing potential of the online space. Anonymity and the use of pseudonyms could facilitate equality of the forum, an option excluded by its technical design.

Inclusion and exclusion in all the conditions of participation.

Participants could exercise exclusion and also be subjected to it (see Table 2). John, Stephen, and Beth experienced exclusion either in the forum or in the institution. They assumed a strategy that either included (Susan ↔ Beth) or excluded (John ↔ Beth, Stephen ↔ Beth) one another. Cathy regarded the forum as an inclusive, therapeutic space, but she excluded voices which she placed outside her frame of expectation, like those that criticised management. She proposed decorum as the criterion for interaction and expected staff members (like Beth) to be informed. In doing so, she created an inequality in theory. Cathy's censoring interventions resulted in exclusionary practices.

The perceptions that Beth, Stephen, and John had of one another led to their mutual intolerance and excluding interaction strategies, while Susan did not oppose her support to these participants overtly and acted in an accepting way. Because Beth, Stephen, and John did not idealise the role of the forum as a rectifier of wrongs, they were not disappointed and did not feel excluded and continued with their participation after the others had terminated theirs. However, this did not mean that they were not aware of the limitations the forum had on structural change.

Stephen and John anticipated that the perceptions of their identities by other participants could be negative, by viewing them as conceited troublemakers. They feared that these negative attributions could inhibit their positive influence. Beth stated that she was not deterred by managerial interventions against her; it made her more resolute and her declarative style and aggression intensified, which caused other participants to observe her identity as more intensely negative.

Challenges and Benefits of Using Grounded Theory

The question that guided this article was whether the use of grounded theory supported the researcher in achieving the research aim, namely to discover the patterns of inclusion and exclusion in the forum. The initial stages of analysis, specifically the open coding that consisted of assigning a descriptive code to small semantic units of text, allowed the researchers to be objective in allowing data to speak for themselves and in not inferring any judgement in the analysis thereof. The paradigm offered by grounded theory forced, and also enabled, the researchers to attach abstract labels to the data categories. The categories could then be sorted under causal, strategic, and consequential conditions, which reflected the logical process of a participant's history and strategy of using the opportunities offered in the forum. In a way, these three conditions reflected a narrative of participation: (a) the motivation for participation, which is reflected in convictions and perceptions; (b) the strategy of participation, which describes a participant's style of interaction with others or the presentation of his or her own ideas; and (c) the consequence of participation, which can gradually be a less or more involved and emotional participation or termination of involvement in the forum. These three conditions (causal, strategic, and consequential) were easily located, but locating the intervening and contextual conditions were more difficult because they were not straightforward. The researchers resolved the dimensional character of the contextual conditions qualified by grade or intensity. These conditions manifested in the stances and emotions of participants, which informed their excluding strategies of interaction. These were described as the degree of tolerance → intolerance; stereotyping → accepting; acknowledgement → dismissal; and respect → disrespect evident in the participations on the forum.

The participants amongst themselves exercised varying degrees of stances. This became evident in the larger context in which the forum operated, namely the managerial context. Although the managerial influence could be sorted under intervening conditions, it also informed the participants' contexts, as well as the context in which the forum operated. Management was therefore both an intervening and contextual condition of the paradigm, and the habitation of management in two main conditions of the paradigm illustrated the pervasive force it had on the potential of the forum as democratizing agent. Their control through the technical design of the forum made anonymous or pseudonym participation impossible—which could have been instrumental in the exercising and promoting of free speech. The design of the forum therefore ensured a high level of managerial control of the forum.

The paradigm of grounded theory allowed the researchers to clearly observe the interactive and cyclic effect of different conditions. It provided insight into the effect of hegemony in all the conditions of the paradigm. Motivation could be based on feelings of exclusion and could eventually lead to exclusive interactions and self-exclusion. These were based on a personal history of experiences of racial exclusion and led to racial confrontation in the online environment. The opportunistic use of the forum served as the motivational force to address injustices and eventually led to the stereotyping and disrespect of others.

The conditions relating to the grounded theory paradigm allowed the researchers to build theory and utilise the benefit of the labelling structure of data as part of a cohesive and interactional model. One has to be aware, however, that certain phenomena, such as managerial influence, are not restricted to one condition alone, and this restriction could also lead to restricted building of theory.

The ultimate value of the grounded theory model for the researchers was to find restrictive factors in building a democratic space and to overcome these. The disrespect and intolerance the participants demonstrated was counterproductive and did not lead to understanding—the tenet of Young's (1996, 2000) model of communicative democracy. Furthermore, by allowing all styles and exercising respect for other forms of participation, a respect for diversity in style and world view could have liberated the forum.

Two sets of conditions influenced the analysis: the intervening and contextual conditions of the participants and of the researchers. These conditions related to the specific context, cultural and personal experiences and assumptions about the participants that influenced the research process. The researchers' experience of participants on the forum and the opinions formed during the interviews also served as contextual conditions. The high emotional impact of the forum context made it difficult for the researchers to make sense of the data and not be swept away by the strong views of the participants. Theory, with the central tenet of understanding and respecting (Young, 2000), was the ultimate guiding force in viewing the findings in perspective. Theory was also utilized to view strategies of interaction as either counterproductive or productive towards the achievement of communicative democracy.

Contribution of the Study

The adherence to the paradigm of Strauss and Corbin (2008) enabled the study to demonstrate the interrelationships between conditions but also enabled the researchers to find a cyclic element of exclusion and alienation among participants. The most important contribution of the study lies in the discovery that a reaction against hegemony, which serves as the motive (causal condition) of participants, leads to hegemonic strategic styles that prove to exclude and alienate potential participation. To address the research question—why and how participants exclude one another is to be found in the conditions of their paradigms. Causal conditions of exclusion became exclusive strategic interactions and exclusive consequential conditions.

A synergy is also established between the central tenet of Young's (1996, 2000) theory of communicative democracy and the theory which is built through the exploration of different conditions within the axial coding paradigm (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Consequences of the interaction on the forum are alienation, disrespect, and distrust, because most participants' motives and strategies are not directed towards understanding and respect, but can rather be described as egotistical and self-serving.

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