2 The Grounded Theory Methodology

As outlined in the introduction, some confusion arose from the previous research, usually with respect to the role of the individual. In order to deal with this confusion and the related open questions it was necessary to use a research approach that is open to the categories, which would emerge from the field rather than testing the hypotheses of existing theories. Thus, in order to pursue one of the goals of the present study, namely to take the perspective of the individual, a flexible and open approach was required, that enables the researcher to enter the field with a vaguely formulated research interest and develop more precise research questions and categories of analysis, or revise them in the course of the research process rather than imposing stiff constraints on the project. In this context, the present study is a suitable example of the basic claim of GTM: the necessity of discovering new (middle-range) social theories because the existing ones cannot explain every social phenomenon (Glaser/ Strauss 1968: 20).

In the present chapter, I will redraw the basic implications of a Grounded Theory methodology (GTM) for qualitative research.

2.1 THE GROUNDED THEORY METHODOLOGY AS AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

The Grounded Theory methodology, originally developed by Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser in 1967 (Glaser/ Strauss 1968), for research design, data collection and data analysis, and presentation of empirical

results meets these needs.[1] The approach is an explorative way of doing research, and it is a style rather than a method (Mey/ Mruck 2011a: 22). It allows the "controlled and verifiable discovery of theory grounded in the data, governed by rules" (Mey/ Mruck 2011a: 11).

The emphasis on the grounding, or the discovery of theory in empirical data demands a particular approach to data collection and analysis. Glaser and Strauss emphasise several main elements of a methodology in their original book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) that would ensure that this goal was reached, and the quality of research maintained at the same time:

- data collection, data analysis and the development of a grounded theory happen in a cyclical process and in relation to each other,
- the analysis transcends empirical description through abstraction or conceptual thinking; the methods applied here are specific modes of coding and constant comparison,
- "the theory should fit the data" (Glaser/ Strauss 1968: 261); this is ensured through the process of relating the emerging theory back to the empirical data by modes of theoretical sensitivity, theoretical sampling, and the constant writing of memos.

Based on their general critique of established empirical research *before GTM*, Glaser and Strauss suggest an alternative approach: in contrast to a deductive way of testing hypotheses, of "adapt[ing] some ideas, derived from a somewhat established formal theory, to the area under study" (Glaser/ Strauss 2010: 51), the researcher should "[enter] the field and investigate[...] the area under study by taking a particular sociological perspective, a focus, by having a general question or problem in mind" (ibid.). Thus, in the very beginning it is not necessary, but rather helpful not to have an elaborate theoretical concept, but to enter the field with an "open-mind" instead (Breuer 2010: 144). In this context, the *discoverers* state that the "generation of theory [...] [is] a process" (Glaser/ Strauss 2010: 49), in the course of

1 I can neither go into detail about the epistemological origins of the grounded theory approach, nor about the further developments of GT-methodologies here. The reader may find a broad and detailed introduction for example in Breuer 2018; Strübing 2014; Mey/ Mruck, 2011b; Clarke 2011; Bryant/ Charmaz 2008.

which the researcher goes back and forth between data collection, data analysis, and conceptual thinking by way of constant comparison.

The authors implicitly describe a *hermeneutic circle*, or, as Breuer put it, a "hermeneutic spiral" (Breuer 2010: 55), at the end of which (i.e. at the time of going public with the empirical results) stands an integrated theory. The idea that the "generation of theory [...] [is] a process" (Glaser/ Strauss 2010: 49) is also true for the emerging theory itself: it can only be of temporary validity and is rather an "ongoing theoretical discussion" (ibid.).

There are two forms of theory, which can be generated by way of the grounded theory methodology: material theory is bound to a particular subject studied. Formal theory, in turn, goes beyond a particular subject, and rather deals with "formal or conceptual areas of the social sciences" (Glaser/ Strauss 2010: 50). Glaser and Strauss insist that it is important to decide for one or the other because that decision has major implications for the theoretical sampling, i.e. the cases which should be compared (cf. ibid.).

2.2 MAJOR RIFTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Since Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss published their original book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, the approach has undergone major changes, both due to the need for its specification or applicability to the research reality, but also due to major rifts about central questions among its *discoverers*. As a consequence of these rifts, the critique of the original book, and the work the two *discoverers* continued individually or in other teams to date, it would be more precise to speak of several "grounded theory methodologies" (Mey/ Mruck 2011a: 12; cf. also Clarke/ Keller 2014: para. 49).

In the present study, I refer to the work(s) of the original authors, but I have also added my own considerations, in particular concerning the idea of a *coding paradigm*. Steinhardt identified two major differences between Glaser and Strauss of how to deal with issues inherent in the original version. One of them concerns the issue of theoretical sensitivity, the other one, connected to this, is that of the question of how to verify the theory in the data (Steinhardt 2015: 32).

A major point of criticism of the approach suggested by Glaser and Strauss was that of an "inductivist self-misunderstanding" (Kelle 2005: para.

24; e.g. also Kelle/ Kluge 2010: 18-21), inherent in the concept. This critique was at least partly possible because the *Discovery* was rather a "Kampfansage" (Mey/ Mruck 2011a: 13) than an elaborate and fully applicable methodological concept. With regard to that critique, several authors state that Glaser and Strauss were "aware of the [methodological] limits of a strictly inductive approach" (Mey/ Mruck 2011a,: 31). Glaser and Strauss state: "of course, the researcher does not approach reality as a tabula rasa, he must have a perspective that will help him see relevant data and abstract significant categories from his scrutiny of the data" (Glaser/ Strauss 1968: 3).

In the *Discovery* book, the authors demonstrate the concept of *theoretical sensitivity* as follows: "[...] the sociologist should be sufficiently *theoretically sensitive* [emphasis in the original], so that he is able to conceptualise and formulate a theory, which is emerging from the data. [...] But the theoretical sensitivity of a sociologist is defined by two further factors: first, his personal interests and his character come into play, second it demands him to theoretically penetrate the field he studies and to systematise his insights" (Glaser/ Strauss 2010: 62). As a consequence, "[being] 'highly sensitive' and a 'systematic approach' can be translated in the way that the researcher has ideas, from which he [...] can fetch the most by means of systematic comparative analysis" (Glaser/ Strauss 2010: 263).

Thus, the concept can be understood in two complementary ways. On the one hand, it can mean "the availability of useful heuristic concepts that make possible the identification of theoretically relevant phenomena in the data material" (Kelle 1996: 32). On the other hand, Glaser (2011) adds more precisely: "[first, the researcher's] personal and temperamental bent to maintain analytical distance, tolerate confusion and regression, while remaining open, trusting to preconscious processing and to conceptual emergence [...] [and second, his or her] ability to develop theoretical insight into the area of research combined with the ability to make something of these insights" (Glaser 2011, p. 147-8; c.f. also Mey/ Mruck 2011a: 31).

Glaser (1978) was the first to react to the inductivist critique and made a suggestion of how to apply the idea of *theoretical sensitivity*. As an attempt to make the GTM-approach more applicable, Glaser (1978) developed his *concept-indicator-model*, which is based on the epistemological assumption that empirical phenomena that we can observe are carriers of social meaning—a meaning that we can understand through our interpretation of

them a) as social beings on the basis of our everyday knowledge as members of a certain *Lebenswelt* (Schuetz 1974), and b) as researchers through an interpretation based on our professional sociological knowledge, which is laid out on a more abstract level.

In order to grasp the complexity of the potential directions, Glaser (1978) developed *theoretical codes*, which shall guide the researcher's attention in the course of dealing with the data. Interestingly, this is what Stru¨bing rather ascribes to Strauss's further work on the methodology and labels with the term "abductive thinking" (Strübing 2008: 52-4). Strauss (1987) adapted Glaser's underlying *concept-indicator-model*, which the latter had developed ten years earlier (cf. Mey/ Mruck 2011a: 24). However, in contrast, Strauss's *coding paradigm*, giving clear heuristic instructions about what to pay attention to, has been received as a solution to original ambiguity and vagueness in the German tradition of GTM-reception. It would allow the researcher to approach his or her data material with the necessary openness, yet take (sociological) pre-knowledge into account (Steinhardt 2015: 32).

This reflects the basic controversy between Glaser and Strauss in the course rather well and also the different perception and reception of the continuous work of both authors, which has been much about the role of previous knowledge in present research. Glaser's position that a grounded theory must *emerge* from the empirical data (Glaser 1978) has been rejected as an "empiricist idea" (Kelle 2005: para. 48), at least in the German-speaking reception of Glaser's individual work after the *Discovery*. In my view, the controversy between Glaser and Strauss is not so much about whether to incorporate pre-knowledge into the analysis or not, but rather about when to do so. Whereas Glaser accepts this adaptationonly at a later stage of the analysis in order to give a grounded theory space to *emerge*, Strauss incorporates pre-knowledge as a heuristic concept in the form of his suggested coding paradigm from the very beginning of data analysis. Accordingly, Kelle identifies the concept of *emergence* of theory from the data as "rather problematic" (Kelle 2005: para. 48) as well; and also Kelle and Kluge state that "Glaser *appears* to hold to the inductivist rhetoric" (Kelle/ Kluge 2010: p. 21; emphasis added). However, in addition to this, Kelle hints to the alternative laid out already in the original book: the concept of *theoretical sensitivity*. As a consequence, Kelle suggests to handle the issue with regard to the need of the researcher: Glaser's approach of the "emergence" of grounded theory from the empirical data through *theoretical*

coding opens the analysis to an experienced researcher's "broad knowledge of social theory [...] [and] his combination of theoretical concepts from different schools of thought" (Kelle 2005: para. 51). On the other hand, Strauss's *coding paradigm* provides inexperienced researchers with a clear guideline of what to pay attention to in the coding process, but at the same time may limit his or her attention to the individual, the micro-level of sociological analysis (Kelle 2005: para. 50).

2.3 THE TOOL KIT

In order to systematically analyse the collected data, Glaser and Strauss suggest a *method of constant comparison*, the first step of which is *coding* (Glaser/ Strauss 2010: 119-120). In this context, Glaser and Strauss criticise other qualitative methods but remain very vague about their own way of coding. In order to bridge this gap, after their split-up Strauss (1987) developed a *coding paradigm* based on Glaser's (1978) *concept-indicator-model*. Against his own background as a pupil of the Chicago School (cf. Breuer 2010: 75), Strauss suggested a paradigm, which consisted of theoretical categories focussing on the individual and its actions, the conditions, strategies of action and the outcome of these actions. Strauss (1987) further suggested organising the analysis in several steps, namely *open*, *axial* and *selective coding*. The analysis is laid out as an iterative process, but the individual analytical steps of coding build on each other and the step to begin with is called *open coding*.

In the GTM literature, *open coding* is often described as "to pry open the data" (Mey/ Mruck 2011a: 25), usually with the help of W-questions (who, what, where, when, etc.) as well as the application of *codes* (in the form of either sociological terms or in-vivo) as a means to get a feeling for the structure of the material. *Axial coding*, in contrast, takes place on a more abstract level and shall help to create an order between the codes or to find a relationship between them that can be integrated into analytical categories. The development of categories is already in the centre of the methodological approach in the *Discovery* book: categories are abstract concepts which derive from the analysis through the researcher's ability of abstract thinking and they have features which fill the categories with empirical content (Glaser/ Strauss 2010: 54). In order to guide the analytical process, the

researcher should develop working hypotheses and more detailed questions about the field of study; these hypotheses are necessarily derived from the data. Working hypotheses are to make assumptions about the "relationship between categories" (Glaser/ Strauss 2010: 49). Constant comparison on different levels of thinking—the comparison between data ("incidents"; Glaser/ Strauss 1968) and codes, between codes, between codes and categories, between categories—shall help the researcher to find similarities and differences and to integrate the findings into an explanatory theoretical concept, (a) key category(ies). The final step of the *coding* process is *selective coding*, in which the researcher looks for further empirical evidence or features to describe those key category(ies).

According to Glaser and Strauss, the emergence of an integrated theory from the empirical data shall be ensured through several criteria of quality. The writing of memos ("stop coding and write a memo about your ideas" (Glaser/ Strauss 1968: 113) shall help to gather flashes of inspiration immediately and in relation to the data they have emerged from, to reflect on these ideas, and to organise and reduce confusion, frustration, or other emotions related to the research process (Glaser/ Strauss 2010: 121). A second criterion is the concept of *theoretical sampling*, which describes the process of data collection and shall help control which further data is needed; the emerging theory here serves as a guideline (Glaser/ Strauss 2010: 53). The sampling, or the choice of "groups of comparison" (Glaser/ Strauss 2010: 56), is organised by creating minimal and maximal contrast groups on the basis of a previous analysis of the data material, which is aimed at finding as many empirical features for categories as possible (Glaser/ Strauss 2010: 56-60).