

RESEARCH METHODS: THE DEBATE ON GROUNDED THEORY

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Barney G. Glaser, Anselm L. Strauss, *La scoperta della Grounded Theory: Strategie per la ricerca qualitativa*. Trad. it. di Massimiliano Tarozzi, a cura di Antonio Strati. Roma, Armando Editore, 2009, pp. 272 (Modernità e società, collana diretta da Roberto Cipriani). ISBN 978-88-6081-490-6

The definition of a flexible and shared methodological model for scientific research has always been considered as a fundamental condition for the development of research. Since when Immanuel Kant, in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781), analysed the transcendental conditions of knowledge, one of the main modern society's challenges has been the attempt to understand the world, respecting both the phenomenal nature of events and the human ambition to generalize them in substantial theories.

The volumen *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: strategies for qualitative research* by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, now accessible in its Italian version, aims to fill the gap between theory and empirical research, never overcome neither by the quantitative approach elaborated by Merton and Lazarsfeld in the Sociology Department of the Columbia University, which hosted Strauss, nor by the qualitative approach of the Chicago School where Glaser studied.

In the framework of the modern reflection on research methodologies, the Grounded Theory represents one of the aspects of qualitative research, together with the ethnographic and descriptive research, with a strictly inductive approach to analysis, codification and theorization of data. Since its first formulation, this theory radically questioned the verification approaches and quantitative methods for research dominant when Glaser and Strauss published for the first time the volumen in 1967. The authors proposed a strategy based on the comparative analysis as instrument to generalize data in a theorization process, opposed to verificationism and grand theories based on logical assumptions and abstract speculations.

So how is the Grounded Theory proposed by Glaser and Strauss conceived? First of all it is an element in continuing development, a process and not a perfected product. The openness of the process, which is a typical feature of the Grounded Theory, determines some procedural aspects like the *Theoretical sampling* (chapter V) which illustrates the contemporaneity of data sampling, analysis and codification, independently from any preconceived theoretical framework. Taking into account the analysis of the first data collected, researchers can decide the additional activities to develop, so conditioning the research process, which moves from

a general starting point to a specific orientation, according to the data itself. It is the theory itself that indicates to researchers the next steps to take, according to the supposed “theoretical purpose and relevance”. These criteria can also be the verification elements for the validation of the research at each stage of its development. “The criteria of theoretical sampling (...) are continually tailored” - as the authors illustrate - “to fit the data and (...) the analyst can continually adjust his control of data collection to ensure the data’s relevance to the impersonal criteria of his emerging theory” (Glaser, Strauss, 1967, p. 48). The researcher’s ability to recognize the theory emerging from the data collected, through a continuous comparison, is defined by Glaser and Strauss *Theoretical sensitivity*. The concepts to which this theory refers to are *analytical*, so enough generic to make reference to concrete entities’ properties but not to the entity itself, and *sensitizing*, that is to say, able to evoke the experiential field. This particular research attitude moves from the individual talent to combine it with skills and expertise, describing the researcher as a professional with insight, imagination and specific knowledge and experience in his study sector.

The adoption of a research method inevitably conditions the training path of the researcher: “Potential theoretical sensitivity is lost when the sociologist commits himself exclusively to one specific preconceived theory (...) for then he becomes doctrinaire and can no longer “see around” either his pet theory or any other” (Glaser, Strauss, 1967, p. 46).

The strategy to guarantee that the deduced categories have the defined characteristics refers to the so called *Theoretical saturation*, which shows the ultimate stage of the data collection for a specific category, beyond which the category doesn’t provide any new information. Only comparison can lead to saturation: without the continuous comparison of the results it is impossible to obtain a substantive theory. During the categories saturation process, new hypothesis will be developed. Such hypothesis, properly verified and transcribed as memos, represent the *core category* of the emerging theory, which will guide the research process in its following phases. At this stage the theory gets a more concrete dimension where the selection and delimitation activities are considered as necessary. The researcher has to eliminate all the redundant elements to make the *schemata*, emerged at a more generalized level, clearer. The open sampling, analysis and categorization process must lead to

the development of a theory characterized by a limited number of variables and applicable to a wide range of situations, always maintaining its strict correspondence to the data.

Going over the principles shared by sociological research in the 60s and 70s, the Grounded Theory sparked off a debate which continues still today among those who advocate the initial formulation of the GT and those who propose revisions and changes to the original version. The authors involved in the debate researchers on methodology: "Our principal aim is to stimulate other theorists to codify and publish their *own* methods for generating theory. We trust that they will join us in telling those who have not yet attempted to generate theory that it is not a residual chore in this age of verification. Though difficult, it is an exciting adventure" (Glaser, Strauss, 2009, p. 37).

Underlining the critical points of the first formulation of the GT, in 1990 Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin moved from the original version, reducing its strictly inductive perspective. As a matter of fact, Strauss introduced the literature on the area under study at the first stage of the research activity, rigorously standardizing the different phases from a procedural point of view. On the same direction, after some years, other proposals like the constructivist theory of Cathy Charmaz and the postmodern one of Adele Clark were developed (Charmaz, 2000; Clark, 2003).

A point of reference to clarify such dynamics and internal tension of grounded research, is offered by the word *Discovery* in the title of the 1967's volumen. This term expresses the epistemological model on which the Grounded Theory is based, considering data as external to the researcher, who *discovers* the underlying schemes of social phenomena, independently from the way he observes them. Therefore the objectiveness and authenticity of research are based on a methods which guarantees the strictly inductive derivation of the theory from data. The ability of the researcher, in turn, corresponds to the sensitivity, acquired through practice, which allows him to recognize these structures. Also the various re-considerations of the GT, and in particular the mentioned constructivist approach of Cathy Charmaz and the post-modern one of Adele Clark, are focused on the meaning of *Discovery*. In both cases, the term discovery, attributed to a theory, should be emblematically re-interpreted. On one hand, reality, from a constructivist perspective, is no longer considered

as external to the researcher but rather as an element to constructed while conducting research. On the other, from a post-modern and Symbolic Interactionism point of view, Adele Clark makes another step forward, interpreting data and reality as set in a complex situational and relational net, inevitably conditioning the observer, that has to become part of the research process, thanks to an innovative instrument, the "Situational maps" (Clark, 2003). The translation of the volumen of 1967 fills the gap of the Italian publications in this specific field, which confirms both the delay of our country in adopting the Grounded Theory and a general inattention to research methodology. In Italy the Grounded Theory begins to be applied to the organizational studies from '90s, by using software for the data analysis, and to the psycho-pedagogical studies which have considered necessary to train researchers on the adoption of this theory and the use of writing techniques and memos. The development of software for Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) has increased constantly during the last ten years, since it allows to analyze and share data in a quickly and efficient way, although it is still in doubt if the use of informatic tools can restrict the creativity of researchers.

The volumen, published by Armando Editore, is part of a Project of National interest co-financed by the Ministry of Scientific Research on the Qualitative research: theories, models and applications. Besides the translation of Part I and III of the *Discovery*, the volumen includes an essay by Gessica Corradi who schematically analyses the Strauss, Corbin, Charmaz and Clarke approaches, and an interesting interview to Barney Glaser by Massimiliano Tarozzi (who supervised the Italian translation of the *Discovery*) concerning the objectivist and realistic perspective of the Glaser's GT (Glaser, Strauss, 2009, p. 237).

The richness of the debate on the GT is among FormaMente interests, as shown by the article published in this issue, on Multi-Grounded Theory, in line with Strauss and Corbin's thought.

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