Grounded Theory and Philosophy of Science

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Abstract: *The aim of my contribution is to examine the relationship between Grounded Theory Methods and the epistemology concerning with the Philosophy of science. In a grounded theory approach the theory is strictly linked to practice because the elements that constitute the process of knowledge are not considered as things in themselves, but as discovered from the data along all stages of research.The Grounded Theory methodology is described as having certain specific characteristics and procedures that separate this methodologies from the others. This article set Glaserian grounded approach in a context where the methodologies are not orthodox in the first place.*

Keywords: *Grounded theory methods; hermeneutics; theory validy; meaning; ontological determination*.

1. Introduction

An empirical science can be seen as system of theories. A theory is a net useful to catch that is the researcher call *world*, that is the entire universe with its concrete- material and abstract- immaterial objects. The aim of doing science is speaking about understanding the complexity of the world investigated as the invisible knits underlining the universe of knowledge where the rule and the importance of interactions with the objects of experience cannot be denied by researcher. From this point of view, the need of a research method to study the world represents the different ways for attaining the understanding of human experience domains.

Investigating the extent to which different philosophical schools are present within Glaserian Grounded methodology has practical implications. The methodology can be used by positivists to discover what actually lies undiscovered in the empirical field of interest. It can be used by researchers inspired by hermeneutics as a tool for creating dialogical understanding and inter-subjective interpretations. Or it can be used by researcher to with a more pragmatic standpoint to create something conceptually that will be useful for the practitioners by solving empirical and conceptual problems.

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2. The root of Grounded Theory methods

By the early 1970, within the social sciences domain, the issues of relationship between objects of knowledge and knowers emerge as an important topic of debate inside traditional controversies between qualitative and quantitative theorists. In fact, the problem of a theory and its empirical foundation influences the directions and the developments of social sciences paradigm in coherent with a post-positivistic approach of epistemology of science. From this point of view, many researchers state that the social actors ascribe meanings to situation through socially shared interpretative practices (Charmaz, 2001). The principal assumptions of *Grounded Theory* methods are that the knowledge, from whom the theory is derived, is local and situated. Inside a post-modern vision of epistemology, the researcher tries to adopt many and different ways for evaluating and carrying out the investigation. Different stages of research can be seen as dialectical processes from which arouse an effective action and empowerment of knowledge with the gain of obtaining new kind of thinking viewed as original forms of praxis, informed by the action that gives rise to a new way of considering the science intended as a puzzle of people's point of views.

From a postmodern perspective of science, Grounded Theory methods constitute a particular approach of qualitative research inspired by the tradition of Symbolic Interactionism. In fact, there is a strong relationship between *Grounded Theory* methods (Glaser, 1978) and interpretative current of Symbolic Interactionism. The principal common assumptions of *Grounded Theory* methods and Symbolic Interactionism consider human actions in relation to social circumstances, rules, conditions and shared meaning attributed to all kind of the objects of knowledge. According to Blumer (1969), "an object is anything that can be indicated, pointed or referred to*"*…(p.45). He categorizes objects into three groups: (1) physical objects as chair and a house; (2) social objects as friends, family or co-workers; (3) abstract objects as moral principles or ideas. In others words, grounded theorists try to understand how the participants' behaviors and attitudes have been shaped through interaction: the transactions between epistemic subjects and its objects bring two ontologically different entities into a dialectical unity. There is no object without subject because the subject requires a object to

become itself: the Self and Other co-emerge simultaneously from the actions of subject and its relationship with the objects. The contact between the epistemic subject and the object known leads to the "trans-active" nature of knowing that affect every object of observation. What the researchers try to know is the transactions between subject and object: from this point of view, it is interesting examining the meaning that people attribute to experiences of life in natural contexts with the aim to discover the processes attaining to human acts.

In agreement with the perspective of Symbolic Interactionism, the meaning attributed to social actions, are always changing because the objects are defined and redefined by the use and the meaning attributed by people belonging to a particular social group.

From an hermeneutical point of view, human meaning can be fully understood as objects related to the interaction of actors implied in the research taking into account the context of the phenomena analyzed: in collecting the data, researchers attribute importance to the attitudes and behaviors of participants in local and situated field. This aspect implies to the researcher to "immerse himself or herself" into the phenomena for a complete understanding of the world's meanings from the perspectives of participants with the aim of reaching a deeper insight of the phenomena that allows the researcher the discovering of hermeneutical aspect of meanings associated with a substantive area of research.
Hermeneutic traditions in natural science focuses on understanding the world characterized by its inter-subjectivity established through the dialogue.

The principal objective of Grounded Method is to generate explanatory theories concerning human social interaction built into the data. This implies for the researcher the need to stay in the natural field for analyzing the data from participants' point of view using complementary procedure to collect the data with the aim of generating a theory.
The reason or the need to collecting and analyzing the data about phenomena from the participants' points of view, is due to the fact that the meaning can be understood by considering the actors' perspectives: in fact, social meaning that people attributes to the objects, can be developed and negotiated through interaction among researchers and participants.

It is interesting to note that the role of interaction is central in all research process because different interpretative frameworks are influenced by social, physical, metaphysical aspects of the contexts of phenomena.

According to Glaser (1992), the main goal of *Grounded Theory* methods is to discover the theoretical aspects underlying the patterned and systematic flows of social life. As stated by Glaser, the principal characteristic is the need to go into the field with the aim of understanding what is really "going on" in the symbolic and real word of participants. From *Grounded Theory* point of view, the role of narratives is very important in all research process influenced by thick description perspectives in which events and customs, as suggested by Geertz (1987), are considered interpretations of interpretations.

From a post-modern point of view of science, a theory is generated from the data by taking into account all the actions concerning the complexity and the variability of human beings.

In all phases of research that starts from collecting grounded data, the relationship between participants and researchers play an important role along the dimensions of knower and of what would be known. This implies to reflect on the contingent nature of knowledge; so the role of objectivity of science can be seen as a particular kind of construction of epistemology of subject that regards the Self. The consideration is on particular understanding to be attributed to the knowledge depend on the epistemic, spatial and metaphorical sense; a reflection about perceptions processes mean that the knowledge are always tied to some position of subject from a particular perspective.

The link between the knower and the object known is also a topic of debate from an hermeneutical point of view, because there are multiple meanings of phenomenon in the mind of people who experience it as well as multiple interpretations of data attached to the phenomena studied. By examining what and how people know, the aim of researcher is to understand the conditions and the context of knowing, viewed as *active process of relating* (Stacy, 2001) or an action-oriented paradigm model of theory building (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

The aim of research, inspired by an action-oriented paradigm model, is to make a sense of local and contextual situations by adopting multiple criteria for evaluating outcomes and processes attaining to situated, relational and textual personal experiences mediated by language and discourse that define the world in an attempt of describing and understanding all human elements that the life concern.

3. The principal assumptions of Philosophy

An interesting aspect of the study, from a post-modern vision of science, is the reflection about the sense to be attributed to the meaning. Inside this point of view, emerge its dynamic nature that is strictly correlated with the use of object in a particular and specific context.

This characteristic of science is recognized by Kuhn (1960) who states that "human science would never been unified in unambiguous way in the light of sufficient controversies aroused from scientific debate among philosophers and scientists"…(p.78). In the essence, from a Kuhn's point of view, human science can be viewed as a particular kind of activities undertaken by scientists who look to the world by means of different disciplines acted through a particular cognitive perspective.

The most significant outcome of Kuhn's theoretical argument shared by philosophers and scientists is to understand the science as a collective activity focused on tradition, authorities, institutions, networks and community solidarity.

So, it is interesting to reflecting on the assumptions of *Grounded Theory Methods* on the light on post-modern epistemological landscapes of science: this allows the researcher to understand many aspects related to the research: material and immaterial contexts and perspectives about the world with the aim to discover relations among all actors implied in the research processes.

A closer attention to these issues means that the theories are placed in the context of complexity that characterizes the postmodern society. From the perspective of multiple points of views of science, Wittgenstein (1967) has indicated that the scientists cannot speak about objects of science by asserting only their essence considered as the point zero of research. He writes: "[…] In fact, we attach names to things in order not to have to talk about whatever lies behind a verbal interface, instead, we talk about the only things that we know, namely the relations between the cognitive appearances of things... " (p.56). This affirmation emphasizes that this point of view is coherent with the basis of the scientific project as stated clearly by Poincaré (1952). In fact, "the aim of science is not the value of things in themselves, but the relations among things"...(p.23).

From this epistemological point of view, the study of ontological and linguistic aspects are fundamental to build a particular world model. A linguistic and ontological determination allows to researcher answer to the *Where does this phenomen exist*?

So, determinations of ontological positions refer to the need of positioning the phenomena in one or more worlds. On the other hand, linguistic determination is concerned with how the researcher speaks about the concept of world being investigated.

A question, based on searching the location of phenomena, presumes a reality with effectives possibilities where the researcher can explore the existence of phenomena. In the world of existence, the objects are characterized by external aspects constituted by their inter-subjective parts underlying the relationships. In fact, the phenomena do not exist alone from the others because they are always related, in some way, to implicit aspects that constitute the different feature of existence.

The context of phenomena has a great impact on the its study because to understand it, it is necessary to determine the context and the relations among all aspects being investigated.

4. The role of theory validity

From a Grounded Theory point of view, theorizing about human complexity is founded on systematic comparisons about findings arising from distant and disparate sources of Knowledge as emerges from the consideration of value of practice. Building theory on practice opens to new and different ways to communicate the current state of human beings in dynamic conditions attaining to attitudes and behaviors. Grounded Theory methods emphasize global and interactive aspects of the world rather than individual and absolute of features concerning the reality examined. Differently from a positivistic tradition, the Grounded theorists do not state that the event (A) is always followed by the event (B) because the most interesting things is to examine the degree to which the event (A) leads to event (B) taking into account their relationships in the range of factors considered.

From this point of view, the generation of a new theory should not proceed in isolation from existing theories because the analysis of data is a creative and iterative process including both categorization and validation of theory. Following this perspectives, all cycle of building theory the most important concepts are continually redefined.

Popper states that new theories of empirical research are built from testing pre-existing theories because the analysis of data with the aim of confirming or dis-confirming the hypotheses posed as point of research according to the principles of external falsification to avoid the absolute reach of generalization and truth and validity of scientific laws. The focus is on objective and absolute truth as correspondence to the facts.

According to Popper's perspectives, scientific progress is validated by a process of empirical falsification, that is the theories are tested and replaced by new theories with greater precision, and explanatory power than the preceding formulations.

As Popper (1972) notes: "From the point of view of objective knowledge, all theories therefore remain conjectural …"(p.23).

In terms of Glaserian grounded theory methods, certain aspects of the correspondence dimension seem relevant; for example, referring to Grounded Theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967) state that "[…]the theory must closely fit the substantive area, which it will be used"(p.67).

Glaser (1988) contends that the notion of fitness can be equated with validity because the theory describes the extent to which concepts reflect the data from which they are generated.In terms of Glaserian grounded Theory methodology, the dimension of understanding is clearly relevant as it is also described as a dialogical processes.

Further evidence of the relevance of the dimension of correspondence to grounded theory has been provided by Glaser (1978), who notes that a grounded theory should work- it should be able to explain, predict and interpret what is happening in a specific area of interest. Taken together, the requirement that a Grounded Theory should fit and work constitute the notion of relevance, which can be defined as the theory's ability to grasp the core problems and processes of the subject under investigation. In terms of grounded theory methodology, the dimension of uselfulness is clearly relevant; Glaser (1998) states that a Grounded Theory can provide two useful contributions to conceptual problems.

First, it can be open activities and challenges of that area of interest.

Secondly, in a more theoretical sense, a Grounded Theory can synthesize and integrate existing concepts into a broader view. As Glaser (2007) observed the properties and usefulness are both natural consequences of a theory well grounded in empirical field, that is the extent to which the theory is grounded in empirical data determines its ability to facilitate both understanding and usefulness for the involved actors.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasize that grounded theory construction should reflect clearly all different perspectives with the aim to offer relevant interpretations for all participants in the research. This consideration is open to a constructivist sense of the way to intend the concept of control of theory grounded on the coherence of the reality being investigated.

There are different claims concerning the validity of a theory. An interesting concept of validity claim is developed by Habermas (1967). As he states that there are three different kinds of validity that are strictly linked to a theory based on data:

- theoretical validity, that is a concept of validity coherent with the level of theoretical abstractions;
- empirical validity, means that the theory is in accordance with other empirical similar observations about the world;
- internal validity concerns the power of a theory of talking about the world.

From the Habermas' perspectives emerges the role of reflexivity of researcher because the social and personal conditions can affected the processes and the outcomes of the research. The transactions between epistemic subject and its objects bring two ontologically different entities into a dialectical unit.

A reflexive analysis of the context means considering the situations, constellations and transactions with people and the material and immaterial aspects of world. Participants become authors and researchers become participants both involved in the processes of transformations concerning the practice.

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