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## SELECTED ASPECTS OF GROUNDED THEORY METHODOLOGY. A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STRATEGY

### 1. ELEMENTARY ASSUMPTIONS OF GROUNDED THEORY

Each branch of social life is based on continual data collection. Collecting it in everyday life is routine and normative, whereas in science, collecting data depends on methodology. Using a specific methodology is associated with particular problems since it implies a certain type of data, the time taken to gather it, the nature of the analysis and the research results. The aim of this article is to analyse one of the strategies of qualitative research, which is the grounded theory methodology. In the circle of American sociology, this strategy opposes the positivist approach to social reality. The mainstream positivism sought to unify the methods of collecting and processing data without making a distinction, which had already been made in the European thought in sociology, between the terms “comprehension” and “explanation”. In the case of the dominant American approaches therefore, the models of the interpretation of processes and social phenomena were accepted by reference to the procedures of constructing hypothesis along with test implications, which were afterwards subject to the empirical, or based on logical exclusion verification. The ideal research included four stages: from the description of the facts, through their classification, generalisation of conclusions and re-inclusion in the testing cycle<sup>1</sup>. The emergence in American sociological literature of translations and commentaries on the works of European thinkers, has shown an alternative way to study social reality through a radical change in a paradigmatic approach. It is based on an imperative paradigm or symbolic interaction. Grounded theory methodology allows the data relating to the experience and events to be examined in their context, and its primary goal (considered in a scientific context) is to build theories based on empirical data. This raises the question about the legitimacy of using grounded theory methodology.

The grounded theory methods were created following cooperation between Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss who were studying people dying in hospi-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. C. G. Hempel, *Filozofia nauk przyrodniczych*, Athleteia, Warszawa 2001, p. 27.

tal in the USA. Their main assumptions were included in the work entitled *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* published in 1967. In their view, systematic qualitative analysis is logically arranged, and on this basis a theory can be generated. Since its publication, Glaser and Strauss's methodology has become one of the most widely used research strategies in qualitative research and is used by representatives of various disciplines<sup>2</sup>. Krzysztof Konecki, who is the most famous supporter of this theory in Poland, explains that building a theory according to this methodology is a process. "The theory emerges out of empirical data that are directly related to the observed parts of social reality during systematically conducted field research. Hypotheses, concepts and the properties of concepts are built in the course of empirical studies, and in the course of study they are modified and verified. So building a theory is closely related to the long-term research process"<sup>3</sup>.

During the procedure to create the grounded theory, research effort is aimed at the development of components including<sup>4</sup>:

- 1) categories – elements of reality observed by the investigator according to certain criteria;
- 2) category features – characteristics attributed to this category;
- 3) hypotheses – relationships formulated between categories.

Generating the theory from data means that most hypotheses and concepts do not only come from data, but are systematically created in connection with the data during the study. Good analysis begins with regular data collection, coding and analysis. The study focuses from the start on conceptualization using the method of constant comparison. With grounded theory methodology it is very important to avoid pre-conceptions having an excessive impact on the study. These could arise from extensive reading related to the subject matter influencing the application of existing theories on the collection and analysis of data. Adopting a comprehensive review of the literature before the emergence of the central category violates the basic assumption that a theory emerges from data, and not from existing theories. The next step is to encode the data. The method used as the data collection process in this theory is theoretical sampling. This is aimed at generating a theory, by which the analyst collects, codes, and analyses the data and decides which data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop a theory as it emerges. The next method used is constant comparison which allows a theory to be generated by systematic coding and analytical procedures. It involves writing theoretical notes, parallel to the data analysis process, and facilitating articulation of the theory. Theoretical notes are notes concerning the data and the conceptual connections between categories. Writing theoretical notes is an essential step in generating a theory<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. K. Charmaz, *Teoria ugruntowana: praktyczny przewodnik po analizie jakościowej*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2013, p. 10-11.

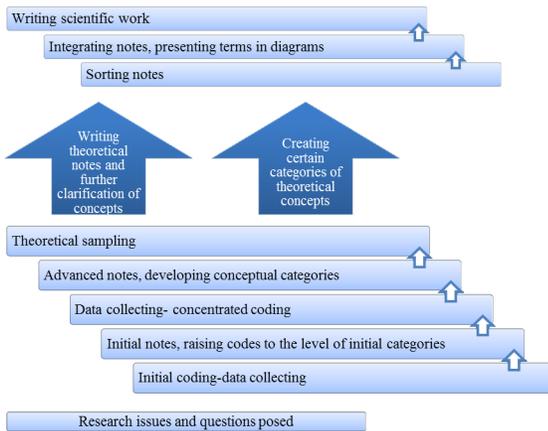
<sup>3</sup> K. Konecki, *Studia z metodologii badań jakościowych. Teoria ugruntowana*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2000, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 29-30.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. B. Glaser, J. Holton, *Remodelowanie teorii ugruntowanej*, Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej,

According to Konecki the grounded theory methodology is the very opposite of the deskbound methods of building theories and the theory of capitalism. He says these “firmly direct and send students of social sciences down the well-trodden paths and canons of descriptions of social reality etc.” According to Kathy Charmaz the grounded theory methodology combines induction and deduction known as abductive reasoning. In the first stage, a researcher makes an analysis based on the empirical data, considering all the explanations of the observed data and forming hypotheses until the most probable interpretation appears. Abduction allows for the modification of existing elements of knowledge by new observations. According to Charmas there is a certain logic to grounded theory in the process of its creation. It begins with the collection of data and ends by writing analyses and reflections on both the collected material and the entire process<sup>6</sup>. The logic of creating continues to happen right until the moment of so-called *theoretical saturation* i.e. the point where additional cases do not bring anything new but merely confirm the generated generalization<sup>7</sup>. Logical scheme of that theory presented in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1 Constuction of a grounded theory.



Source: author's own study based on K. Charmaz, *Teoria ugruntowana...*, p. 19.

Strauss and Juliet Corbin suggest that grounded theory allows the investigator to be both scientific and creative provided that the three rules are applied:

- 1) Once in a while take a step back and ask yourself: What is going on? Does what I think I see match the reality stored in the data? The data themselves do not lie.
- 2) Be sceptical. All theoretical explanations, categories, hypotheses and questions regarding data, regardless of their origin, should be treated as provisional

Vol. VI, no. 2/2010, p. 91-98.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. K. Charmaz, *Teoria ugruntowana...*, p. 239.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. M.S. Lewis-Beck, A. Bryman, T.F. Futing Liao, *Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods*, SAGE Publications, 2004, Inc., <<http://knowledge.sagepub.com/view/socialscience/n1011.xml>>, (retrived: 10.11.2015).

ones. They always require verification based on the real data and should never be accepted as facts.

3) Use research procedures. The procedures for data collection and analysis are designed so as to give the research the value of accuracy<sup>8</sup>.

From this point of view Adele E. Clarke strongly criticizes the classical grounded theory. She disapproves of its “resistance” in many areas and relentlessly points out its flaws. “Resistance” in classical grounded theory is seen by the author primarily in:

- 1) the lack of profound reflection on the research process itself;
- 2) over-simplification – emphasis on what is shared and looking for cohesion “at a push”;
- 3) over-simplification – focusing more on the individual rather than on the many coexisting social processes;
- 4) interpretation of diverse data in terms of ‘negative cases’;
- 5) looking for the “purity of grounded theory”<sup>9</sup>.

The first objection directed against the grounded theory is the argument that it is not possible to suspend one’s consciousness and beliefs during the research process. The way in which researchers collect data, affects the phenomena they see, where and when they see them and what conclusions they draw from them<sup>10</sup>. According to Czech: “Approaching the subject of research, scientists are guided by their knowledge, which is a legacy of their predecessors and their own studies. They are empirically determined by their overall knowledge”<sup>11</sup>.

## 2. GROUNDED THEORY AND ETHNOGRAPHY – A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The grounded theory methodology describes the use of qualitative research strategies. This methodology has a strong relationship with ethnographic data collection techniques which include: participant observation, interviews, data collection from the subjects’ histories. Moreover, both approaches use comparative data analysis. The role of the researcher in the process of participating in the research field is the same. However, despite similarities one cannot clearly state that both approaches should be equated<sup>12</sup>.

The ethnographic approach is one of the research strands named as interpretative and is often associated with qualitative research. The ethnographic approach was named after an ethnographic research method. Ethnomethodology is a differ-

<sup>8</sup> Cf. E. Babbie, *Podstawy badań społecznych*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2013, p. 332.

<sup>9</sup> A. Kacperczyk, *Badacz i jego poszukiwania w świetle “Analizy Sytuacyjnej” Adele E. Clarke*, *Przegląd socjologii jakościowej*, Vol. III, no. 2/2007, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. K. Charmaz, *Teoria ugruntowana...*, p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. A. Czech, *Dedukcja vs indukcja w nauce o przedsiębiorstwie*, in: *Nowe kierunki w zarządzaniu przedsiębiorstwem – między teorią a praktyką*, eds. H. Jagoda, J. Lichtarski [Prace Naukowe Akademii Ekonomicznej im. O. Langego we Wrocławiu, No. 1014], Wydawnictwo AE im. O. Langego we Wrocławiu, Wrocław 2004, p. 125.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. K. Konecki, *Studia z metodologii badań jakościowych...*, p. 125.

ent process of approach to qualitative field research where researchers are sceptical about the ways in which people describe their experiences. The approach is based on the assumption that people do not describe the world as it is, but according to the meaning they attribute to it. Ethnographers believed that immersion in a particular culture and the stories of their informers represent reality. They focus their attention on determining the methods used to reach an understanding of reality<sup>13</sup>.

In the ethnographic method:

1) The study is exploratory. Its purpose is to explain and describe the nature of a social phenomenon. Researchers who use it rarely test any hypotheses previously posed.

2) The procedure uses unstructured data, that is, those which are not organized into analytical categories during the data collection phase.

3) A few cases are examined in such a way, but sometimes it is just one case considered in great detail.

4) Analysis of the data obtained involves the interpretation of the meaning of certain human activities and the functions they fulfil in the community. Research reports are in the form of descriptions and explanations, in which generalizations of quantitative and statistical analyses only play a supporting role<sup>14</sup>.

Ethnographic methods aim for the descriptive. The purpose of the analysis is to obtain numerous sources of data (records, products and diaries) and their condensation. They are less concerned with the conceptual or theoretical significance of these observations. Obviously, in the course of the decision-taking, what to leave, what to emphasize, in what order to present data, what to relate with what, which main ideas are important, are all part of a constant analytical decision making process<sup>15</sup>.

The most important characteristics of ethnography include:

1) The emphasis on research to explore not to test hypotheses.

2) Work on data that were not encoded into pre-determined categories after they were collected.

3) Studies involved a few cases or just one.

4) Interpretation of the analysed data is descriptive.

5) The main research technique is participant observation.

“Ethnography is focused on a description of the unit of analysis, i.e. people, groups, organizations and nations etc.”. The unit of analysis itself is limited in time because it is done during the study. A researcher calls a unit of analysis “a case study”. In contrast, the grounded theory methodology is not restricted by area or time while analyzing the research area. This is due to the assumed central category which is a social process. Furthermore analysis of the social process enables the preconceived as-

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. E. Babbie, *Podstawy badań społecznych...*, p. 330-331.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. A. Górny, *Wybrane zagadnienia podejścia jakościowego w badaniach nad migracjami* [Prace Migracyjne, no. 20], Instytut Studiów Społecznych UW, p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. A. Huberman, M. Miles, *Analiza danych jakościowych*, Trans Humana, Białystok 2000, p. 1.

sumptions and perspectives of researchers to be removed. The grounded theory does not require a full description of the facts in a particular research area. Theoretical sampling allows enough data to be chosen to generate a theory explaining the social process. Statements are usually hypotheses, not descriptions of facts or events<sup>16</sup>.

In addition, an ethnographic description is not the same as a trait of grounded theory methodology, which involves generating theory on the basis of the observed event. Descriptions of facts which are important in ethnography, are only valid for the grounded theory in the context of generating concepts and performed theoretical description of concepts, and in the final stage of generating a theory<sup>17</sup>.

A comparative analysis in ethnography differs from the grounded theory. Ethnographic data are used to verify theories or generate new hypotheses under an existing theory, and then verify the selected aspects. In contrast, grounded theory methodology is focused on generating theory and not only on the verification of many empirical cases "collected theoretically" to analyse from a research area, and not from an existing theory. The difference in the two approaches, despite some points in common, is the way in which the information collected is analysed. It concerns the way of generating categories and properties, the formulation of hypotheses and the writing of theoretical notes<sup>18</sup>.

### 3. THE ROLE OF THE GROUNDED THEORY RESEARCHER

The task of the researcher is to collect data that are analysed continuously. When a researcher is convinced that his or her conceptual frame is arranged into a systematic theory, the test ends. The researcher strives to create central categories that could be called "saturated". The researcher is immersed in the social world conducting observation of the reality in question. The investigator is required to provide both clear statements of theory and descriptions<sup>19</sup>.

Assumptions of the grounded theory methodology are presented using the example of the phenomenon of migration. The studies discussing the issue of migration have been based mainly on quantitative methods. However, in an attempt to study migrant communities in the selected context, this analysis was supported by a qualitative study. Thanks to this, specific mechanisms are described regarding people deciding to go abroad and information on the functioning of immigrant communities is collected.

It seems that quantitative research, whose strength is above all reliability, is more relevant in the search for universal standards, by creating statistical generalization, as well as in determining relationships between measurable events. The most important "weaknesses" of quantitative research, mentioned by David Silverman include:

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. K. Konecki, *Studia z metodologii badań jakościowych...*, p. 122-123.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 123

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. K. Charmaz, *Teoria ugruntowana...*, p. 182.

- 1) lack of deeper contact with the respondents and reflection on a given situation;
- 2) basing statistical correlation on arbitrarily defined variables;
- 3) interpreting in an arbitrary way the results of analyses, often on the basis of current popular knowledge, which may influence the attitude of researchers or the values recognized by them<sup>20</sup>.

The use of quantitative methods, i.e. in a survey in the study into migrant groups is unreliable. The researcher faces many difficulties that could affect the data. The major obstacle to analysis is the proper selection of respondents, which results from a lack of reliable statistics on the extent of migration. Sampling of respondents by applying a qualitative research method is different. It does not have to meet the requirement of representativeness of the data collected. The focus is on the quality of information obtained during interviews, and the snowball method to reach people who do not appear in official statistics is used as a sampling of qualitative research methodology. Other difficulties during the research on migrant communities include:

- Lack of trust / fear. The investigator meets with fear and reluctance from respondents. This leads to refusals to participate in the study or to providing false information.

- Providing answers, which, in the opinion of respondents, the researcher would like to hear. It often happens that immigrants feel obliged to their host country.

- Embarrassment. Sincere and direct responses to some of the questions in the questionnaire may cause embarrassment not only among representatives of ethnic groups. Furthermore, cultural differences between respondents and researcher, and the questions appearing in the survey may unintentionally cause embarrassment among the respondents.

- Unfulfilled dreams. Answers to the questions in the survey may often have more in common with the unfulfilled dreams of respondents than with their life situation during the test. The differences between what the respondents would like to be true, and what really is, what they would like to believe, and what they really believe, can be very significant. Information derived from them can cause significant distortion of the reality under study.

- Inadequacy of questions. What often seems like an easy question, for an average member of the researcher's culture, can be difficult or completely incomprehensible for a member of an ethnic minority<sup>21</sup>.

A researcher using qualitative methods also faces such difficulties. The difference, however, stems from the observations made during the interview and may be identified and taken into account in the context of the study. During conversations the investigator may freely formulate questions so that they are understood by the

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. D. Silverman, *Interpretacja danych jakościowych*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2007, p. 34.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. A. Górny, *Wybrane zagadnienia podejścia jakościowego...*, p. 14.

respondents. As a consequence more accurate and precise information, characterizing the functioning of the migrant community, may be obtained.

The author of this paper has conducted research on the social impact of labour migration, taking into account two research groups: people who left their home country for work purposes and currently do not reside permanently in Poland and students of pedagogy, law and administration from Rzeszow universities who due to the nature of their studies are sensitive to social problems, and who may have strong opinions on the social impact of population movement. According to the available statistics on the region it can be assumed that every resident will have encountered in their environment people who have emigrated for commercial purposes and left their families behind. In addition the students collected statements concerning the definition of the phenomenon of migration, including labour migration and its impact on the functioning of the family.

The basis of grounded theory is an adequate and systematic conceptualization of materials through coding. A preliminary analysis of the material collected has allowed the questions to generate explanations for the course of certain events e.g.:

1. What are the social consequences for people who have taken the decision to migrate for economic reasons?

and

2. How is this phenomenon (of labour migration and its consequences for the functioning of families and individuals) evaluated by young people, students who may make such a decision in the near future?

A further step has been taken to conceptualize a wider batch of materials to create categories and dimensions to describe them. The first of the categories refers to work done by the respondents which characterizes its compatibility with education, the conditioning of needs or the search for satisfaction. The second category described the migrants' contact with their home country and family. Further details concern cultural and social life and the parent-child relationship. The issues which could not be neglected in the research were the causes of migrating abroad and their effects, but also the very notion of migration. Another very important element of the method described was the preparation of notes during the study, which contained the researcher's questions and her comments and observations. The coding process and data collection were carried out at the same time. When encoding was introduced the collection of material became more organized. The next stage of research was theoretical sampling. On the basis of the notes, the questions asked and the codes created, the data collected filled the gaps to the questions as formulated. This process continues until the data collected cover the researcher's questions and the built theory can be satisfactorily consistent.

Research conducted by the author helped to formulate the definition of migration as a journey from the places we know and often love, in order to seek a better life or more frequently new sources of income and a better job. The interviewees also pointed out the consequences of this phenomenon. The most common character-

istic feature is Euro-orphanhood. A child left behind in the home country by one or both parents will have a problem in creating an image of appropriate family relations. In addition, such a child also lacks role models and is unhappy seeing the absent family members becoming estranged and the family unit falling apart. Nevertheless there are positive features of the phenomenon of migration. Above all, it gives people a chance of self-development and improved well-being, which young people cannot achieve, while remaining in Poland. Attention was drawn primarily to the opportunities to gain material resources but also to experience and independence. It is true that for many young people emigration is not a constraint, but an opportunity for a better job and a different life. Migration as an example of a specific way of dispersing populations helps develop societies. It sets in motion cultural exchange and is a natural phenomenon that drives today's world at every level of life.

The dominant reasons for leaving one's home country are professional (job loss) and family reasons (both positive e.g. getting married, as well as negative - the disintegration of married life). Employment abroad still allows the migrant to accumulate savings after satisfying their basic needs. The longer people stay abroad to work, the less frequently they return to their home country. Migration also affects relationships between spouses as well as parents and children. The most frequently cited consequence of parents' emigration was the imitation of such a family model by the "abandoned" children in their adult life. A serious effect arising from being the child of an immigrant is the lack of patterns of marriage and parenthood. The child cannot see how a regular family should function in daily life. The results appear in future life when they are trying to establish a lasting relationship. Some respondents noted a positive impact of migration on children. These people think that such a life situation forces the child to be more independent and also offers a better start in life. Emigration also affects spouses. Because of the separation they interact with each other mostly by phone or over the Internet. They visit the family more often, which may be caused by the need for contact with relatives who help them, e.g. in bringing up children.

The usefulness of grounded theory in the study of migration is of great importance. Its very big advantage is the fact that it assumes the building of a theory that may be subjected to generalizations. However, taking into account the fact that creating a unified theory of migration has not so far been successful, because migration is determined by a number of factors, the application of grounded theory to the study of migration can be a very difficult but promising undertaking.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Grounded theory is not so much a theory but a methodology emerging from the theory of data, in which the researcher is participating. This method may be supported by researchers using qualitative rather than quantitative research me-

thods. The methodology of grounded theory constructs the research process in a completely different way. The researcher does not remain a passive observer of phenomena or processes occurring in the community but he or she becomes part of the tested reality. Practical application of the grounded theory requires imposition of some rules which would enable its further implementation. Academic discourse should concentrate on matching the resulting theory with an area in which it has been studied. Moreover, this theory should be clear and sufficiently general to be applicable in other areas. The last feature of the theory is the possibility of subjecting it to control in relation to changing processes in everyday life. Fulfilment of these requirements allows for further discoveries and exploration in the context of structural changes. However, it should be considered as one of the possibilities of testing. Qualitative methods are not suitable for collecting representative data (qualitative studies are based on the selection of respondents in a purposeful, not random way, hence the lack of representativeness). Using in the assessment data from different sources and collected by different methods lead to the assumption that the conclusions are drawn correctly, logically and methodically.

SELECTED ASPECTS OF GROUNDED THEORY METHODOLOGY.  
A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STRATEGY

Summary

Scientists conducting research in the field of social sciences are constantly looking for new ways of analysing the social reality. For many years, scientific research has successfully used quantitative methods alongside qualitative research methods. The grounded theory methodology is a type of methodology providing a basis for systematic empirical research and analysis of the obtained qualitative data. The presented article reviews the main points of the grounded theory. It also aims at comparing this methodology with an ethnomethodological approach and at indicating the role of the researcher in qualitative research<sup>22</sup>.

**Keywords:** grounded theory, ethnography, category, ethnomethodology, research

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. The article was written as the outcome of the author's surveys on economic migrants and/or family members of such persons and it concerned the impact of migration on functioning of the family as a result of further reflection on the analysis and evaluation of the empirical data obtained. See: B. Skoczyńska-Prokopowicz, *Spoleczne skutki migracji zarobkowych. Na podstawie opinii mieszkańców Podkarpacia*, Wydawnictwo UR, Rzeszów 2015.

WYBRANE ASPEKTY METODOLOGII TEORII UGRUNTOWANEJ –  
JAKOŚCIOWEJ STRATEGII BADAWCZEJ

## Abstrakt

Osoby prowadzące badania naukowe w obszarze nauk społecznych ciągle poszukują nowych sposobów analizy rzeczywistości społecznej. W badaniach naukowych, obok metod ilościowych, od wielu lat chętnie wykorzystuje się metody badań jakościowych. Jedną z metodologii dostarczającej podstaw do systematycznego przeprowadzenia badań empirycznych i analizy uzyskanych danych jakościowych jest metodologia teorii ugruntowanej. Artykuł ma charakter przeglądowy, prezentujący główne założenia teorii ugruntowanej. Celem artykułu jest także porównanie metodologii z podejściem etnometodologicznym wraz ze wskazaniem roli badacza w badaniach jakościowych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** teoria ugruntowana, etnografia, kategoria, teoria