Unearthing grounded normative theory: practices and commitments of empirical research in political theory

Unearthing Grounded Normative Theory: Practices and Commitments of Empirical Research in Political Theory

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ABSTRACT

Many normative political theorists have engaged in the systematic collection and/or analysis of empirical data to inform the development of their arguments over the past several decades. Yet, the approach they employ has typically not been treated as a distinctive mode of theorizing. It has been mostly overlooked in surveys of normative political theory methods and methodologies, as well as by those critics who assert that political theory is too abstracted from actual political contestation. Our aim is to unearth this *grounded normative theory* (GNT) approach -- to identify its definitive practices and highlight its potential significance. We detail four overlapping commitments characteristic of GNT. These include commitments to expanding the *comprehensiveness* of input for normative arguments through original empirical research and/or analysis, *recursivity* in the development of normative claims, *attentiveness* to the systematic inclusion of a range of voices and ways of knowing, and *accountability* to those engaged by the theorist in empirical contexts. We discuss methodological distinctions within GNT, including between more- and less-solidaristic approaches. We discuss how GNT answers calls for theorists to engage more closely with empirical political dynamics and we consider responses to possible critiques.

KEY WORDS grounded normative theory, democratic theory, critical theory, indigenous theory, methodology, ethnography, non-ideal theory, public philosophy; practice, solidarity; inductive, deductive, analytic

[Many of] the men and women I interviewed here … made heroic efforts to live up to their ideals, reformulating them as they discovered their limitations through painful experience. . . . In the case of political equality, for example, the ideal turns out to be both subtler and somewhat more practical than theorists have traditionally assumed. This experience convinced me that field studies of what happens to various ideals when people try to live by them could prove useful in clarifying a wide range of normative questions (Mansbridge [1980]1983, p. xiii).

My approach begins with listening carefully to those suffering the lived experience of injustices in their own ways of knowing and articulating them. This application of the norm of always listening to the other side helps to free us from our own sedimented descriptions of the real and disclose new possibilities (Tully 2014, p. 282).

Grounded normativity teaches us how to live our lives in relation to other people and nonhuman life forms in a profoundly nonauthoritarian, nondominating, nonexploitive manner. Grounded normativity teaches us how to be in respectful diplomatic relationships with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous nations with whom we might share territorial responsibilities or common political or economic interests. Our relationship to the land itself generates the processes, practices, and knowledges that inform our political systems, and through which we practice solidarity (Coulthard & Simpson, 2016, p. 255).

Introduction

Commentators have often criticized contemporary normative political theory as too asbtract or inattentive to actual political dynamics. For example, advocates of political realism in normative theory have argued that most theorists have paid too little attention to the fractious nature of actual politics, in favor of a focus on identifying abstract normative principles intended to guide and constrain political practices (B. Williams, 2005; Geuss, 2008; Galston, 2010; see also Miller, 2013, 2016; for discussion see Waldron 2016; Finlayson, 2017; Erman & Möller, 2018).[1] Other political theorists have advocated a non-ideal approach, which begins with presumptions of partial compliance with normative principles, and similarly criticize an abstraction from empirical politics of much contemporary theory and thus its limited relevance for actual political problems (Anderson, 2010; see Fung, 2007; see also Sen, 2009, pp.10-18, 96-113; Goodhart, 2018, Ch.1). Others have proposed broader frameworks to orient and justify greater empirical engagement by theorists. These include 'political' political theory, focused on ways that choices about political principles are influenced by the study of political institutional practices (Waldron 2016); normative behaviorism, focused on developing normative political principles from observable facts about political systems (Floyd, 2020; see also Floyd, 2017); or general calls for attention to existing empirical research in normative theory development (Bauböck, 2008).

Others have questioned whether normative political theory should be located within political science, citing a mismatch with empirical researchers (for discussion see Kaufman-Osborn, 2010; Alexander, 2018; see also Barry, 2002; Grant, 2002). Such accounts also reflect

longer-standing concerns about distinctions between normative theorizing and falsifiable empirical research (see especially Wolin, 1969; Rehfeld, 2010; *pace* Dienstag, 2016). Taking a different tack, feminist, critical, and decolonial scholars have argued that normative political theorizing reifies the perspectives of socially dominant groups, and is insufficiently attentive to the actual insights, experiences and interests of groups facing oppression, including violence, colonialism, cultural imperialism, forced migration, and epistemic power (see Spivak, 1988; Young, 2001; Enloe, 2004; Medina, 2013; Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2014). These and other criticisms have questioned whether normative political theory is sufficiently relevant to actual political problems and struggles against oppression.

Yet, such critique has given little attention to ways that many normative political theorists have been conducting empirical research to enrich their claims over the past several decades. They have undertaken detailed empirical investigations in the contexts of migration and the movement of persons (Doty, 2006; Tonkiss, 2013; Forman, 2018; Stivens, 2018), democratic theory and deliberation (Mansbridge, 1983; Parkinson, 2006; Grönlund, Bächtiger & Setälä, 2014; Johnson, 2015; see also Koenig-Archibugi, 2017), human rights and responsibilities for injustice (Kurasawa, 2007; Ackerly, 2008, 2018; Cabrera, 2010, 2020), social disadvantage and inequality (Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007), and citizenship and belonging (Klosko, 2005; Schattle, 2008).

Likewise, accounts of methodologies for and in normative political theory have given relatively little attention to such empirically engaged normative accounts. For instance, two prominent volumes devoted to methodologies of political theory include chapters on realism within political theory and explore the relevance of empirical research to normative political theory (Leopold & Stears, Eds. 2008; Blau, Ed. 2017).[2] Neither collection, however, devotes

significant attention to work that involves the direct conduct of empirical research to inform its normative theorizing.[3] The same is true of political theory methods chapters appearing in leading field handbooks. For example, Simon Caney proposes several instructive theses on the relationship between empirical research and accounts of global justice, but he gives limited attention to relevant normative accounts drawing on original empirical research or analysis (2018). We highlight the importance of considering the range of empirically engaged political theory accounts in discussions about how normative theorists have, can, or should relate to empirical processes and data.

Specifically, we argue that, though the work comes from multiple theoretical traditions and focuses on many substantive topics, most empirically engaged political theory can be understood and assessed as 'grounded normative theory' (GNT). This approach is marked by shared commitments to incorporating original empirical data or analysis in a recursive process of theory development striving for accountability to persons in empirical contexts. We show how recognizing GNT as a distinctive and coherent methodology can enrich understandings of the full scope of the political theory methods and address many of the criticisms of the normative-theoretical enterprise raised by political realists and others. Greater attentiveness to the approach can also guide scholars in designing empirical research projects for normative inquiry, utilizing that research for normative theorizing, and assessing grounded work. We focus on ways that grounded normative theorists have sought to broaden and deepen the range of ideas, interests, and actors informing their theorizing. In short, we seek to 'unearth' and frame an approach that has been in practice for some time.

We begin by identifying four core overlapping commitments evident across GNT. We identify variations in methodological orientations that, while seemingly different due to

differences in theoretical roots and substantive research, manifest the central GNT commitments in their work. We consider possible objections and common challenges encountered in using the approach. Overall, with this 'unearthing' we show that GNT is a coherent approach making significant contributions, while also reinforcing the foundational relevance of normative theory to explanatory and interpretive empirical political science. Additionally, we argue that in its more methodologically solidaristic variants, GNT has particular relevance for those engaged in political contestation, and especially those in struggles against oppression.

I. Grounded Normative Theory: Methodological Commitments

Practitioners of GNT have worked on different normative questions, employed different empirical methods, and pursued different forms and degrees of engagement with actors engaged in political contestation or struggles against oppression. Despite these and other methodological variations, which we discuss below, the coherence of the approach lies in its set of central commitments to comprehensiveness, recursivity, epistemological inclusion and epistemic accountability. These central commitments complement each other and are mutually reinforcing. They also serve as criteria for assessment of individual grounded accounts. This is similar to the ways that other normative concepts like democracy are both descriptive and evaluative. While a democracy may be defined by criteria such as free and fair multi-party elections, broad suffrage, etc., the extent or quality of a democracy can also be assessed in part by how free and fair its elections are, which groups have suffrage, how restrictive or expansive voting rights are in practice, alongside overarching concerns with the promotion of individual freedom, political equality, influence over policy formation (see Diamond, 2016, Chs. 2-3)). GNT accounts may be assessed according to the extent of four shared commitments, including their efforts to expand

comprehensiveness and *recursivity*, *attentiveness* to the systematic epistemological inclusion of a range of voices and ways of knowing, and *accountability*. These overarching commitments stress intellectual humility, and strengthening the rigor, systematicity, and coherence of normative arguments. We offer capsule definitions of these four commitments here, followed by more detailed elaborations of each.

1) Comprehensiveness: grounded normative theorists use empirical methods to collect and/or analyze data to diversify, broaden, and deepen the range of insights, claims, interests, and actors considered in their development of normative arguments.

2) Recursivity: grounded normative theorists work to incorporate empirical data into normative theorizing in a recursive process, in which normative claims are developed and revised through ongoing and accountable engagement with empirical data, and with empirical contexts and actors in qualitative field work.

3) Attentiveness to Epistemological Inclusion: grounded normative theorists typically attend to the structural power of epistemology, including that some modes of generating knowledge obscure or silence some voices and exclude ways of knowing not prevalent in the main currents of normative political theory.

4) Epistemic Accountability: GNT, especially when involving qualitative field research, typically gives attention to potential power imbalances in the conduct of research itself, i.e., between those engaged in political contestation and those who research it. In more solidaristic approaches, theorists foreground epistemic

responsibility to ideas and persons disadvantaged in political struggles against exploitation, exclusion, oppression, and domination.

These commitments inform the questions posed in GNT, guide theorists' research design, and help provide bases for assessing GNT scholarship. Adherence to them enables grounded theorists to reach beyond the confines of their own considered judgments and extant literature to more directly engage with empirical contexts, including with the views and contextually specific knowledge of those engaged in political contestation. We find each present across GNT accounts, though how they are interpreted or actualized varies by account and methodological orientation, especially regarding the last two commitments. The remainder of this section offers further detail.

Comprehensiveness

Grounded normative theorists conduct original empirical research, and/or analyze empirical data, to strengthen the comprehensiveness of their theorizing: to diversify, broaden, and deepen the range of insights, claims, interests, and actors they bring to bear on arguments in GNT. The latter is broadly understood as concerned with the interpretation and evaluation of moral claims relevant to political contexts. The commitment to comprehensiveness – to the conduct of original empirical data generation or collection, and/or analysis – distinguishes GNT from forms of applied political theory (see Smits, 2016), where empirical prescriptions are offered from normative theories, but empirical research has not been conducted in developing the theory.

By contrast, the primary emphasis on normative claims distinguishes GNT from sociological grounded theory, which focuses on the inductive development of explanatory, descriptive, or interpretive empirical theories through qualitative research (see Charmaz, 2014;

Corbin & Strauss, 2014). To be clear, nothing here is intended to suggest that grounded sociological theory or other primarily empirically oriented research cannot also have normative relevance, or to reify a rigid normative/empirical divide or fact/value distinction (see Grant, 2002; Barry, 2002; Kaufman-Osborn, 2010; Williams, 2012; Alexander, 2018). Rather, grounded normative (political) theory is distinguished from sociological grounded theory by its primary emphasis on the development of normative arguments. GNT turns to empirical engagement first to expand the comprehensiveness of inputs to develop such arguments.

The commitment to comprehensiveness can be manifest in the use of a broad range of methods, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches. That breadth also serves to distinguish GNT from the sociological variant, as well as normative theorizing said to display a narrower 'ethnographic sensibility' (Herzog & Zacka, 2019; Longo & Zacka, 2019; see Zacka, 2017), on which more below. Specific methods adopted by grounded normative theorists have included quantitative surveys (Mansbridge [1980]1983; Forman, 2018); unstructured or semi-structured, open-ended interviews (Mansbridge 1983[1980]; Parkinson, 2006; Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007; Ackerly, 2008; Tonkiss 2013; Cabrera, 2010; 2020; Baines & Stewart, 2011; Baines, 2017); community workshops (Forman & Cruz, 2018); participant observation (Simplican, 2015; Tenove, 2015); sensitizing reading (cf. Blumer, 1954; Cornish & Gillespie, 2014; Wiener, 2018); life-writing, autobiography, art, and other self-expression of individuals (Stern, 2005; de Leon, 2020); reports or other forms of documentation from those engaged in contestation (Wiener, 2018); and ethnography (Mahmood, 2005; Wedeen, 2007; Schatz, 2013; Herzog & Zacka, 2017; Zacka, 2017). Focus groups, deliberative forums, and community workshops promoting interaction and dialogue among research participants have also been used

by theorists as tools for constructing data salient to the normative arguments they develop (Mansbridge, 1973; Klosko, 2005, pp. 190-222; Tenove, 2020).

Others have focused on analyzing existing data or textual resources for the development of normative claims. These have included quantitative data sets on state religious regulation (Perez and Fox, 2018); historical records of constitutional deliberations in India (Keating, 2011), court transcripts (Leeb, 2018), records of diplomatic negotiations (Deitelhoff, 2009), and ethnographic narratives (Van Den Anker, 2008; Lu 2017). Such use of existing sources can facilitate engagement with insights and practices otherwise inaccessible and may lower the cost and time commitment of grounded normative work.

Distinctions between such works and some accounts in normative political theory, which consider empirical factors but fall short of comprehensiveness , can be highlighted through a comparison of two theorists' work. In the first, Antje Wiener (2018) aims to broaden the common understanding of whose practices count, and whose practices ought to count, in the articulation and use of norms in international relations. Focusing on the *quod omnes tangit* principle (what touches all must be approved by all), she studies contestations of norm violations with regard to fundamental rights, prohibitions of torture and sexual violence during wartime by seeking out primary and secondary sources, including quotes from activists recorded in official documents of international institutions and newspaper articles, social media, and event reports. While official sources serve to frame the local normative conditions under which those in struggle engage (e.g. in contestation, protest, and resistance), non-official sources constitute the discursive repertoire to normatively evaluate access to contestation and identify emerging issues and tensions in global society (Wiener, 2018, p. 217). This breadth diversifies, broadens, and

deepens the range of actors whose arguments about these contested norms she brings to bear in the adjudication of their contested meanings.

This approach stands in contrast to the 'contextualist' methodological approach elaborated by David Miller. Its rationale is aligned with normative political realism's call for theorists to give more attention to real-world political dynamics. In it, theorists are to eschew invariant universal principles of distributive justice, etc., in favor of ones that are applicable within specific contexts (Miller, 2013, pp. 46-52). Miller holds that normative theorists should develop their claims in a way "that is sensitive not only to general facts about the human condition but also to facts of a more specific kind, facts about particular societies, or types of societies" (2013, p. 18). He has employed such a contextualist approach in arguments working to justify, for example, relatively stringent limits on immigration (2016). Yet, Miller's own contextualism offers broad suppositions about specific national/political contexts and their applicable principles, rather than direct and systematic empirical data collection or generation, and/or analysis in those contexts (Bosniak, 2017; also Go, 2020).[4]

Rationales for more direct and systematic empirical engagement indicated by our commitment to comprehensiveness are outlined in each of the three article epigraphs above. Mansbridge, for example, in *Beyond Adversary Democracy,* notes that her extensive empirical investigations of democratic decision practices at a New England town meeting and crisis help-line organization proved vital for "clarifying a wide range of normative questions" (1983[1980], p. xiii;). James Tully similarly offers a rationale focused in part on expanding inputs, on ways in which "listening to the other side helps to free us from our own sedimented descriptions of the real and disclose new possibilities" (2014, p. 282). Tully's broader and influential call for a 'public philosophy in a new key' (2008) indicates an approach to grounded normative theory

undertaken in a more explicitly solidaristic vein. For Tully, academics, as relatively privileged and responsible members of the demos, can adopt the role of 'learned citizens' engaging directly in an "interlocutory intervention on the side of the oppressed" (Tully, 2008, p. 17) to advance "civic freedom".

The commitment to comprehensiveness is not limited to research conducted in express solidarity with a given empirical context. Nor need it be understood as entailing only direct engagement with non-elites struggling against injustices, domination, or exclusion. Insights may be taken from a range of actors in salient contexts, including, for example, high-ranking officials of India's governing Bharatiya Janata Party (Cabrera, 2020, Ch.8), English officials with roles in immigration policy (Tonkiss, 2013), or 'civilian border patrollers' in the U.S. Southwest (Doty, 2009). Each may provide insights crucial to ensuring a more comprehensive process of normative theorization.

Possibly the most urgent rationale for GNT is articulated by Coulthard and Simpson (2016) in their article "Grounded Normativity / Place-Based Solidarity." Their understanding of "grounded" refers to ethical frameworks provided by "Indigenous place-based practices and associated forms of knowledge" (Coulthard & Simpson, 2016, p. 255). They urge especially those working within broadly Western, 'settler-based' theoretical traditions to reckon with how their abstraction from land, water, culture, tradition, and systems of human and non-human life has justified and prolonged colonial violence. Coulthard and Simpson call for normative theorists to engage in the difficult work of decolonizing the social construction of knowledge. Their exhortation helps to direct attention to the next three commitments typically found in GNT accounts, each of which relates to empirical engagement.

Recursivity

GNT is marked by a commitment to the revision and refinement of normative claims through repeated engagement with empirical findings. This characteristic recursivity helps to distinguish it from empirical studies focused on the narrow testing of individuals' attitudes toward normative claims. In one such study, Doug Bond and Jong-Chul Park revisit some normative assumptions of Rawls's *Theory of Justice* (1971), and of previous studies which have sought to test which principles of distributive justice persons find fair or appealing. Situating their empirical inquiry in Korea and the United States, they find evidence that reasoning as if behind a Rawlsian "veil of ignorance" – ignorant of one's wealth, status, abilities -- is plausible, but that the primacy of the individual in his assumptions is not supported in Korea (Bond & Park, 1991). They leave to others, however, to revise the normative theory. Thus, while their empirical investigation has normative relevance, it is not conducted as part of a broader recursive process aimed at revising and refining a normative theory itself.

Such an approach can be contrasted with that adopted by, for example, Will Kymlicka. He partnered with public policy scholar Keith Banting and other researchers to determine whether policies of domestic recognition for some domestic minority groups and Indigenous peoples he has endorsed in his normative work actually erode social welfare protections in ways critics have alleged. Their largely negative findings have further influenced the normative claims and ultimate prescriptions (Banting and Kymlicka eds, 2006; see also Soroka, Johnston, Kevins, Banting and Kymlicka, 2016).

Luis Cabrera (2010) notes that some of his initial presumptions about global citizen agents were overturned by recursive analysis embedded in field work involving more than 250 interviews in the North American and European migration contexts. He notes in particular coming to understand how unauthorized migrants themselves were acting as 'global citizen

agents' in some significant ways (Cabrera, 2010, chapter 5; for other GNT-informed approaches to citizenship see Doty, 2006; 2009; Tonkiss, 2013; Stivens, 2018).

The commitment to recursivity in grounded normative theory is distinct from more introspective processes specified in, for example, Rawlsian reflective equilibrium (1999, pp. 40-46). It seeks through rounds of internal reflection to reach a stable equilibrium position on specific cases or questions between her own considered judgments and normative principles given in theoretical arguments. Grounded normative theory entails more direct and typically more systematic engagement with empirical contexts in the recursive process.

Some theorists have sought to revise Rawls's internalized process so that it entails such external engagement, for example, in the process of 'pragmatic equilibrium' outlined by Archon Fung as a means of identifying the best available fit between a democratic or other ideal and the institutions and processes that could effectively advance it (Fung, 2007). Particularly notable here, Jonathan Wolff and Avner de-Shalit (2007) put a concept of 'public reflective equilibrium' at the center of their grounded normative investigation of the concept of disadvantage. For Wolff and de-Shalit, a normative theory that "does not tie in with the way citizens behave and think … needs to be modified" (p. 43). Their approach thus shares important methodological sensibilities with the contextualism advocated by Miller (2013). A key difference is that Wolff and de-Shalit developed their theory in a comprehensive and recursive process involving extensive field research and qualitative interviews. At the same time, however, such an approach may raise issues of epistemological inclusion, the commitment to which we now turn.

Epistemological inclusion

Epistemological inclusion is concerned with ways grounded normative theory typically strives to be inclusive of the ideas and direct insights, but also the ways of knowing and generating knowledge, of those engaged in political contestation. The commitment is reflected in Tully's call for empirical engagement to "free us from our own sedimented descriptions of the real…" (Tully, 2014, p. 282). To further reinforce, that engagement may entail the inclusion of views or claims to knowledge that are in severe tension with the normative claims the theorist ultimately offers (Doty, 2009; Tonkiss, 2013; Cabrera, 2020). Overall, if epistemic justice and epistemic oppression are the terrain on which philosophers study the ability of individuals, groups, and communities to make claims to justice, or of others to recognize those claims (Fricker, 2007; Dotson, 2014; Mills, 2007; Medina, 2013), epistemological inclusion is a key methodological responsibility for grounded normative theory.

To elaborate the sense of epistemological accountability in GNT and highlight contrasts with other approaches, we can turn again to Miller's contextualism. Miller, for example, opens his 2007 book, *National Responsibility and Global Justice*, by relating that, in seeing a report on would-be immigrants beaten and shot while trying to scale a fence from Morocco into Spain's North African territory of Melilla,

> I find my sympathy for the young African men who are trying to cross the fence tempered by a kind of indignation. Surely, they must understand that this is not the way to get into Europe. … Do they think they have some kind of natural right to enter Spain in defiance of the laws that apply to everyone else who might like to move there? . . . Although I can understand their plight, which must indeed be desperate if they are willing

> to try, time and again, to risk life and limb to get across the border; I also think they are deluded and are responsible for their delusion (Miller, 2007, pp. 2–4).

Miller's account incorporates information about persons whose actions in the context are relevant to his own normative claims, but he does not attempt to include their actual views, insights, or moral claims into his analysis. He appears to dismiss the relevance of doing so. Thus, while his account might be marked by some limited commitment to comprehensiveness, in at least noting actors in a normatively relevant empirical context, it is not marked by epistemological inclusion.

Concerns for epistemological inclusion also can figure significantly in assessments of grounded normative theory accounts, including especially whether the design of empirical investigations draws sufficient distinctions between persons' views and positionalities within social and knowledge structures. Kristen Monroe's account may be taken as an exemplar of epistemological inclusion, for foregrounding the different positionality of her interviewees: people who did and did not act to save Jews during the Holocaust as a basis for theorizing about responsibility (Monroe, 2012). Such an account demonstrates attentiveness to such differences and the power dynamics they entail. Interestingly, she finds similar reasoning behind those who took very different actions. But she doesn't conflate these.

Wolff and de-Shalit (2007) similarly informed their normative theory of disadvantage through interviews with providers and receivers of social services. The different experiences that such groups have of disadvantage, however, were obfuscated to some extent in their text. The normative insights they draw may come both from those within the structures that define disadvantage and those struggling against disadvantage and the interpretations of disadvantage

imposed on them. Further, their emphasis on achieving public reflective equilibrium – a balance between normative principles and a coherent 'public view – raises concerns about whether the presumed public view is actually a privileged view that is not sufficiently inclusive of the range of ideas, interests, and actors that may be part of that public.

Similarly, deliberative forums provide opportunities for generating data about the normative insights and preferences that arise and shift in groups involved in structured discussions (Badger & Quealy, 2019; see Dryzek & Braithwaite, 2000; Fishkin & Luskin, 2005). They also, however, may mask some perspectives and power imbalances (see Ackerly, 2000; Young, 2001; Abelson et al., 2003, p. 241; Mansbridge et al., 2010, p. 82; Karpowitz & Mendelberg, 2014, p. 357; Schneiderhan, Khan, & Elrick, 2014, p. 793). Both pose a challenge to the researcher's hearing and understanding of disparate views, and effectively incorporating them into a recursive process of theorizing, in addition to raising fairness and related concerns for research processes.

An exemplar of grounded normative theory practices that are attentive to distinctive ways of knowing across empirical contexts and groups is offered in Glen Coulthard's *Red Skin, White Masks* (2014), Coulthard critically engages a range of diverse anti-imperialist traditions and practices to challenge a common belief that the governing relationships between Indigenous people and colonial states can be sufficiently transformed through a politics of recognition. Coulthard (2014) reveals the various ways that liberal forms of recognition "reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous peoples' demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend" (p. 3). He offers an alternative to liberal political recognition, which seeks the empowerment and resurgence of Indigenous people *on*

their own terms without sanction, permission, or engagement of colonial epistemic, ethical, or political structures (see also Alfred, 2005; A. Simpson, 2014; L. Simpson, 2011).

Epistemic accountability

Epistemic accountability addresses the more direct relationships between the researcher and those engaged in empirical investigations, in particular in field work (Ackerly, 2018, p. 241). It entails such concerns as attending to the risk of misrepresenting a group's needs and desires when speaking "for" them (Rubenstein, 2014, pp. 219-220; see also Alcoff, 1991; and see Smith, 2012).

The commitment can be manifest in more fully elaborated forms of accountability, for example, the subsequent sharing of findings, outlines and full text drafts with those engaged, and correspondence or in-person dialogue with them on possible differences of interpretation (see Ackerly, 2018, p. 2 fn. 1, p. 171 fn. 25). Or, it can appear in a researcher's efforts to ensure that there are meaningful forms of accountability to those whose lives and political struggles do not put them in a political position to demand epistemic accountability (Ackerly, 2018, p. 241). For example, Erin Baines' work with former abductees of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda – persons for whom silence has been a political imperative and a source of suffering (Baines, 2017, pp. 18-29). Working in a solidaristic vein, in addition to attending to the histories of silencing among former abductees, Baines engages in various forms of knowledge co-production. These include helping them to create maps of their former camps, as well as "maps" of their bodies and life histories. She helped them to write and publish their autobiographies and through these creative means revealed what they thought despite their being deprived of control over everything else during their abduction. In doing so, she has had to reflect on the potential for

relationships with researchers to be dangerous or extractive, noting that the women's stories that she drew on might "at best, be entirely redundant in the context of the lives of the storytellers… and at worst, detrimental to their safety" (Baines, 2017, p. xv).

Epistemic accountability is primarily about the interpretation of findings. Using inductive and/or deductive methods, the researcher strives to move between data and analysis so that the researcher's epistemology (particularly which ideas can be taken as assumptions) is no more determinative of the argument than that of the people with lived experience of the problem in question. This is not a posture of epistemic relativism. Far from it. Relativism *assumes* imcommensurability of ontological perspectives. If Grounded Normative Theory has an underlying onotological perspective, it is that we should not assume relativism. Rather, being epistemically accountable means committing to thoughtfully and deeply engaging with the perspectives of others, particularly those for whom the political stakes are high. Comprehensiveness, recursivity, and epistemological inclusion are methodological mechanisms that support epistemic accountability in interpretation. We revisit how these can be used for immanent critique within GNT in the penultimate discussion of the article.

The four commitments serve as the basic defining features of grounded normative theory – marking it as a distinctive approach within normative political theory and providing some means of assessing specific accounts. At root, GNT guides theorists in challenging their own normative and empirical pre-suppositions. Its animating spirit is thus the overarching commitment to a form of intellectual humility – one implied by many normative political realists and others who exhort normative theorists to move beyond introspection and examine actual politics in developing normative claims. Grounded normative theorists seek to be as comprehensive in their sources as possible, to develop their normative claims in a recursive

process that allows the theorist to reconsider prior assumptions and reasoning, to be inclusive of the ideas and insights of those engaged in the politics informing the GNT project, and to be epistemically accountable to them, not distorting or misrepresenting their ideas.

II. Methodological Orientations

There also are some significant variations in GNT approaches. These can be arrayed on two dimensions. The first is an orientation in determining the purpose of the research roughly distinguished as more or less solidaristic. These difference manifest in approaches to determining research questions and the engagement of persons within empirical contexts. The second is an analytical orientation differing between primarily deductive or inductive approaches to thinking through what the empirical insights mean for the normative theory.

If as Robert Cox argues "Theory is always for someone and for some purpose" (1981, p. 128), GNT entails making explicit the social groups whose predicament animates a theorist's question. With a more solidaristic orientation, it may entail working in partnership with them. In line with Tully's exhortation for theorists/philosophers to engage directly in an "interlocutory intervention on the side of the oppressed" (2008, p. 17), explicitly solidaristic approaches typically seek to harness the theorist's privilege of time, money, status, job security, expertise, and other forms of power for the purpose of supporting those communities or groups in which and with which they situate their research. Theorists may develop research questions, designs, and methods such that the research addresses questions that matter to the research participants. They may also work beside them to gain further insight into which normative puzzles are challenging for them and which they view as necessary to address (Forman, forthcoming; Johnson & Porth, in progress).

While more-solidaristic approaches to grounded normative theory share certain commitments with Participatory Action Research (PAR), GNT is not necessarily participant-driven from the conceptualization of the project through the dissemination of the project. Moreover, although in its most solidaristic variants, GNT often seeks to empower particular groups in struggles against injustice, it does not necessarily seek to empower them as researchers *per se* (see Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014).

Less-solidaristic accounts are not designed to expressly serve the interests of some set of persons in an empirical context. Their ultimate conclusions often will broadly align with the interests of a group of persons engaged in a given context, and prescriptions may be informed by those interests and the political struggles seeking to realize them. Their conclusions or prescriptions, however, will not necessarily be tailored to serve the interests of a particular group (Mansbridge, 1983[1980]; Parkinson, 2006; Wolff and de-Shalit, 2007; Koenig-Archibugi, 2017). They also may give more sustained attention to actors whose views and actions are not aligned with their own ultimate conclusions (Doty, 2009; Tonkiss, 2013; Cabrera, 2020).

The second broad dimension on which grounded normative theorists vary is their deductive or inductive methodological approach to grounding and analyzing data. In practice, scholars may also switch between modes depending on the stage of the project. Deductive GNT accounts typically begin by examining how a key concept has been constructed in political theory specifically or in political science more generally. To critically engage existing theoretical understandings of a concept, the grounded normative theorist collects the data needed to broaden the empirical basis for understanding it and arguments relevant to it – including especially normatively relevant claims by persons in salient empirical contexts. For instance, Christ Tenove (2020) conducts focus groups with survivors of mass violence in Kenya and Uganda to

interrogate the forms of "justice" promoted by the International Criminal Court. The theorist analyzes recursively, moving back and forth between those normative constructs that are familiar to the field and those emerging in the data (Mansbridge, 1983[1980]; Cabrera, 2010, 2020; Tonkiss, 2013).

An inductive approach works from the 'context-up' rather than the 'concept-down' and is more open to the possible normative questions and issues at stake in research to be determined from within the research process. The process is not comprehensively open-ended: certain concepts are likely to be at stake in certain contexts and others not. In an inductive approach, the researcher develops the constellation of concepts and their interpretation through engagement with the ideas of the people engaged in the struggles related to that concept. For example, for her research on sex worker rights in Canadian cities, Genevieve Fuji Johnson (2015, 2017, 2020) began by observing, listening to, and learning from the sex worker rights community, resisting importing particular principles regarding the nature of sex work (e.g., that it is necessarily exploitative, coercive, and violent). Then, Johnson and sex worker rights activist, Kerry Porth, conducted extensive interviews with the community's policy advocates and examined documents produced by allied civil society organizations to determine what their governance priorities are and how they work to achieve them.[5] Inverting the deductive approach, and on the basis of this empirical work, they explored the academic literatures on the themes and concepts that emerged in the empirical research for insights useful in understanding the phenomena they observed. Working in an explicitly solidaristic vein, Johnston and Porth rearticulated their observations back to sex worker rights communities in ways that may be helpful to them.

Despite different orientations to research questions and design, GNT accounts are again marked by commitments to comprehensiveness, recursivity, epistemological inclusion, and

epistemic accountability. These central normative commitments, and not the methodological orientations to solidarity or to deduction or induction, provide the foundation for a theorist's own decision making about and during research. They can be found across grounded normative theory accounts, serving to tie them together in a distinctive approach to doing normative political theory.

III. The Potential Significance of Grounded Normative Theory

We close by reinforcing the import and distinctiveness of GNT by addressing three possible concerns. First does and how does GNT answer the call by political realists and others for a normative political theory that is more attentive to empirical dynamics? Second, what is the difference between the answers to the call offered by GNT and political theory with "ethnographic sensibility" (Zacka et al., 2020)? Finally, we address two immanent criticisms of GNT.

Political theory and the "real world"

GNT is part of a large and growing family of political theory calling for more attention to empirical politics in theory development: political realism (B. Williams, 2005; Geuss, 2008; Galston, 2010), non-ideal theory (Anderson, 2010; see Fung, 2007; see also Sen, 2009, pp.10-18, 96-113; Goodhart, 2018, Ch.1), and others (Bauböck, 2008; Miller, 2013; Waldron, 2016; Floyd, 2020). While we cannot offer a nuanced discussion of any let alone all of these here, we use a discussion of politial realism to illustrate the role of GNT in that family.

GNT is significant in part for its potential to incorporate such investigations into the theory development and revision processes. For illustration, Bonnie Honig and Marc Stears (2011) argue for a realism grounded in the history and politics. These politics reveal human

practices that are in formed by aspirations both to justice and self-interest. They call their realism "agonistic" and contrast it with, as well as construct it from, the realisms of Williams (2005), Geuss (2008), and Tully (2008). On the one hand Geuss, the "pessemistic" realist, relies on assumptions about the real world that give too little attention to real-world dangers of an overriding emphasis on stability and order, and to processes in which more expansive moral principles have been institutionally embedded (2008, p. 202). On the other hand, Tully, the "optimistic" realist gives insufficient attention to political violence and resistance which cannot be transformed through persuasive engagement. Agonistic realism is more aptly attuned to such violence, and to ways in which the absence of violence may signify oppressive order rather than mutuality. Ultimately, they say, agonistic realism "takes nothing for granted, not even the 'real' (2011, p. 204).

Realists, as Bosniak notes in her criticism of Miller, should not rely on suppositional evidence, anecdotal evidence, or "wishful metaphysics of consensus" about which empirical assumptions are realistic or feasible (2017, p. 97; also Go, 2020). Similar charges might be levied at Geuss (2008), who argues for a 'realistic' approach to politics focused on basic principles of order and security, rather than ambitious, ostensibly ahistorical ones of justice, etc. Despite the claim of the label "realist" these approaches are based on a contest-centered assumptions, assumptions that need empirical investigation (cf. Mansbridge 1983 [1980]).

GNT offers a normatively consistent methodological two-pronged response to realist critiques that political theory is too abstract and relies on unrealistic views of politics. GNT agrees that political theory needs to be informed by lived politics, but it does not assume that the best source of normative insights are those of the "winner" in political struggle. GNT researchers develop their theories using systematic empirical evidence not assumptions. Where the dominant

views are obvious and the focus of most attention, the research might work in more solidaristic modes with those in struggle to reveal the normative insights not being reflected in contemporary normative treatment of a topic.

GNT brings to political realism (and to the family of approaches that are wary of abstraction) methdological guidelines for bringing empirical insight to bear on normative debates. GNT enriches understandings of political contestation, the contexts in which it occurs, and the actors engaged in it. Common across the range of methods GNT reesarchers deploy (and what makes the approach potentially significant and noteworthy within normative theory), is its commitment to expanding the comprehensiveness of the inputs to be considered in the theory development process through direct engagement in empirical research and/or analysis, and to do so in ways that are attentive to the power of recursive analysis and the importance of epistemological inclusion and epistemic accountability. GNT offers a methodologicial response to the challenges posed by political realists.

Method without methodology

Another response, which Lisa Herzog, Matthew Longo, and Bernardo Zacka describe as an "ethnographic" sensibility or turn, deploys the methods of ethonography in normative theorizing (Herzog & Zacka, 2019; Longo & Zacka, 2019; Zacka et al., 2020; cf. Ackerly, 2020). Ethnography is typically associated with long-term situtated participant-observer anthropology, but Longo and Zacka argue for interpreting it more broadly in a political theory context, to encompass such methods as historical ethnography, relational interviewing "and the close reading of cultural artifacts." In their view, what is definitive "is that the scholar attain proximity with the subjects of study, paying close attention to details—someone's posture, the placement of furniture, their choice of words— with the presumption that such details are meaningful, and

that their meaning depends on context" (Longo & Zacka, 2019, p. 1067). Herzog, Zacka and Longo's call for an 'ethnographic turn' in normative political theory addresses some of the challenges that bring scholars to GNT more generally and an ethographic sensibility is an importatn method for bringing valuable insights, particularly regarding practices of epistemological inclusion and epistemic accountability. It is more method than methodology and the distinction helps illustrate the more fully developed normative theory of political theory research within GNT and the role of this methodology in enriching and strengthening processes of interpreting and evaluating politically relevant moral claims.

Consider, Zacka's (2017) own methodology is situational ethics. He applies ethical principles to social service work with often vulnerable clients. Informed by ethnographic observations on the ground floor of a service bureaucracy, he develops a set of guiding principles for 'street level bureaucrats' in working with vulnerable clients. Such principles certainly have normative significance, but they are primarily concerned with ethical standards for institutionally situated individuals, rather than the broader interpretation and evaluation of politically relevant moral claims that is characteristic of normative political theory.

By contrast, Wolff and de-Shalit used their empirical research to theorize about the *meaning* of vulnerability and disadvantage. We criticized that work above for not being sufficiently comprehensive in its empirics – relatively too informed by those who work with people who are disadvantaged rather than by those who are themselves disadvantaged. The GNT commitment to recursivity might have turned them to ethnographic methods with vulnerable people as a complement to their initial interviews rather than to conduct more interviews (which they did). Doing so would have brought an ethnographic method into their GNT methodology

and might have enabled Wolff and de-Shalit to better fulfill their aspiration of retheorizing a normative concept that is important to political life.

To be an adequate response to the call for political theory in the real world, an empirical method needs to have a methodology that enables the theorist to show their work. GNT scholars can do this by (1) specifying why their data enable a comprehensive look at the problem, (2) deploying recursivity and perhaps adding new methods or sites of study during the research process, (3) attending to epistemological marginalization in politics or political theory and identifying sources and modes of inquiry that enable these to be included (regardless of whether the previously ignored insights were from those priviledged or disadvangaged in power politics, and (4) utilizing methods of accountability (whether inductive, deductive, or both) that give the theorist and their audience confidence that the empirical claims are indeed findings and not merely assumptions, suppositions, intuitions, or hopes.

Immanent criticism

GNT is a way of doing empirical normative theory that is guided by a set of methodological principles for experience-informed political theory used to specify the research question, gather data, analyze data, and incorporate data. They complement, guide, and moderate each other. Over emphasizing one poses problems for the GNT. We illustrate this by addressing two critical concerns raised by those doing or considering doing GNT. When conducted less comprehensively, with insufficient recursivity and reflexivity, without appropriate attentiveness to the voices and interests of those engaged in context, GNT can lead theorists to problems.

First, like any empirical researcher, they may misunderstand or misrepresent their data, or misread the context. The four commitments mitigate against this, but we have seen above flawed examples.

Second, and pressing given the import of epistemological inclusion and accountability, as decolonial and feminist GNT scholars caution, being normatively committed to epistemological inclusion and accountability are not a sufficient methodology for avoiding the pitfalls of importing privilege or arrogance into how we do GNT (cf. Smith, 2012). These might include: projection, attributing our beliefs to others; cherry-picking, selecting respondents whose views comport with ours; ventriloquism, interpreting our data to have said what we wanted to say; and the opposite, deference, surrendering our independent judgment to the respondents' own account of their experience, an approach which would defer to the dominant narratives of the site, rather than provide mechanisms for interrogating these while learning from them; identity politics, evaluating the worth of ideas according to the identity of the speaker; authenticity politics, deferring analysis to the authentic voice of certain people in struggle; exoticism, privileging the unique, different, unfamiliar, counter intuitive (Silverman, 2017, esp. Ch. 4; Cho, 2018, esp. Ch. 3).[6]

Again, the commitment to recursive epistemological reflection is particularly important to questions of injustice because differences among groups and within groups create often invisible practices and norms of domination. One of the key contributions of GNT can be to reveal these. As with all research and with all navigations of power hierarchies, it is possible to do GNT badly, being unmindful of the effects of hierarchy and privilege; however, in the face of this possibility, the central commitments to epistemic accountability reminds researchers of this possibility and of their commitment to attending to it throughout the research process.

Yet, this commitment to recursivity has a downside as well. While the previous question comes from a concern about lack of humility on the part of the theorist, is it possible to have too much? The GNT commitments to epistemological inclusion and accountability may seem to lead theorists to privilege the raw data over their own analysis or to privilege endless recursive reflection over developing a normative analysis. In either case the work might never be done.

Grounded normative theorists have different ways of satisfying demands of recursivity in order to be confident that they have the range of actors and ideas appropriate to their project that is necessary and sufficient for interrogating epistemological biases in the field, in the data, and in their own analytical approach. The key is to document decision points so that the author and her critics can reconstruct the argument and identify where potential bias in the boundaries of data or analysis of the data could have occurred.[7]

In the larger philosophical sense, the project of political theory generally is never done, but having done empirical work, particularly if the data are collected in ways that take time and other resources of those in vulnerable groups, the grounded normative theorist has a professional, ethical, and relational obligation to complete the analysis, publish the work, and share the findings with those who informed the work in a form that is accessible and useable to them. Thus, the commitment to epistemic accountability is itself a commitment not to be caught in endless loops of recursive self-reflection.

Conclusion

As detailed in the Introduction, there is widespread sentiment that normative political theory needs to be informed by empirical insights. There is less clarity about how theorists have done that work. We have worked to show that most empirically-informed normative theory can be

understood as developing the field of grounded normative theory and that the commitments of grounded normative theory can be used to improve that work and guide future work.

Since those pursuing such work for the past several decades, and those writing about it, have not typically treated it as falling within a coherent approach, in some ways grounded normative theory remains an emergent area of political theory. Yet as more scholars seek to ground their normative theory with empirical research, we need support these endeavors with the wisdom gained from across the broad range of questions, context and methods in which GNT has been pioneered. This article has sought to guide other political theorists in utilizing GNT, and to encourage political and social scientists to engage with grounded normative theory by addressing the contributions and the weaknesses of the approach through the same critical attention the field gives to other methodologies.

To reinforce, we do not suggest that all political theorists should pursue GNT, or indeed that it is appropriate for all types of normative questions. Rather, we argue that this approach to political theory significantly enriches and advances a broad range of theoretical investigations and is an essential complement to abstract theorizing. For the normative theorist, the question is not: am I a grounded normative theorist? It is, how would my research and teaching benefit from the recognition of and engagement with grounded normative theorizing?

Notes

[1] See the "Critical Dialogue" between Michael Goodhart and Erman and Möller in *Perspectives on Politics* (2019).

[2] See in particular the chapters by David Miller and by Adam Swift and Stuart White.

[3] In Blau (Ed. 2017), one chapter on comparative political theory methodologies includes grounded normative theory within its discussion (Ackerly & Bajpai 2017).

[4] Elsewhere, Miller and co-author Sundas Ali have empirically tested some of Miller's longstanding claims about the importance of shared national sentiment, with mixed results (Miller & Ali, 2014).

[5] Johnson, Burns, & Porth (2017). See also Justin de Leon on Lakota cosmologies of security (2020) and Stacy Simplican's work on modes of public participation and the politics of presence of people with cognitive disabilities (Simplican et al., 2014; Simplican, 2015).

[6] We also thank Jamie Mayerfeld for raising some these issues.

[7] This is a key part of a feminist research ethic more generally (Ackerly & True, 2010, 2020).

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Note on contributors

Brooke Ackerly is Professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt University. In her research, teaching, and collaborations, she utilizes empirical research on activism and the lived experience of those affected by injustice, including human rights and climate change. Her work utilizing GNT includes *Political Theory and Feminist Social Criticism* (2000), *Universal Human Rights in a World of Difference* (2008), and J*ust Responsibility: A Human Rights Theory of Global Justice* (2018).

Luis Cabrera is Associate Professor of Political Science at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. He has published widely on citizenship and migration, democratic theory and international organizations. He has conducted fieldwork for grounded normative theory projects

in India, Europe, the United States, Mexico and Southeast Asia. His most recent monograph is *The Humble Cosmopolitan: Rights, Diversity, and Trans-State Democracy* (Oxford UP, 2020).

Fonna Forman is a professor of political theory at the University of California, San Diego, and founding Director of the UCSD Center on Global Justice. Since publishing *Adam Smith and the Circles of Sympathy* (Cambridge 2010) her work has become increasingly "grounded", focused on poverty, climate justice, borders and participatory urbanization. With architect Teddy Cruz, she leads the *UCSD Community Stations*, a network of field stations based in marginalized neighborhoods across the US-Mexico border.

Genevieve Fuji Johnson is a Professor of Political Science at Simon Fraser University. She studies and teaches grounded normative theory and feminist political thought. Recent publications include "Sex Work Governance Models: Variations in a Criminalized Context," *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, published on-line May 2020 (Kerry Porth co-author) and "Whiteness, Power, and the Politics of Demographics in the Governance of the Canadian Academy," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, September 2020 (Robert Howsam co-author).

Chris Tenove is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Political Science at the University of British Columbia. His current research focuses on online challenges to democracy and human rights such as incivility and hate speech, disinformation, and cyber-security threats faced by activists. In addition to book chapters and policy reports, he has published work in journals such as *Political Research Quarterly* (2020), *International Journal of Press/Politics* (2020), and *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2019).

Antje Wiener is Chair of Political Science at Universität Hamburg and By-Fellow at Hughes Hall, Cambridge. She is an International Relations theorist and her monographs include *Contestation and Constitution of Norms in Global IR* (CUP 2018), *A Theory of Contestation*

(Springer 2014), and *The Invisible Constitution of Politics* (CUP 2008). Her articles appeared in *International Theory* (2021), *International Affairs* (2019), *Review of International Studies* (2009), and *European Journal of International Relations* (2004) among others.

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