



Grounded Theory and the Biographical Approach: an Attempt at an Integrated Heuristic Strategy

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Preface: a Few Brief Introductory Remarks on Methodology

The methodological debate which began some years ago concerning the relationship between quantitative and qualitative research¹ does not appear to be over yet.² The attempt to draw distinctions between the so-called qualitative and quantitative methods still sees the most famous of Italian methodologists invariably taking up contrasting positions. Apart from the most radical stances that tend to eliminate any possibility of real discussion (Pera, 1991), it has to be said that the task of drawing a clear, definitive methodological distinction between qualitative and quantitative research is not only a difficult one, but one perhaps bordering on the impossible.³ What I therefore propose to do here is to submit a number of ideas as necessary premises of my own position in the present essay. The first of these ideas is that, regardless of the possibility of formulating crystal-clear criteria when distinguishing between qualitative and quantitative analyses, we nevertheless need to accept what has been called the *qualitative methods challenge*. This means I am convinced that certain *non-standard* research strategies⁴ must be given the chance to gain wider academic acceptance within the field of sociological research. In order to do so, I of course accept the need for reflection at the three levels of sociological knowledge (the epistemological, methodological and the technical),⁵ while avoiding the dominance of method viewed as a series of immobile, unchangeable and absolutely binding principles.⁶ What I mean is that control over, and a prompt, explicit report on, the rules of conduct and the procedures followed are an essential part of the researcher's task, regardless of whether the adopted research method is largely quantitative or qualitative,⁷ but also that moving away from the traditional (and mainly quantitative) methods used in sociological research becomes increasingly important if we are to understand and explain those newly emerging social phenomena that render late modernity increasingly difficult to label and standardize.

But also
to reconstruct
the past!

What I would like to do in the present essay is to propose a qualitative research approach, in other words one that is strongly weighted towards the analysis and understanding of those emergent social phenomena whose causes and effects have yet to be fully grasped. More specifically, in my attempt to meet the challenge of qualitative method, my principal aim is to support the methodological efficacy (and thus the heuristic propriety) of the synergetic,

complementary combination⁸ of grounded theory and what is generally referred to as the biographical approach.⁹ To this end I am firstly going to give a brief general introduction to the two different research methods, and then show that the idea of combining the two research methods in a synergetic, integrated manner is far from being simply a theoretical, unrealizable desire but, on the contrary, constitutes an unexpectedly profitable methodological approach. In order to demonstrate the practicability of such an approach, as illustrated by a study on youth unemployment I conducted in 1996 using this very integrated methodology, I am going to analyse some of its main features. What I want to do, therefore, is to show how the strengths of my proposed research 'model' have been seen to work in practice.

The Biographical Approach

In order to fully understand the methodological approach proposed in the following pages, it is important to have a clear idea of the context within which the two research methods in question were developed. To this end, I would like to provide a brief history of the biographical approach and of grounded theory.

The use of biographies in social studies, albeit somewhat intermittent, goes back almost a century now, and has produced some highly important material during that time. Two main, yet distinct, phases in the evolution of this approach have been identified (Poiret *et al.*, 1983). The first phase occurred in the USA, and in particular in the 'Chicago School', and was symbolized by the monumental studies of Thomas and Znaniecki.¹⁰ Their works were to mark the 'baptism' of the biographical approach to sociological research, and without any doubt figure among the classics of sociology. The sociologists of the Chicago School saw the main subjects of the study as being social organization and disorganization, with the biographical material (including letters, diaries and other personal documents) constituting the most important sociological key to the understanding of these phenomena. During the inter-war years, this highly fertile area of sociological study saw the production of numerous works based on personal documentation, and dealing with subjects such as immigration, the break-down of the family and society, suicide, youth maladjustment and juvenile delinquency, poverty and certain ethnic minorities. This was followed by intense methodological debate over whether the use of biographical material enabled one to prove (or otherwise) hypotheses and/or produce theories: the conclusion reached was that while personal documents had an intrinsic value in terms of the wealth of information and detail they contained, they could not be said to have any *proof value*.¹¹ Personal documents and other biographical material were thus ascribed secondary status from the sociological point of view, and as a result were employed increasingly less often at the very moment that American sociology reached its apex.

The second phase, on the other hand, began in Europe at the end of the 1950s. Here the approach in question developed in a different direction: in fact, it became a favoured methodological tool used in several fields of enquiry, not just in sociology, in order to gain a better understanding of 'real lives' and of social marginality, and was considered the 'research method' of social and political commitment. An instrument of learning, but also of political struggle, given that in its negation of the subject's domination by ideology (a

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domination confirmed and extolled by the triumph of 'quantofrenic' measurement in the social sciences at that time), it proposes a new method of learning, a strong alternative to positivist knowledge, and a social science committed to transforming the world. After the experience of *The Polish Peasant*, the biographical approach in Europe went in two separate directions: on the one hand, it encountered the isolated, yet highly productive Polish 'memoirs school',¹² while on the other it formed a unique, fruitful relationship with certain European left-wing schools of thought, especially in France and Italy (Campelli, 1990, p. 181). Within this complex 'partnership', the biographical approach tends to lose its already scant pretence to being a purely technical and methodological instrument, and becomes a premise for cultural and political revolution, an instrument to be used in order to gain a *different*, anti-authoritarian, anti-bureaucratic perception of society. Thus biography becomes research 'in the sense of the study of reality combined with a critical-practical activity tending towards the transformation of that same reality' (ibid.). It has never been so far-removed from the neutral, 'numerical' approach of American sociology; the need that is felt here is to get to know the subject of study from the very roots upwards, to enter into its very heart, to share it during the period of research.¹³ However, this same transition was to mark the isolation of the biographical approach (often as a result of its methodological 'superficiality'¹⁴) and its marginalization within present-day sociology (Cipolla, 1990) (despite several signs of a recent resurgence). With the subduing of political and intellectual tension, the influence of the biographical within the social sciences was also to diminish. It was only towards the end of the 1970s that sociology surprisingly showed renewed interest in this approach, with a noticeable number of empirical studies based on it, as well as an attempt to provide it with that theoretical-methodological grounding that had been somewhat lost in the studies conducted during the previous years. Thus we can say that 'the early 1980s were definitely characterised by the unexpected, albeit not always clear, success of the biographical method' (Campelli, 1990, p. 182). The reasons for this revival of the biographical approach to social science are somewhat analogous to those that led to its success during the 1960s, although the emphasis this time was now placed on a different motivating force. In fact, while its 'ideological' character had remained constant (i.e. it was to give a voice to the more marginalized aspects/sectors of society), the objective was no longer one of making the subjects of a study (those who recounted their lives and their 'contrary' cultural views) aware of the political struggle ahead: the idea now was to express the social scientist's indictment of the process of social marginalization of the weakest members of society (ibid.). The following years were to see yet another fall in the number of sociological studies conducted according to this approach, although there have been a number of very recent signs of renewed sociological interest in this kind of research.¹⁵

For obvious reasons of space, I cannot give a complete account here of my own perception of what the biographical approach is (something which I realize is far from being a foregone conclusion, however). For such an account, I suggest the reader refers to my previous publication (Chicchi, 1999). All I wish to say here is that, together with Cipolla, I believe reflection on the biographical approach cannot be circumscribed to the purely technical level of the problems that exist, despite the references to certain particular choices

made at this level; and likewise, I believe that this approach is legitimized regardless of the question of sociological truth (Cipolla, 1990),¹⁶ despite the fact that, as will shortly be shown, it may be rather unbalanced and uncertain at times. Moreover, in order not to compromise its heuristic efficacy and its particular methodological virtues, we clearly must avoid both reducing biographical material to a mere illustrative extra (Ferrarotti, 1981) or embellishment of 'traditional' sociological studies (surveys), and its literary use devoid of any methodological reflection. To summarize, then, sociological research based on the biographical approach implies awareness of the need to establish the worth of that empirical material Ferrarotti calls *primary biographical material*,¹⁷ and to establish that methodological, transversal reflection is necessary if a piece of research is to be defined as sociological.

Grounded Theory: a Qualitative Research Method

Grounded theory was proposed for the first time by two American scholars, Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, in the late 1960s.¹⁸ In their efforts to provide a scientific method of analysis capable of legitimizing the treatment of qualitative empirical data, they formulated the theoretical foundations of the new methodology and conducted a series of empirical studies based on it. In the present essay I am going to refer to this original version of the theory especially, which was subsequently developed and modified both by the two American scholars themselves and by the latter working jointly with other sociological scholars.¹⁹

The theoretical and methodological foundations of *grounded theory* are based, on the one hand, on the methodological approach of the symbolic interactionist school of thought as formulated by its most important proponents: that is, that access to the everyday world of individuals is an unavoidable precondition for sociological research (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979). On the other hand, they are based on the Weberian view of the need not only for an accurate description of social action, but also for a causal explanation using abstract theory (Ciacci, 1983; Ricolfi, 1997). Moreover, the methodology underlying *grounded theory* is based principally on an inductive research process (albeit not exclusively so)²⁰ favouring an open relationship, as free as possible from theoretical presuppositions, between the researcher and the empirical data that the latter gathers and codifies during field research work. Glaser and Strauss claim that 'to formulate a theory starting from data means that many hypotheses and concepts are not only based on data, but that they are also systematically extrapolated from the data during the course of research. The formulation of a theory implies a process of research' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 6). This research process is thus based on data: theory and scientific knowledge rest upon collected data. 'The collection of data is a fundamental prerequisite, an underlying necessity if theoretical reasoning is to produce scientifically valid, plausible results' (Cipriani, 1993, p. 38).

In the light of what has been said so far, we cannot proceed to analyse the procedures and methods envisaged by grounded theory or data-based theory²¹ without first illustrating two of its basic ideas. The first concerns the need for the *constant retroaction of the various phases in the methodological cycle*, in order that these phases may constantly influence and substantiate each another. The observation, gathering, coding and categorization of data, together with their

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theoretical elaboration, are thus activities that influence each other during the entire research process. In this way the various levels of analysis are constantly retroactive, the one upon the other:

Joint collection, coding and analysis of data is the underlying operation. The generation of theory, coupled with the notion of theory as process, requires that all three operations be done together as much as possible. They should blur and intertwine continually, from the beginning of an investigation to its end. (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 43)

The second notion regards the attempt to obtain an increasingly high level of abstraction as one proceeds with research. 'The reader will have noticed that grounded theory is organised in such a way as to virtually force a researcher to be increasingly abstract when he tries to understand a situation observed during a field study' (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979). This progressive movement by degrees of abstraction leads Glaser and Strauss to present two different research objectives. The comparative analysis of collected data may in fact be used to produce two different types of theory, *substantive theory* and *formal theory*, each of which exists at a separate level of generalization. Let us try to get a firmer grasp of the meaning of this distinction as proposed by the same writers:

By substantive theory, we mean that developed for a substantive, or empirical, area of sociological inquiry, such as patient care, race relations, professional education, delinquency or research organization. By formal theory, we mean that developed for a formal, or conceptual, area of sociological inquiry, such as stigma, deviant behaviour, formal organization, socialization, status congruency, authority and power, reward system or social mobility. [. . .] Both substantive and formal theories must be grounded in data. (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, pp. 32-33)

This clarification is an important one, because with this distinction the two writers wish to warn those researchers intending to use this research method against confusing the two different levels of generalization, and to ensure that they first have a clear idea of the aims of the research:

The analyst, however, should focus clearly on one level or other, or on a specific combination, because the strategies vary for varying at each one. For example, in our analysis of dying as a non-scheduled status passage, the focus was on the substantive area of dying, not on the formal area of status passage. With the focus on a substantive area such as this, the generation of theory can be achieved by a comparative analysis between or among groups within the same substantive area [. . .] If the focus were on the formal theory, then the comparative analysis would be made among different kinds of substantive cases which fall within the formal area, without relating them to any one substantive area. (Ibid.)

In fact, the procedures and levels of comparison to be employed by the researcher will vary depending on the level of generalization aimed at.

The Procedures and Methods of the Original Grounded Theory

Many complex data-elaboration and coding methods that have been developed over the years constitute the methodological basis of current *grounded theory*. I would like to present a summary here of the main aspects of this theory.

The analytical procedures and methods of data-based theory are designed to enable the researcher to develop a *substantive* (or *formal*) theory without overlooking the necessary criteria for any 'correct' science: its meaningfulness, the compatibility between data and theory, its generalizable nature, the possibility of reproducing it again, its precision, rigour and testability (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Thus bearing in mind the traditional criteria of scientific legitimacy, the two writers show how all research processes are based on the capacity of the researcher to identify the important features of the collected data and to give them a meaning. This 'capacity', which is also a result of experience, is defined by Glaser and Strauss as *theoretical sensitivity*. It should also help the researcher to formulate a theory in such a way that it faithfully reflects the true nature of the studied phenomenon. To put it more precisely, 'the sociologist should possess sufficient theoretical sensitivity to be able to conceptualise and formulate a theory as it emerges from the data [. . .]. The sociologist's theoretical sensitivity possesses two features. Firstly, it reflects his personal inclinations. Secondly it includes the sociologist's capacity for theoretical intuition in his field of research, together with his ability to manage and codify his intuitions' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 46). However, while the ability to use this theoretical sensitivity to grasp the subtlety and pertinence of data is a necessary prerequisite of all researchers, it is not in itself enough to guarantee scientific validity: a systematic research process involving the use of specific analytical methods is also necessary (techniques that have been formalized above all in the most recent versions of the method).

According to the original version of grounded theory, as formulated by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s, the grounding and 'generating' elements of a theory that have to be obtained through a meticulous comparative analysis of the collected data (it is no coincidence that *grounded theory* is also called the *constant comparative method*), are as follows: at the first level of generalization, the *concepts* and the conceptual *categories* together with their *properties*; at the second level of generalization, the hypotheses or *generalized relations* between the categories and their properties. Let us now look in more detail at their characteristics, before proceeding to describe the proposed research process.

The conceptual units (*concepts*) emerge at the first encounter with the reality being studied, and are labels indicating empirical evidence (they represent events, repeated situations, differences, etc.). The type of concept that needs to be formulated from the relationship with the data is to have two basic characteristics: firstly, it must be *analytical*, that is, sufficiently generalized to indicate characteristics of substantive things, rather than just representing itself. Secondly, it must be capable of *sensitizing*, that is, of producing a meaningful image that enables each person to grasp the object of reference in terms of his own personal experience (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).²² The formulation of concepts of this kind, at any stage of a study, indicates a move towards the construction of a category as the relationship between concepts at a higher level of abstraction. A *category* is itself a conceptual part of theory, while a *property* is an aspect

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or element of a category. We should always bear in mind that both categories and their properties are given by the direct relationship with data, even though they may be said to 'exist' independently from the empirical evidence that generates them. They may be located, as already mentioned, at different levels of abstraction. The lowest level is that which emerges relatively quickly during the initial data-collection phase (low level of generalization). The sociologist then looks towards the other potential categories that may be obtained, until all the conceptual categories that can be extrapolated from the collected data are full: certain that there is no further need to return to the field, he then goes on to build hypotheses (high level of generalization). These are obtained from the relations that may be construed among the various categories, and between the categories and their properties. The combination of the various hypotheses leads to the highest possible level of generalization: the construction of the theory.

I am now going to examine the generalization process leading up to the formulation of a 'grounded' theory in terms of the examples given by the two authors in question in relation to a well-known study they made (Glaser and Strauss, 1965) of the status passage of certain terminal hospital patients. The first step is to codify all *incidents* into as many conceptual categories as can be obtained, that is, until their saturation point is reached. One of the first categories obtained by the authors from the data they had collected during their study was the category of 'social loss'. 'For example, the category of the 'social loss' of dying patients emerges immediately from a comparison of the replies given by the nurses when asked to comment on the forthcoming death of their patients' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 105). It is clear the nurses tended to evaluate the degree of 'social loss' the death of a patient would represent for the latter's family, for his/her chosen career, for society in general: 'He was so young', 'He was to be a doctor', 'She had a full life', or 'What will the children and her husband do without her?'.

At this point, having codified the category, we must continually *compare* the various meaningful incidents that emerge from the new interviews with other incidents that emerged during previous interviews and that were codified within exactly the same category.²³ The continual comparison of meaningful incidents within a codified conceptual category will thus quickly lead us to the generalization of its theoretical *properties* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 106). To extract the properties from the various categories, the researcher must therefore try to calculate its possible dimensions, the condition under which it is accentuated or minimized, its main consequences, its relationship with the other categories, and all its other potential properties. The example given by the authors helps us once again to understand this transition:

For example, while we constantly compared the data regarding the reaction of the nurses to the 'social loss' of the dying patient, we realised that some patients were seen by the latter as a considerable social loss, whereas others were seen as a limited social loss, and that the patient's health tends to vary positively in relation to the degree of social loss. Moreover, it was clear that some of the social characteristics that the nurses used to establish the degree of social loss were immediately noticed (age, ethnic group, social class), whereas others were only perceived after a certain period of time spent with the

patient (job, merits, status, education). This observation made us realise that the perceived 'social loss' may change in the meantime, as further attributes of the patient are discovered. (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 106)

At this point in the study, having gone through the same process with all the categories obtained, Glaser and Strauss invite us to take note of, and reflect upon, the collected material, and to resolve any logical contradictions or incongruities present. Once all the categories, together with those properties that can be extrapolated from the research context, have been codified, then they have to be *integrated* in order to produce the underlying hypotheses of the theory to be generated. In order to formulate a complete theory, we also need to draw its boundaries: this is done by *underlining the affinities that emerge from the comparison between the categories and their properties* in order to get a smaller number of concepts located, however, at a higher conceptual level. Finally, only 'when the researcher is sure that his analytical framework forms a substantive, systematic theory, that is constitutes a suitable and accurate summary of the subject being studied, and that it is drawn up in a form that others working in the same field could utilise, can he then confidently publish his results' (ibid., p. 113).

Subsequent Formulations of Grounded Theory

Subsequently, Glaser and Strauss tried to clarify and perfect the above-described procedure in further publications.²⁴ Furthermore, Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, in their book *Basics of Qualitative Research* published at the beginning of the 1990s, presented a more systematic and clear (albeit rather complex) interpretation of the *grounded theory* research method.

They identify a series of coding procedures arranged on a progressive scale of abstraction: *open coding*, *axial coding* and *selective coding*. Each of these stages in research is linked in turn to certain specific sampling procedures (*theoretical sampling*) aimed at facilitating recognition of those things and incidents of acknowledged heuristic value.²⁵ At the beginning of the research, the researcher must choose, in accordance with the aims of the research, the group to be studied, the type of observational instruments to utilize, and the ways of contacting the subjects to be interviewed. At the beginning, the decisions concerning the number of interviews or observations to be made also depends on the moment of access to the field of study, on the resources available, on the research objectives and on the energy available. Later on, these decisions may be modified according to the evolution of the theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 179). Sampling in grounded theory depends upon the logic and aim of the 'three basic types of coding procedures'. Moreover, it is closely bound to theoretical sensitivity, regardless of the type of coding involved. 'The more sensitive you are to the theoretical relevance of certain concepts, the more likely you are to recognise indicators of them in the field and in the data' (ibid., p. 180). However, let us now analyse the various phases in the above-mentioned research.

The first phase consists of *open coding*. The aim of this initial foray into the field is that of discovering, naming and categorizing the phenomenon;

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Naming

subsequently, the various categories will have to be formulated in terms of their dimensions and properties. Naming of the phenomenon means applying conceptual labels to the incidents and to the other meaningful aspects of the object being studied (*concepts are the basic building blocks of theory*). There are two fundamental analytical procedures involved in the coding of data: the making of continual comparisons, and the asking of questions. In *open coding* these two procedures find expression in the creation of categories. In fact, the classification of those concepts obtained from initial field work is given by a continual comparison of the same concepts. Those concepts belonging to similar aspects of the phenomenon thus produce categories at a higher level of abstraction (through a reduction in the number of conceptual units with which to work). The creation of conceptual categories with which to codify the phenomenon also means labelling phenomena in order to proceed with the generation of theory. How are categories to be named? The two authors propose two criteria: (1) choosing the name that seems to be the most logically correlated to the data; (2) names should be 'graphical' in that they should indicate their corresponding empirical referents. The names chosen can be modified, however, during the research process, and they have the simple, yet important, job of reminding the researcher of the incident that emerges from the data.

When categories start to emerge, then the researcher has to identify the properties and dimensions of each of them. The properties are the characteristics or attributes of a category, while the dimensions represent the position of a property along a continuum. Properties and dimensions are important because they enable the researcher to better compare the categories, thus creating the basis for the development of the hypotheses of a theory.²⁶ The authors also suggest certain *ad hoc* techniques to optimize the researcher's theoretical sensitivity during data coding: e.g. multiple-choice questions, detailed analysis of words and sentences, *flip-flop techniques* (i.e. changing and reversing of points of view, and imagining the opposing point of view), comparison of different positions, the refusal to take for granted what others confidently claim (this conduct should act like a red flag to the researcher, getting him to be extremely careful with regard to certain words or sentences feigning certainty and truth).²⁷

Open coding is followed by *axial coding*. This consists of the reorganization of data so as to obtain connections between the categories (and between the categories and any subcategories) that have been formulated. This coding involves a complex series of procedures and comparisons which are conducted using a coding paradigm proposed by the two authors. 'In grounded theory we link subcategories to categories in a set of relationships denoting causal condition, phenomenon, context, intervening conditions, action/interaction strategies, and consequences. Highly simplified, the model looks something like this:

- (A) CAUSAL CONDITIONS > (B) PHENOMENON >
- (C) CONTEXT > (D) INTERVENING CONDITIONS >
- (E) ACTION/INTERACTION STRATEGIES >
- (F) CONSEQUENCES.

Criteria for open coding

Use of the model will enable you to think systematically about data and to relate them in very complex ways' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 99).

By *causal conditions* the two authors mean the incidents, accidents and events that 'guide' the development of a phenomenon. *Phenomenon* here refers to the main idea, the incident or event to which a series of actions are connected. The *context* is the particular spectrum of conditions in which the strategic actions and interactions take place. The *intervening conditions*, on the other hand, are the structural conditions that support the strategic actions and interactions involving the phenomenon. These conditions either facilitate or tend to hinder the methods adopted in a specific context. As far as the final two points, (E) and (F), are concerned, there is no need for any further explanation, as they concern the strategic actions and interactions employed in managing and handling the phenomenon, together with the consequences resulting from them.

Selective coding is the selection of the phenomenon that plays the central role, interacting as it does with all the other categories. It thus involves the selection of a *core category* into which all the other categories are to be systematically integrated. At this point the integration of the elements that have been coded up to now may proceed within the framework of a story, that is a narrative representation of the main subject (phenomenon) of research. Strauss and Corbin's illustration of grounded theory procedures does not end with selective coding, but also envisages the minute description of a series of specific techniques (conditional matrix, memos, diagrams) aimed at the improved practical management of the data collected in the field.²⁸

This brief summary of data-based theory clearly cannot convey all the information and examples suggested by the fathers of grounded theory in their own writings (which have been repeatedly cited here); however, I believe that it should be sufficiently complete for the purposes of the present essay. Finally, to sum up, I would like to present a brief, practical guide to the main characteristics of grounded theory in the following schedule:

Schedule 1

1. *The 'circular' methodological cycle*
The collection, coding and analysis phases must be characterized by a constant retroaction of each phase on the others.
Each individual phase may only be considered over at the end of research, and thus after the formulation of the theory.
2. The research process, aimed at the gradual development of a theory strictly connected to the data gathered, proceeds in a progressive manner, from the lowest to the highest level of abstraction:
empirical reality > concepts > categories (with their properties and dimensions) > hypotheses > theory (substantive or formal).
3. The methodological organization of research is based upon a mainly inductive system

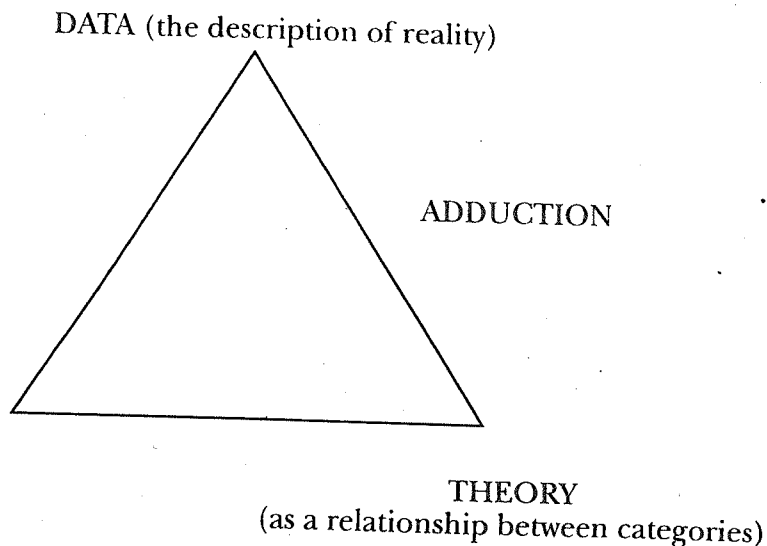
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The Hoped-for Meeting between Two Different Strategies of Research

Having very briefly illustrated the general characteristics of the biographical approach and of grounded theory, in this second part of our work I would like to use an empirical study I conducted in 1996 into the problem of youth unemployment to show the why and wherefore behind the potential integration of these two methods. There are a number of reasons why I chose this methodological option, including the specific object of the research I was to conduct, the stimulus and 'support' from certain methodologists, and in particular a series of methodological reflections I made at the time. Let us take a closer look at these reasons for such a choice.

First of all, I decided to study a phenomenon like youth unemployment, which had yet to clearly reveal all its various complex aspects, using a research method that would enable me to trace its new social conformation from the empirical material available, rather than through the testing of previously codified theoretical hypotheses. I was faced, in fact, with the task of studying an emerging phenomenon resulting from ongoing radical changes in the socio-economic system which had still to be studied in any real depth, a phenomenon of a rather complex nature incorporating a variety of different economic, legal, psychological and sociological aspects. This led me to adopt a specifically qualitative method for my research. In fact, the biographical approach's main aim is not that of testing already-formulated theories, but of suggesting the bases for new ones. The biographical approach, as Enzo Campelli cleverly observed, is moreover the method that possesses, among others, the virtue of preserving the entire socio-historical nature of the phenomenon being studied: rather than breaking it up into different segments, this approach maintains a 360° view of its subject (Campelli, 1982). Having decided to utilize this type of approach, a number of problems remained, however, and in particular the difficulty encountered during the analytical phase of managing

Focused interview such a wealth of empirical material, so rich in information, as that resulting from such an approach. Moreover, these problems could only be re-dimensioned by getting around that which Daniel Bertaux calls the *impasse of the (biographical) maximalist approach*,²⁹ by choosing not to collect life stories that include all and every single aspect of the subjects' past, but rather to focus just on those biographical features that are in some way connected to the world of employment (and of unemployment).

Thus, following these methodological suggestions, I reached the decision to try and integrate biographical research with grounded theory, as this latter seemed capable of resolving this particular problem, through the adoption of a series of well-coded data-analysis procedures. In Costantino Cipolla's work entitled *Oltre il soggetto per il soggetto* [*Beyond the subject on behalf of the subject*], the author states that while the biographical method has a number of undoubted strengths, sociologically speaking it also has a number of weaknesses and faults in certain phases of its methodological cycle (above all, in our opinion, in the coding and analysis of the collected data). In this book, Cipolla sustains that the biographical approach needs to be 'integrated with other heuristic methods in a complementary, symmetrical manner' (Cipolla, 1990, p. 111).

Furthermore, Roberto Cipriani explicitly states that 'Perhaps the date-based, or grounded, theory is best used in conjunction with the biographical approach' (Cipriani, 1993).³⁰ Although these views would not in themselves have been enough to justify the integration of two different research methods, nevertheless careful methodological reflection was required in support of such a decision. I believe that methodological 'support' can be found in certain *basic similarities*³¹ that may be shown to exist between the nature of biographical research in Daniel Bertaux, in particular (according to his ethno-sociological view of the *récits de vie*), and the subsequent developments of grounded theory.

These basic similarities consist of the following (closely linked) characteristics:

- both methods aim at the generation of new theory from data, rather than at the proof/falsification of existing theory;
- both construct reality by means of *induction* (although perhaps *adduction* would be the more suitable term) as opposed to *deduction*;
- in the case of both methods, hypotheses are formulated retrospectively: and when entering the field of research, preference is given to the use of *sensitizing* concepts (in Bertaux: opening *questions*) open to improvisation and gradually modifiable during the course of research;
- in both cases, the technical and instrumental approach, together with observation of the object of study, are not bound by a previously construed, inflexible analytical format;
- in both cases, the choice of the individual cases to be included in a representative sample is not subject to considerations of statistical probability, but guided by what Glaser and Strauss call theoretical sampling, and what Bertaux calls the principle of *data saturation* and the principle of the *negative case*,³²
- in both cases, the 'sampling' depends upon precise, conscious strategic decisions made by the researcher (and which do not therefore make any

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claims to objectivity for the purposes of credibility), who uses theoretical-substantive hypotheses to formulate an empirical sample group taking in all those subjects with specific characteristics of interest for the purposes of the study;

- sociological knowledge in both cases is second-level knowledge (knowledge of knowledge). That is, the practical knowledge of the subjects is considered as an essential means by which to gain further (hence second-level) knowledge of vital importance for any understanding of the social system;
- the generalizations are in both cases the result of the discovery of 'general mechanisms' that give a specific shape to social relations, which in turn establish the situations and the logic of actions.

Finally, I think importance should be given to one divergence between the *récits de vie* and grounded theory. Different scholars have different views about the way existing writings relating to the studied subject should be used. In fact, while in Bertaux' ethno-sociological research the author does not disdain from using concepts already formulated by other researchers as a theoretical filter and guide for field research, grounded theory (especially in the earlier versions) considers such practice as constituting a bias to be avoided in order not to be conditioned when gathering and analysing data; although the position of the formulators of grounded theory was to gradually 'soften' on this particular point.³³ This is why I think it important to point out that a synergetic collaboration between the two different methods may, for example, enable us to avoid the procedural imperfections present when just one of the two methods is adopted. In fact, the need to develop sociological sensitivity towards the phenomenon that constitutes the subject of study must also involve a closer analysis of past theories on this matter.

Summing up, then, we have to bear in mind that it is not easy, in a truly synergetic interaction of two different approaches to research, to distinguish at all times the contribution made by the one or the other: however, we may say that the more specific contribution of the biographical approach has enabled us to undertake our study of youth unemployment without the need for any drastic 'surgery', and to follow the path (albeit broken at times) of the diachronic development of individual cases in relation to the problem of employment/unemployment. Grounded theory has helped us, on the other hand, to remain open to various possibilities during the generation of our theory and, above all, during the phase of elaboration, analysis and interpretation of our data, to handle the complexity and enormity of the biographical material found.

In conclusion, I would like to offer the reader a view of certain sections of the data analysis framework we used, according to the procedures provided for by grounded theory, for the elaboration of the explanatory hypotheses (see Tables 1 and 2).

The gradual spreading of qualitative research methods has led numerous scholars over the past few years, in the wake of similar experiences in quantitative research, to create computer programs designed to provide the researcher with support during the coding and interpretation of the qualitative data collected in the field. There are even programs, such as *Kwalitan*, *Nud.Ist* or *Atlas.ti*, that have been specifically designed to satisfy the requirements of grounded theory.³⁴ Of course, although this may mean that the frameworks

Table 1. Data analysis framework. Life story No. X

Concepts	Categories and subcategories	Properties	Dimensions of the properties
Childhood	1. Work and childhood	General interest in	Considerable – average – little
Puberty	—dream of becoming ...	Practicality of wish	Considerable – average – little
Interest in world of employment	—interest in parents' work	Degree	High – average – low
...			
Unemployment in the family	4. Transition from school to work	Difficulty of	Great – average – little
Transition		Incompleteness	High – average – low
Discouragement	—relationship between school and the world of employment	Help from the school	Max. – average – min.
Boredom		Handled individually	Max. – average – min.
Adverts	—intermittence (alternation) school/work	Degree	Max. – average – min.
Relatives	—biding time in educational establishments		Yes – no
Friends		Degree of choice	Training course/school
Curriculum		Length of time	Max. – average – min.
Public	—disorientation/discouragement	Degree	Considerable – average – min.
competitions for positions of employment			Max. – average – min.
Independence		Duration	Long – short
	—submerged economy, part-time as a compromise		Yes – no
Independence	—'I'm looking for a steady job'	Desirability	High – average – low
...			
Institutional	6. Job insecurity: the world of 'odd jobs'	Number of experiences	Many – average – few
Casual	—'odd jobs'	Valuable professional experience?	Considerable – little
No relationship		In keeping with subjects studied?	Yes – no
Guidance	—writing curriculum vitae	Greater experience required	Yes – no
Distance school work	—illegal work (submerged economy)	Experience	Considerable – little – none
Illegal work		Way of seeing the situation	Dissatisfied/indifferent/deferent
Part time	—social relations at work	Level of consolidation	High – average – low
'Shame'	—feeling of insecurity	Degree	High – average – low
Emancipation	—the 'shame'	should you be ashamed of being unemployed?	A lot – a little – not at all
I don't know what to do!		Perception of shame	High – average – low
The adult world	—blame for unemployment	Responsibility	Of others – personal
Adolescence	—leisure time	Degree of organization	High – average – low
...			

Table 2. Some sections of the summary 'open coding' and the basis for 'axial coding' (life stories 1–10)

Concepts	Dimensions of the properties	
	Categories and subcategories*	Properties
Childhood	1. Work and childhood	General interest in
		SDV No.: 710 568 49

Table 2. Some sections of the summary 'open coding' and the basis for 'axial coding' (life stories 1-10)

Concepts	Categories and subcategories*	Properties	Dimensions of the properties
Childhood	1. Work and childhood	General interest in	SDV No.: 7,10 5,6,8 4,9 Considerable - average - little
Puberty	—the dream of becoming ...	Practicality of wish	7,8 5,10, 4,6 Considerable - average - little
...			
Nursery school	3. School forges affection		1,2,6,8 4,5,7 3,9,10 Yes — no
School		Duration	1,2,8 4,5,6 3,7,9,10 Long - average - short
Friends		Voluntary choice?	1,4,6,10 3 2,5,7,8,9** Max. - average - min.
Curriculum		Length of time	1,5,7,8,9 2,3,4 High - average - min.
...			
Institutional	6. Job insecurity: world of 'odd jobs'	Number of experiences	2,7,8,9 3,4,5 1,6,10 Many - average - few
Casual	— 'odd jobs'	Valuable professional experience?	1,2,3,5 7,8,9 4,6,10 Considerable - little
No relationship		In keeping with subjects studied?	1,3,5,7 4,6,10 2 8,9 Yes — no
...			
Emancipation	—the 'shame'	One should be ashamed of being unemployed	4,6 1,7,8 2,3,5,9,10 A lot - little - not at all
I don't know what to do!		Perception of shame	7,9 5,6,8,10 1,2,3,4, High - average - low
The adult world	—blame for unemployment	Responsibility	2,5,9,10 1,7,8 4,6 Of others — personal
...			

* Of course, it is not certain that the categories shown below are all present in each life story; in fact, this depends on the development of the dialogue during each interview.

** The arrows show how one proceeds in the axial coding phase (comparison between, and linking of, codified categories and subcategories) and indicate the important recurrences.

presented here are rather anachronistic, it can only increase the heuristic potential of our present qualitative research 'model'.

Notes

1. Officially recognized in an important conference held in Parma in the mid-1990s, the proceedings of which, duly edited by Cipolla and De Lillo (1996), are cited in the text.
2. See the concept of *uncertain distinction* in Cipolla and De Lillo (1996).
3. It is not one of our intentions to discuss this point here, but suggest that the reader looks at the article by Enzo Campelli, 'Metodi qualitativi e teoria sociale' [qualitative methods and social theory] in Cipolla and De Lillo (1996).
4. To use the rather unsatisfactory, albeit efficacious, negative term suggested by Marradi.
5. See Cipolla (1991, p. 34).
6. Cf. Feyerabend (1975) and Campelli (1999).
7. Regardless of the difficulty in clearly establishing a general methodological difference between qualitative and quantitative analyses, there can be no doubt that any sociological study tends towards either one (quantity) or the other (quality) kind of research method. The 'indicators' of this imbalance are, of course, the main topic of the current debate mentioned above. Given that a closer examination of this question is not the principal purpose of the present essay, we suggest the reader considers the definition given by Marradi for all qualitative studies. Part of the non-standard group, they are characterized by: greater emphasis on the everyday world of social subjects; a strong tendency towards direct contact with the object (subject) of the study; the circumstantial nature of any generalizations (dependency on the context of the study); a prevalently inductive nature; oriented more towards the understanding of certain hidden worlds of meaning than the causal analysis of general assertions; the considerable importance given to the sociological sensitivity and capacity of the researcher, and finally by a view of causation as a process to be reconstructed in narrative terms. See A. Marradi, *Due famiglie e un insieme*, in Cipolla and De Lillo (1996, pp. 167-178).
8. C. Cipolla (1990); in particular p. 111ff.
9. In truth we believe that the most appropriate methodological and technical form of the biographical approach to be followed in creating this particular combination is that of Daniel Bertaux' *récits de vie* (Bertaux, 1976, 1997). With regard to the aptness of the term 'approach' when referred to those studies that make use of bibliographical material, see Bichi (1999).
10. *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918-1927) consists of five volumes, and was published between 1918 and 1927 (the complete edition). The research material consists in the main of the self-produced biographical material (e.g. 427 letters) of Polish peasant-farmers who had emigrated to the United States. The two writers obtained the documents through an advert in the paper, in which they asked such persons to send in material recounting their life stories, from their childhood to the present day. The specific subject of the study was the change and disintegration of the traditional family of origin in relation to the choice of emigration, to the economic situation and to the new urban lives of these immigrants. The writers saw their use of the biographical material they had gathered as the means whereby sociology could mediate the relationship between subjective characteristics and constantly changing socio-cultural factors. This study was widely criticized, especially from the methodological point of view. The most famous criticism was that made by H. Blumer, who refused to legitimize the role of personal documents in establishing empirical truths or falsehoods; however, these criticisms, albeit often justifiable, failed to compromise the importance of this work which is to this day considered a classic of sociology.
11. M. De Bernart (1990, p. 356).
12. For further details, see the volume edited by Cipriani (1987).
13. '[...] the bases and praxis of research are transformed, and it now becomes "shared-research". From sociology as an indifferent technique, a socially neutral administrative procedure, we pass over to sociology as a meaningful form of involvement in human problems and an opportunity of self-development' Ferrarotti (1981, p. 97).
14. Cipolla, speaking of D. Montaldi, author of a series of studies based on the biographical method between 1960 and 1970, points out the absence of any adequate methodological elaboration of data: 'The stories often appear disconnected from one another, at least in

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certain studies, [...] without any treatment of the basic information aimed at any typological attempt to connect these stories with the class they belong to. The same relationship between action and knowledge is founded upon a rather vague basis of uncertain utility' (Cipolla, 1990, p. 97).

15. 'The second part of the essay aims to demonstrate the suitability of the life-story method to an analysis of a society like ours that seems to live on the stories it tells of itself' (Bovone, 1994, p. 16).
16. In particular, paragraphs 2 and 3 of chapter 2.
17. The biographical material *par excellence* are the *Life Stories* where not only their 'objective' nature is emphasised, but also their 'subjective' weight within the framework of a *complex, reciprocal* form of interpersonal communication between the narrator and the reader.
18. Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss came from two different fields of sociological research, but they made an equal contribution to the formulation of the theory in question. A. Strauss received his sociological training at the University of Chicago, where he gained considerable experience in the field of qualitative research. He was greatly influenced by the other sociologists he met there, and in particular those belonging to the school of *pragmatists* and symbolic interactionists; men of the calibre of R. E. Park, W. I. Thomas, John Dewey, G. H. Mead and H. Blumer. Barney Glaser, on the other hand, came from a different school of sociological thought. He was influenced by the work of P. Lasarsfeld (principal innovator of modern quantitative research), and studied at Columbia University where he conducted his early research work. His main contribution to *grounded theory* consisted in his showing that qualitative research also required a series of systematic procedures by which to codify data gathered and to test the hypotheses formulated during research work.
19. The most recent work on this subject is that by A. L. Strauss and J. Corbin (1990). Another extremely clear and simple work is that of B. Starrin (1997).
20. '[...] deductive thought, like inductive thought, is part of an analytical process. For example, it may so happen that the analyst is not immediately capable of finding proof of a process in the data available [...]. When this happens, the analyst may use deduction and draw up hypotheses of possible and potential situations of change, then go back to the data or into the field and look for proof supporting, rejecting or modifying this hypothesis' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 148).
21. 'Literally speaking, we should say that the theory is "founded", "grounded", but it is a good idea to further specify the contents of this basis, that is, empirical data. Thus we can rightly speak of a theory based on data, and the expression "data-based" seems to give a clear idea of Glaser and Strauss' original concept, keeping the substance of the idea while giving an even more explicit meaning with the reference to data' (Cipriani, 1993, p. 38).
22. For a more detailed discussion of sensitizing concepts, see Blumer (1964, pp. 3-10).
23. 'While coding an incident for a category, compare it with the previous incidents in the same and different groups coded in the same category' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 106).
24. See, for example, Glaser (1978) and Strauss (1987).
25. *Open sampling* corresponds to the open coding phase. This phase of sampling aims to detect the greatest possible number of potentially relevant categories (together with their properties and dimensions), and is open rather than specific or guided. *Relational and variational sampling* corresponds to axial coding, and its main aim is to find as many differences as possible in the dimensions of the collected data. Finally, selective coding is linked to *discriminate sampling*, which must be *direct and deliberate*, that is, it must 'consciously' choose who and what to sample in order to obtain the necessary missing data. In discriminate sampling the researcher must choose the places, the people and the documents that offer the chance to test his *story line* (the conceptualization of the most important phenomenon), to improve the relations drawn between the categories and to fill out the more underdeveloped categories. Thus we need to test our hypotheses against reality (the data). The question is: how long must sampling carry on? The limit is provided by the point of *theoretical saturation*. 'The general rule in grounded theory research is to sample until theoretical saturation of each category is reached' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 188). That is, until (1) no further meaningful data emerge in relation to a category; (2) the category has fully developed; (3) relations among the categories have all been established and substantiated.
26. In order to get a better grasp of this distinction, the authors suggest we examine the following table:

Category	Properties	Dimension range (used for every event)
Watching	Frequency Extent Intensity Duration	Often – never More – less High – low Long – short

27. For a detailed account of the said techniques, see 'Techniques for enhancing theoretical sensitivity', chapter 6 of the work by Strauss and Corbin (1990).
28. The same authors of the work in question suggest that the reader proceeds using the procedures formulated by them for grounded theory, moving gradually from a lower to a higher level. At the initial level, the researcher should only utilize open and axial coding, while selective coding, together with all the complex data handling techniques, can be used at the higher level.
29. The biographical approach should be employed for the purpose of furthering research and the achievement of its objectives: thus the life of the interviewee should be explored by focusing on one particular aspect of that life (Bertaux, 1997).
30. See also Cipolla and De Lillo (1996, p. 299).
31. The heuristic integration we propose here between *récits de vie* and *grounded theory* lies at the very limits of the *horizontal integration between two types of survey* proposed by Cipolla (Cipolla, 1990). In fact, in our case this is not a question of proceeding in the same parallel direction, using two different types of research in order to gain an understanding of the same phenomenon, looking for moments when the two methods complement each other or moments of reconstruction. As a result of their 'methodological common denominator', what we are doing is employing the two different research methods during the various phases of the same methodological cycle, continually taking advantage of the strengths and the technical-methodological 'recommendations' of the one to aid the other, and vice versa.
32. Bertaux states that if we 'survive' the negative-case test (i.e. the negation of our working hypotheses), then we will have 'proven', unless otherwise shown, such hypotheses (Bertaux, 1997, p. 26).
33. See, for example, the views of Strauss and Corbin on this point (1990).
34. See, for example, Ricolfi (1997, chapters 5, 6).

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