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The Methodological Convergences between Symbolic Interactionism and Constructivist Grounded Theory

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Abstract This article explores the connection between Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) and Symbolic Interactionism (SI) in the light of the methodological position presented in Herbert Blumer's *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. The examination of this connection will take place in three steps: firstly, I will offer some preliminary considerations with regard to 'variant forms' in Grounded Theory (GT) as well as cite the present debates about the differences and similarities between different approaches within it; then, I will describe the essential characteristics of the 'methodological position' of SI and build some lines of continuity between these elements and the main tenets of constructionist GT; finally, I will present ten conceptual expressions and methodological practices in which it is possible to verify the methodological convergence between the two perspectives.

This analysis makes it possible to consider the Constructivist Grounded Theory as a set of coherent principles, methods, and research practices from the point of view of a scholar inspired by the SI's perspective. However, the peculiar reference to the methodological position of SI does not exhaust the set of possible epistemological and methodological sources, from which the perspective of GT derives. Instead, it represents a controversial point, with regard to which the debate still appears to be particularly heated.

Keywords constructivist grounded theory, symbolic interactionism, Herbert Blumer, grounded theory, methodological alignment

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The 'Variants' of Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory (GT) constitutes one of the most consolidated methodological perspectives in the 'qualitative' research and is one of the most discussed and debated ones, especially among its own supporters. Without a doubt, this debate signals the vitality of this perspective; at the same time, fifty years after its 'foundation' by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, GT shows a certain tendency to internal "fragmentations" (Kenny, Fourie 2014), which poses the risk of it becoming, at least partially, counterproductive, especially for young scholars who tend to approach this perspective with the expectation of finding a coherent and reliable reference for their empirical research. It is not coincidental that many essays contribute to the debate around GT being heated, underlining its variety and diversity. One of the most recent examples in this regard is the contribution of Anthony Bryant (2019), in which he discusses – with numerous references and with the usual sharpness – some of the central and controversial points about the current debate surrounding GT. Bryant's text is the result of a study inspired by a thorough exploration of the essays that constitute the collection, edited by himself together with Charmaz, namely *The Sage Handbook of Current Developments in Grounded Theory* (2019) – a sequel to *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory* (2007). Many other essays underline the existence of a variety of internal GT approaches, contributing to the discussion about common denominators on the one hand and points of divergence on the other (Annells 1996; Kenny, Fourie 2015; Rupsiene, Pranskuniene 2010; Priya 2016).

Today, the GT perspective is a multi-faceted framework of references, articulated through 'approaches' distinguished by virtue of different remarks assigned to some characteristics present in Glaser's and Strauss' original formulations. In this regard, it is possible to identify four different GT formulations. The first two of them originate from the parting between the two founders: the 'classic' approach was promoted and is still supported by Barney Glaser, while Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin developed their own version of GT, in which the theoretical and procedural dimensions acquire a greater coherence with respect to the roots of philosophical pragmatism. Further, Kathy Charmaz, a student of Strauss, is the one who assumed the role of the promoter of the third approach, namely the Constructionist Grounded Theory. This role has led the author to be considered as one of the most renowned international interpreters of this perspective. The final development within GT comes from the works of Adele Clarke, who takes into consideration some suggestions previously put forward by Strauss, and integrates them within the cultural frames of post-modernism, generating a perspective called 'Situational Analysis' (Clarke 2005).

It is not the purpose of this article to describe and contrast the essential characteristics of these four orientations; here I refer to the literature already available on this subject (among the most recent are: Kenny, Fourie 2015; Apramian, Cristancho, Watling, Lingard 2016; Rieger 2019). Instead, here it is worth emphasizing how these approaches offer, by virtue of their different epistemological and methodological implications, meaningful frames of reference for scholars and researchers

of different backgrounds and interests. In fact, as Méabh Kenny and Robert Fourie (2015:1270-1271) note, those different orientations lean on a common basis that constitutes the feature that identifies and characterizes the GT perspective, distinguishing it from other perspectives in the wide arena of qualitative research. These elements are constituted by the reference to theoretical sampling, constant comparison, and the use of memo writing as a research strategy, as well as to the difference between substantive and formal theory. In this sense, Kenny and Fourie have clearly described the relation that exists between diversity and similitude within GT:

Although this history of GT documents the schismatic nature of the three variations of GT, it is important to recognise that they nevertheless retain some familial resemblance. Despite Glaser's protestations, Straussian and Constructivist GT still claim a kinship with the original Classic GT. Indeed, Straussian and Constructivist grounded theorists continue to embrace a number of the original innovative methodological techniques (including theoretical sampling, saturation, the constant comparison and memo writing) which originated in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). As a consequence, although Classic, Straussian, and Constructivist GT, are undoubtedly distinct and diverging variations of GT, they nevertheless remain within the GT family albeit with some heated family arguments (Kenny, Fourie 2014:7).

At the same time, some scholars identify the basis of this differentiation within the epistemological realm, especially referring to the following two

main areas: a) how to conceive the role of the researcher in relation to the reality studied; b) how to conceive data and theories.

Consequently, the debate that has been raging for the last thirty years portrays lines that do not seem to be easy to overcome, not only because they refer to epistemological frameworks that are not easily reconcilable, but also because different research strategies and procedural choices descend from these different premises and, therefore, they become substantially discordant. To this extent, the debate about literature's role during the research process (Dunne 2011), the different ways in which data is codified, and the process of theory construction – are all concrete examples of contrasting methodological positions (Kerry, Fourie 2015).

The debate among different approaches within GT is useful and relevant insofar as it aims to focus on the different aspects they emphasize and the potentiality they express regarding the analysis and understanding of the studied phenomena. To this extent, after fifty years of the development and extraordinary diffusion of this approach, it seems pointless to wonder which version could be considered consistent with the 'original' formulation; each of the different variants can contribute to the broadening of the knowledge of the phenomena analysed, building on different methodological emphases and choices. Furthermore, the development of comparative analyses that tend to identify more clearly possible points of convergence among different approaches should be encouraged, while at the same time safeguarding the plurality of the proposals and the cognitive potential that each

one contains¹. At the same time, it is significant to extend the knowledge of the peculiarities of the different approaches in order to understand their potentials with respect to the choices to be made in specific research processes. Consistently with this purpose, the aim of this article is to show how one of the approaches listed above, namely the Constructivist GT, exhibits epistemological and methodological consistencies with the methodological position of the SI as expressed by Herbert Blumer. The relevance of this point is confirmed by a vast and recent body of literature that implicitly or explicitly indicates the continuity between SI and GT (Aldiabat, Le Navenec 2011; Milliken, Schreiber 2012). On the other hand, this article strives to narrow down and to deepen the contents of that literature, which very rarely calls into question the contribution that Herbert Blumer offered on the methodological level to the development of some variants of GT. In particular, the initial chapter of his well-known work, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Methods*, will be taken into account. Specifically, this article intends to show the existence of a close connection between the GT version developed by Kathy Charmaz and the methodological position of the Blumerian SI.

It is necessary to stress that this line of continuity should not be perceived as the only possible one – neither within the relationship between SI and GT, nor in the general framework of similarities and

consistencies between GT and other epistemological and methodological frameworks. On the one hand, indeed, the circumstances under which Anselm Strauss offered his own GT proposal, developed together with J. Corbin, is known and consolidated; this proposal is obviously coherent with the theoretical framework developed by Strauss within the SI background and is clearly formulated in several textbooks (Strauss 1987; Strauss, 1993; Strauss, Corbin 1990). On the other hand, the same contribution by Strauss formed the basis for the development of a further GT approach, namely the one by Adele Clarke, called ‘Situational Analysis’. This has already been extensively dealt with in literature; it is, therefore, redundant to return to this discussion and, instead, references are made to appropriate in-depth analyses on the subject (Chamberlain-Salaun, Mills, Usher 2013; Clarke 2008; Kools 2008; Clarke, Friese, Washburn 2015).

Beyond Blumer’s contribution, the circumstances for which SI became the common denominator for at least three GT approaches seem evident, and it constitutes a source of inspiration for their development. At the same time, however, it must be remembered that it is the tireless in-depth and detailed work carried out by Barney Glaser with respect to the constitutive elements of the ‘Classic’ GT approach (see, for example, Glaser, Holton 2007), and further specifications developed by scholars who are particularly determined to preserve and promote this approach (see Holton, Walsh 2017; Konecki 2018) that demonstrate the importance of promoting pluralism and dialogue among GT approaches, and avoiding the risk of fragmentation for the sake of its further overall development.

¹ From this point of view, the edition of the volume *Developing Grounded Theory: The Second Generation* (2009) represents a very interesting model to follow as it is based on the exposure of the different ‘souls’ within GT, promoting a fruitful comparison, starting from the premise that “Grounded Theory evolved and changed – and is still changing” (Morse 2009:18).

Symbolic Interactionism: Herbert Blumer's Methodological Position

Symbolic Interactionism is a dynamic and lively point of reference for many scholars in different disciplines (especially in sociology and social psychology); inside SI there are different emphases (Plummer 2012) that make the symbolic interactionist community a plural and multifaceted environment, and one that is active both theoretically and empirically, which inspires many young scholars. In Europe, however, SI is not a prevalent perspective; the handbooks of sociology or sociological thought that are published in Europe take SI into consideration essentially as micro-sociology, and discuss 'classics' such as George H. Mead, Herbert Blumer, and Erving Goffman, without taking into consideration recent works of many scholars, such as Howard Becker, Gary Alan Fine, David Altheide, Robert Prus, Peter Hall, David Maines, Joe Kotarba and Kathy Charmaz, to name but a few.

It is useful, then, to gradually approximate the common lexicon between SI and Constructivist GT. For this, Blumer's definition could be important for summoning the fundamental premises of SI, which could be resumed in four points:

These four central conceptions are: (1) people, individually and collectively, are prepared to act on the basis of the meanings of the objects that comprise their world; (2) the association of people is necessarily in the form of a process in which they are making indications to one another and interpreting each other's indications; (3) social acts, whether individual or collective, are constructed through a process in which

the actors note, interpret, and assess the situations confronting them; and (4) the complex interlinkages of acts that comprise organization, institutions, division of labor, and networks of interdependency are moving and not static affairs (Blumer 1969:50).

Hence, SI methodological approach could be defined as follows:

Symbolic interactionism is a down-to-earth approach to the scientific study of human group life and human conduct. Its empirical world is the natural world of such group life and conduct. It lodges its problems in this natural world, conducts its studies in it, and derives its interpretations from such naturalistic studies (...) It recognizes that such direct examination permits the scholar to meet all of the basic requirements of an empirical science: to confront an empirical world that is available for observation and analysis; to raise abstract problems with regard to that world; to gather necessary data through careful and disciplined examination of that world; to unearth relations between categories of such data; to formulate propositions with regard to such relations; to weave such propositions into a theoretical scheme; and to test the problems, the data, the relations, the propositions, and the theory by renewed examination of the empirical world (...) It believes that this determination of problems, concepts, research techniques, and theoretical schemes should be done by the *direct* examination of the actual empirical social world rather than by working with a simulation of that world, or with a preset model of that world, or with a picture of that world derived from a few scattered observations of it, or with a picture of that world fashioned in advance to meet the dictates of some imported theoretical scheme or of some scheme of "scientific"

procedure, or with a picture of the world built up from partial and untested accounts of that world. For symbolic interactionism the nature of the empirical social world is to be discovered, to be dug out by a direct, careful, and probing examination of that world (Blumer 1969:47-48).

The first chapter of *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Methods*, from which this quote originates, was written by Blumer in 1969, two years after the publication of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* by Glaser and Strauss. This first chapter, however, constitutes the synthesis of a cluster of ideas and positions that Blumer had been developing during his career since 1937, when he named the approach, whose founder he is now considered. To a certain extent, in the indications offered by Blumer it is possible to find an effective summary of the Constructivist GT's purposes and methodological practice. In this sense, I shall attempt to reinvestigate them by integrating their description with some other Blumerian references:

1. The study of the empirical world is directed towards, and performed together with, concrete social actors who are part of the construction of the studied phenomenon;
2. This direct study of the empirical world allows the researcher to acquire first-hand knowledge of the studied phenomenon and to experience an intimate familiarity with that phenomenon; this is possible only through the constant presence of the researcher within the studied contexts so that they can understand people's life and the way in which these actors define the situations in which they live;
3. The researcher 'poses' abstract problems from the empirical world; they use concepts (called "sensitizing concepts") to start their observations, adopting an attitude of 'openness to further investigations, clarifications, and developments (Van den Hoonaard 1996; Bowen 2006);
4. The direct observation of the empirical world takes place through the gathering of data in a careful and organized way ("systematic"); Blumer suggests calling this practice "methodological exploration" (Blumer 1969:40);
5. Data is analyzed through the identification of their properties and the summarizing of them into categories placed at a higher level of abstraction than the data itself; moreover, the analysis is then completed through the identification of relationships between these categories. Blumer suggests calling this practice "methodological inspection" (Blumer 1969:40);
6. The 'finalization' of the analysis takes place by means of formulating theoretical propositions with respect to those connections and to constructing a coherent theoretical framework;
7. Finally, these theoretical frameworks are further 'validated' through a new analysis of the empirical world (related to the studied phenomenon); there is, therefore, a continuous and overlapping circle in the field, from which the researcher will never be removed; this way the researcher's theoretical acquisitions can be compared with the empirical world itself, i.e. with the subjects participating in the research.

This continuous relationship with the empirical dimension of reality basically occurs in two ways: through the careful and systematic scrutiny of the data, and the continuous involvement of the research participants in relation with the conceptual categories developed by the researcher. This kind of procedures, so different from the 'conventional' research processes, are strictly interlinked with Blumer's notion of "reality":

These are two procedural modalities that respond at the same time to a theoretical and methodological need, that is to "respect the nature of the empirical world," because reality is obdurate, that is obstinate, in sense that the empirical world "respond" or "react" to our representations or our statements about it - in the sense of challenging and resisting, or not corresponding, to the images or conceptions we have of them (Blumer 1969:55).

Sociological concepts and theories must be generated by the researcher's direct experience of the empirical dimension ('grounded'). The scholar is included in the processes, actions, and interactions between individuals who dynamically build the phenomena that they are interested in; only the immersion in the individuals' reality allows for the acquisition of an 'intimate familiarity' with the studied phenomena, assured by constructing and acquiring first-hand knowledge by means of the interaction with the research participants.

When undertaking a research process:

1. the scholar is guided by "sensitizing concepts," i.e. cognitive guidelines formulated in open and

general terms, which are specified, integrated, modified, and eventually redefined during the research process;

2. the process of the collection and analysis of data is based upon the direct experience of empirical reality as well as the logical and at the same time creative abilities of the scholar and their communicative, interpretative, and relational skills with regard to the explored contexts and people who inhabit them;
3. the researcher proceeds with partial hypotheses regarding the observed phenomena, the stories that have been shared, and the dialogues that have been undertaken, all of which is constantly validated by scrutinizing the data;
4. the researcher follows a non-linear path between the data collection and analysis, and the building of a plausible theoretical explanation of that experience, through an iterative process of collecting and analyzing data.

The 'Epistemological Alignment' in Grounded Theory and the 'Constructionist' Perspective

The GT perspective and the 'grounded' methods act on a reversal in how they consider theory's and concepts' role in sociological work, as they introduce the idea that a theory should be an outcome rather than a predecessor of empirical work. Moreover, theory – while here considered as the outcome of the empirical work – assumes a provisional nature and is strictly connected to the contexts

in which the work has been carried out. In other words, theory does not aspire to be universally applicable to all circumstances; such applicability must be adequately argued and empirically corroborated.

My understanding is that GT offers a perspective of the sociological endeavor that is relatively different from the one established over time in the social sciences, i.e. one based on the idea of empirical generalization and theory validation built a priori through a process of logical deduction. According to Herbert Blumer, sociologists often do not have any direct, first-hand knowledge of the phenomena they claim to theorize, which is due to the distance between the activity of speculative reflection and the empirical reality. On a methodological level, GT is an analytical process that – through the continuous comparison of small amounts of data – proceeds towards the definition of increasingly elevated and refined conceptual levels, whose interconnection allows the researcher to draw (or ‘construct’) a theory that is related to the studied phenomena.

There are two aspects that can be examined in the current situation:

1. The first one regards the fact that if the so-called ‘classic’ formulation is excluded, the one promoted by Glaser, the other derivations of GT (the ones from Strauss-Corbin, Charmaz, and Clarke) develop in the wide intellectual framework of SI, albeit with different emphases; all of them derive from the same intellectual principles that characterize their broad theoretical horizon and, therefore, can be considered the result of the fruitful

continuity between the theoretical frames and methodological practices. SI is a rather wide and rich framework, which is why it is understandable that several perspectives have been generated even within the same methodological family (Charmaz 2012).

2. The second one is connected with the acknowledgement of an increasing level of dialogue and convergence among these three interactionist formulations of GT: after the death of Anselm Strauss in 1996, the continuation of the ‘Straussian’ tradition was secured by Juliet Corbin with the publication of new editions of *The Basics of Qualitative Research*; Corbin herself declared that she had made a partial revision of that tradition. Without losing the essential formulations, she proceeded towards a substantial approach connected with the constructionist positions. As the author says:

There is no doubt that I, Corbin, have been influenced to some degree by the writers of contemporary feminists, constructionists, and postmodernists. I especially admire the works of both Clarke (2005) and Charmaz (2006) and how they apply postmodernist and postconstructivist paradigms to grounded theory methodology, thus taking up the challenge of Denzin (1994, p. 512) to move the regions of post-modern sensibility (Corbin, Strauss 2008:9).

Likewise, Clarke’s latest effort is a recent volume that collects the contributions of various scholars who adopt the ‘situational analysis’. The Foreword to the book was signed by Kathy Charmaz. She affirms that:

Situational analysis, however, gives Strauss's legacy new form that transcends 20th-century perspectives and practices. Similarly, situational analysis draws on different sources - feminist theory, postmodernist critiques, epistemological debates, and science and technology studies, to name a few - but synthesizes, integrates, and transforms them to produce an original statement and a unique method (Charmaz 2015:8).

In other words, these three lines of GT tend to converge and get aligned, which is based on the reciprocal influence mediated by the relevance given to the constructionist and the postmodern (and feminist) paradigm as well as, obviously, the wide symbolic interactionist framework (Charmaz 2008b). Consequently, SI and its present constructivist epistemological vocation is the common denominator of the lines of these intriguing Grounded Theory developments. To some extent, it is precisely this denominator that allows for the possibility of their convergence. This double aspect (SI as a common denominator and the gradual alignment of these main approaches of GT) supports the need to focus on, and bring out, those theoretical and methodological elements in which the continuity between the two perspectives is substantiated. The next pages of this article are dedicated to describing this point with explicit reference to the case of Constructivist GT.

It is important to underline that Barney Glaser, one of the founders of the GT perspective, clearly expressed his opposition to identifying any theoretical and methodological connection between GT and SI. In an interesting interview given to

Massimiliano Tarozzi (Tarozzi 2009), Glaser supported an absolute separation between SI and GT, based on the fact that GT "is nothing but a stupid, insignificant method and nothing more" and that "epistemology is irrelevant, it is useless, I imagine" (Glaser as cited in Tarozzi 2009:233, translated from Italian by the author; see also Glaser 2005; Newman 2007). It is worth underlying that, based on these points, GT in the Glaserian version would be completely independent of any theoretical and epistemological roots.

It must be recognized that this position constitutes one of the most evident and controversial points of divergence in the internal debate between GT approaches; with regard to this aspect, Glaser and the supporters of the 'Classic' GT version have shown significant consistency. In fact, according to Glaser there is no connection between GT and philosophical considerations, since it is a research method and as such "stands alone, on its own, as a conceptualizing methodology" (Glaser, Holton 2004:39). Consequently, there can be no epistemological connection with SI, nor with another theoretical paradigm. However, if some of the key aspects of the 'Classic' proposal are considered, such as the emphasis on the notion of 'emergency' and the well-known Glaserian statement that "all is data," it is possible to understand that they themselves originate from a specific epistemological conception. Therefore, not to establish this connection would be, according to George Steinmetz, a case of "epistemological unconsciousness" (Steinmetz 2005:109 as cited in Staller 2012:396). In fact, the research methods - even if 'discovered' during their practical application - always call into question an epistemological consid-

eration in aspects such as the position taken by the investigator during the research, or the definition of what 'data' is and how it should be 'treated' by the researcher. Besides, arguing that "all is data" or that theories "emerge" from data implies a precise vision of the relationship between the observer and the observed reality, and the relationship between reality and its representation; therefore, the adoption of a position with an epistemological foundation is implied. One may disagree about the relevance of the constructionist perspective (Glaser 2002) or about the influence of SI's theoretical framework on the GT method (Glaser 2005), but it is difficult to sustain the independence of the latter one from some epistemological reference, especially given that the role of epistemology is to 'justify' how knowledge is generated (Staller 2012). Therefore, every method of research, including GT, is embedded in a methodological consideration, which, in turn, fits within a certain epistemological framework. From this point of view, "epistemology is inescapable" (Carter, Little 2007:1319). It is no coincidence that the diverse GT orientations are analysed, understood, and compared not only with reference to different methodological choices, but also upon considering their own position in epistemological contexts, from which those choices originate and are 'justified' (Kenny, Fourie 2015). In fact, much of the debate that has been taking place for the last twenty years highlights – to a varying degree – the location of the 'classic' orientation in the positivist epistemological framework (for some 'implicitly positivist', for others 'post-positivist' by virtue of the influence of critical realism) as well as the Straussian orientation in the American pragmatism and Charmaz's and Clarke's approaches within constructionism and post-mod-

ernism. The inclusion of different approaches in specific epistemological frameworks must certainly be discussed, but it would be hard to question the fact that methodological choices do not originate from a particular epistemological conception. In this sense, the goal of the article herein is to emphasize that the clarification with regard to the continuity between the methodological and theoretical dimensions is significant for the development and advancement of the GT method, as well as its ability to produce sound knowledge of the studied phenomena. In other words, GT changes and develops above all by virtue of the specifications that are being gradually elaborated on in methodological and theoretical terms.

Let us return to the central theme of the considerations herein. Kathy Charmaz, one of the most relevant scholars in this subject, has contributed to the translation of some traits of the Blumerian 'naturalistic inquiry' into a coherent methodological perspective. What are the characteristics of Constructionist GT in Charmaz's view?

My constructionist approach makes the following assumptions: (1) Reality is multiple, processual, and constructed - but constructed under particular conditions; (2) the research process emerges from interaction; (3) it takes into account the researcher's positionality, as well as that of the research participants; (4) the researcher and researched coconstruct the data - data are a product of the research process, not simply observed objects of it. Researchers are part of the research situation, and their positions, privileges, perspectives, and interactions affect it (Charmaz 2008c: 402).

On the methodological level, the main elements that characterize Constructionist GT can be outlined as follows:

1. The use of sensitizing concepts as an approach for data collection and analysis;
2. The iteration of data collection and analysis, and the connection between them;
3. The constant comparison between various data within the empirical basis that is gradually constructed by the researcher;
4. The analyst's open attitude towards possible lines of interpretation so that the 'imposition' of a single theoretical frame on the data can be avoided;
5. The orientation of data analysis towards the construction of theories;
6. The process of 'constructing' the method itself, i.e. it is 'constructed' – like data and theories – to the extent that the researcher identifies innovative methodological strategies in order to handle problems and situations that emerge during the investigation;
7. The research logic is inductive, deductive, and abductive.

In the light of these elements and the arguments outlined before, it is possible to identify a common 'lexicon' of both SI and Constructionist GT; it constitutes a conceptual and methodological 'space of convergence' between the three 'Grounded' perspectives referred to in the previous part of the article.

The Common Lexicon of Both Symbolic Interactionism and (Constructionist) Grounded Theory

In order to reveal and discuss this shared lexicon in greater detail, below I expound on ten phrases that best describe this 'conceptual space'.

1. *Symbols and meanings.* The different ways in which individuals assign meaning to their experiences are of particular in the study of the 'social worlds' (Strauss 1978; Clarke, Leigh Star 2008) and, therefore, constitute the essential focus of data analysis; the goal is not only to understand what events and situations 'mean' to the participants of the research processes or why they occur, but, instead, to capture the dynamics of the construction and reconstruction of those meanings.
2. *The consideration of the participants' point of view.* Consistently with Blumer's invitation to acquire an intimate familiarity with data and social worlds, both perspectives underline the importance of 'assuming' the point of view of the social actors and of the research participants; this means that these social realities must be approached from within, with the perspective of their 'inhabitants' being assumed, which will eventually lead to the researcher's awareness developed through getting absorbed in the actors' attitudes and behaviors.
3. *The identification of the 'social placement' of individuals.* Each research participant builds their own understanding, a unique story within which they interpret their own experience (in

relation to the studied phenomenon); this assumption requires a continuous communicative interaction with the participants, which is promoted in order to acquire first-hand knowledge of those stories. The ways in which those communicative interactions are possible depend on the strategies that the researcher intends to adopt in the specific contexts of inquiry; ethnographic research, participant observation, and the implementation of in-depth interviews are the most common ways to achieve these goals. Beyond the methodological strategies, however, it is important to remember that the researcher is not to be interested in the research participants as merely individual cases, but also as those who share – with other participants – the circumstance of being able to ‘say’ something important about the studied phenomenon. To a varying degree and with different intensity, they share some biographical element, by virtue of which they ‘participate’ in the research process. These “points of intersection” between stories and life experiences constitute the “social placement” of the participants (Kleinmann, Stenross, McMahon 1994). The idea to keep in mind is that this ‘social placement’ is not an objective fact, but, rather, it is a construction of the scholar who – operating on the basis of sensitizing concepts and the data collection/analysis iteration – sometimes determines which subjects to meet and what social contexts to cross (thus creating a process that, in GT, is called ‘theoretical sampling’) in order to start, integrate, and complete their theoretical reflections. This way, the process of reaching higher levels of abstraction in theory-building remains ‘grounded’ in

the empirical basis on the one hand and the concrete social worlds on the other.

4. *The co-construction of data.* The scholar is interested in – and sensitive to – those aspects that are the expression of the inner conversation processes of the research participants, as well as the ways in which they perceive their courses of action; the ways in which these courses of action are interwoven; and the ways in which these actions align (or conflict) with that of others, are influenced or hindered, and how they are renegotiated and eventually modified. These aspects are ‘collected’ through a communicative dynamics (the interview at first), in which the researcher engages their biographical, cultural, and cognitive characteristics; the scholar is, therefore, involved in a process of inner dialogue aimed at ‘attributing meaning’ to the data during both their collection and analysis.
5. *Sensitizing concepts.* The scholar has previous knowledge that influences their methodological choices during the research and contributes to the gradual building of their own points of view on the topics they are investigating, also by means of getting familiarised with the existing literature on those issues. Therefore, contrary to what is commonly believed, the researcher does not assume a ‘naive attitude’ with respect to that knowledge, striving to think of themselves as a *tabula rasa* or minimizing the effects of their previous knowledge on the research processes. Instead, they consider their knowledge as a meaningful reference framework for the identification of ‘conceptual anchors’, through which

they can find their own place within empirical practice, and for the processes of exploring social worlds and ‘social placements’. These are the “sensitizing concepts” mentioned by Blumer, which do not constitute a defined and immutable system of concepts to be verified, but, rather, a set of references that are open to further and more major developments during the immersion in the empirical dimension (Blumer 1969:147-148).

6. *Constant comparison.* In order to secure the continuous connection between the empirical basis and the conceptual apparatus, the researcher needs to be able to get absorbed in the data, considering their similarities and differences, and identifying patterns and diversities. In the course of the inquiry, the researcher accesses new sources, meets different people, learns new points of view; they do not merely reveal and present these points of view, but they also make comparisons between them, adding their own subjective perspective into the procedure. Research is a dynamic process of continuing comparisons made between various data, as well as it is constant movement involving a plurality of perspectives. Consequently, the analysis of data in the Constructionist GT is a set of procedures through which the researcher moves ‘back and forth’ between the collected data and between the data and concepts that the researcher is gradually generating in the course of the analysis itself. The iterative nature of the collection/analysis process responds to the need that the process of conceptualization and interpretation should be generated through the continuous reference to data, since, as Blumer says, “Reality exists in empirical world and not in the methods used to study that world” (Blumer 1969:27). For this reason, it is also necessary to demonstrate openness, i.e. to be able to elaborate on different interpretative hypotheses, to undertake new ways of cognitive exploration, and to fill the gaps present in data availability. This will result in the increase in the awareness of the analyzed circumstances as well as in the interpretative considerations being grounded in a better way.
7. *Self-reflexivity.* In order to study the social worlds of the research participants, the scholar perceives them through the internal dialogue with which they construct an interpretative model that includes (in the double sense of containing, i.e. inserting, and comprehending, i.e. interpreting or making visible and intelligible) the learned perspectives. In the continual construction, the interpretative model goes beyond individual stories and individual contexts; this ‘going beyond’ refers to both the content and the outcome of the research. The conditions according to which the scholar will determine that the research has been completed are closely linked to their evaluation – compared with that of the research participants – of the adequacy of the interpretative model as well as the completeness of the data collected and analyzed (which, in GT, is called ‘theoretical saturation’).
8. *Salience (sensitivity).* The researcher, therefore, needs to constantly interrogate themselves about the words, the expressed meanings, the processes, and the contexts that are relevant to the research participants. In doing so, they are attentive to any differences, specificities, recurring

models and patterns, and similarities. In the light of their previous knowledge and based on what they find out during the very investigation, they reconstruct possible interpretative paths that appear meaningful – i.e. *salient* – to them with respect to the given circumstances and analyzed issues. Developing salience is the result of an interpretative process which the researcher operationally translates, ‘marking’ that which they consider relevant within data. This process of ‘marking’ is essential for the gradual abstraction and is accomplished through the technique of ‘coding’ the empirical basis.

9. *Abduction*. Abduction is a form of reasoning, according to which the creation of new hypotheses and new concepts is possible based on the valorization of ‘surprising’ evidence – i.e. new and unexpected empirical experiences – in which there is no separation between the dimension of ‘discovery’ (through data collection) and that of ‘justification’ (the validation of hypotheses through that data). Whenever the researcher deals with new and unexpected experiences and evidence during the investigation, they are required to understand and explain the phenomenon through an act of discernment and hypothesis (Timmermans, Tavory 2012:172; Tavory, Timmermans 2014; Richardson, Kramer 2006). However, the definition of what is new and unexpected – and why – in the empirical dimension, depends always on the knowledge and sensitivity of the scholar. Their abilities are not only engaged in recognizing what is new and unexpected, but they also play a role in stimulating new insights that make it possible to understand the new and

the unexpected in original interpretative frameworks. The abductive reasoning is strengthened by procedures and methodological approaches that are typical of GT, namely:

- the constant comparison (comparing new data with the developing categories, and evaluating if the theory that is being constructed can contain all the possible variations present in the empirical dimension);
- never taking for granted the emergent aspects of phenomena, often returning to the observed data, since the perception of the observed phenomena can change over time due to new observations or the development of awareness;
- trying to apply to the observational data more than a reference or a theoretical framework, e.g. through the memo-writing, in order to evaluate its interpretative power (on this see also Charmaz 2014).

Accordingly, the abductive reasoning does not arise in an alternative way, but is combined unconventionally with the logical deductive reasoning and the inductive reasoning. In this context, the scholar’s previous knowledge and their familiarity with the literature and the existing theories is of great help for the correct development of the abductive practice.

10. *The construction of grounded theories*. The analytical and interpretative work of the ‘grounded’ scholar is essentially completed through the following three elements:

- the identification of the patterns – this refers to shared elements within the situation, i.e. the circumstances in which the meanings (expressed by the subjects in the interviews or observed in the empirical work) are generated; it has to do with the reconstruction of the afore-mentioned ‘social placements’;
- the construction of categories as ‘conceptual assumptions’, in which groups of codes that share common references of meaning are synthesized; this analytical activity is called ‘focused coding’ (Charmaz 2014; Kenny, Fourie 2015); its purpose is to identify consistent lines of interpretation related to the analyzed data and, thus, proceed towards the construction of a more abstract and complex theoretical system related to the studied phenomenon;
- the identification of logical and argumentative links through which categories are interconnected – this refers to the construction of interpretative paths, both on the descriptive and explanatory levels, which is the result of the continuous comparison of analyzed data. These interpretative paths are ‘translated’ into the drafting of a series of propositions that constitute the outcome of the interpretative work, i.e. a (grounded) theory on the studied phenomenon.

Conclusions

This article aimed to reconstruct the theoretical and methodological continuity lines between the methodological position of SI as expressed by Herbert

Blumer and the Constructivist GT. A clearer understanding of the epistemological and methodological antecedents of the different variants of the GT can make it possible to identify the points of contact that can promote dialogue and convergence between these orientations.

Importantly, Blumer’s contribution is not exempt from possible critical remarks, which must be remembered for the purposes of a more complete evaluation of this author’s contribution to the development of the Constructionist GT. First, the idea that reality is of ‘obdurate’ character has attracted much criticism; it has been stated that he is not entirely emancipated from the realist vision of social reality; if conceived as ‘resistant’, reality would have autonomous and distinct characteristics vis-à-vis the observer. Even though, another interpretation of this passage is possible in the light of Blumer’s broader theoretical contribution. He supports the researcher’s need to constantly negotiate – in the course of the investigation and analysis – their own conceptual acquisitions with the empirical reality, i.e. with the research participants and their life contexts. Even when the scholar has reached a level of their own theoretical elaboration that they consider satisfactory, they will need to constantly compare these acquisitions with their own data (the empirical basis) and with the empirical reality (people and their contexts).

Secondly, Blumer underlines that, for SI, the nature of the empirical world must be “discovered” and derived from its direct examination. An intense debate has been taking place about whether the scholar’s acquisitions are “discovered” in/from the data, or if

they are co-constructed in the process of the interaction with the participants. This is a controversial issue within the epistemology of the social sciences in general, but also within the Grounded Theory framework (Charmaz 2008a).

In fact, using the term 'discovery' would mean attributing data with an autonomous existence with respect to the observer, who would have the task of searching within them the knowledge they are looking for (as if this knowledge was already contained in the data and it only needed to be brought to light). It is a position that Charmaz considers typical of the "objectivist" GT (Charmaz 2003). Contrary to this, in the constructionist perspective data is seen as cognitive entities generated in the interaction among the research participants, where the scholar is an element too, i.e. they are being co-constructed (Charmaz 2009). Blumer's criticism to conventional research methods based on surveys and on the analysis of variables results in the approach that such use of the term 'discovery' should be interpreted in terms of the process of 'generating' or 'constructing' by virtue of a direct relationship with people's lives and their social contexts. However, this is an interpretation that must be subjected to further and more in-depth reflections².

Although the idea that GT constitutes a plural methodological perspective that can be applied by scholars of different theoretical inspirations has been consolidated, it is vital to underline that some of the authors who have made (and are making) a sub-

² For a critical assessment of the Blumerian methodological contribution, see, among others, Hammersley 1989 or Best 2006.

stantial contribution to the development of this perspective are inspired by the tradition of SI on the one hand (in particular K. Charmaz, J. Corbin, and A. Clarke), and by theoretical tenets deriving from constructionism and post-modernism on the other. Earlier in the article I have tried to highlight, in particular, the coherences between the methodological structures of the (Constructionist) GT proposed by Kathy Charmaz (Charmaz 2014) and the methodological approach proposed by Herbert Blumer in its classic formulation (Blumer 1969); I have identified ten areas of convergence (more would be possible, too). These areas of convergence make it possible to identify – in the (Constructivist) GT – a set of coherent methods and research practices for those inspired by SI. Such coherence neither implies a unique direction (Handberg, Thorne, Midtgaard, Nielsen, Lomborg 2015) nor suggest a form of "theoretical capitalism" (Glaser 2005). In fact, it is not only the case that those who use grounded methods can draw inspiration from many theoretical references (also other than SI), but it is also significant that those who are inspired by this perspective can employ different methodological strategies (Travers 2001; Morrisette, Guignon, Demazière 2011; Kotarba 2014). For instance (and referring to Charmaz once again):

By forming a strong theory-methods package, symbolic interactionism and grounded theory can inform and advance each other. Symbolic interactionism offers a world-view and language for conducting grounded theory studies (...) In short, the symbolic interactionist perspective fosters developing the kind of reflexivity to which constructivist grounded theorist aspire. Grounded theory holds promise for

constructing stunning new concept that expand the reach repertoire of symbolic interactionism. *But realizing the full potential of both perspectives and methods is still to come and awaits your involvements* (Charmaz 2014:312; italics added).

And – more openly and consistently, and representing a constructionist point of view:

I see both fitting together as one theory-methods package. I think there can be others. Feminist theory, critical theory and now there are some people doing some nice connections between critical realism and grounded theory methodology (...) I see symbolic interaction and grounded theory methodology as going together but not the only package at all (Charmaz, Keller 2016).

The ethnographic survey, for example, is, obviously, a completely coherent perspective within

the Blumerian methodological position and it represents a preferential choice for many symbolic interactionists. Although a convergence of the constructionist approaches in GT can be witnessed, it must also be noted that it continues to be a rather controversial methodological and theoretical field, and one crossed by a plurality of positions and differentiations (Bryant 2019). In fact, in recent years there have been attempts to make reformulations and updates that prefigure a new ‘rediscovery’ of GT (see, for example, Bryant 2002; Gibson, Hartmann 2014; Holton, Walsh 2017; Konecki 2018). It will be necessary to understand if this dynamics of development inside GT is going to be useful for the consolidation of, and increase in, the capacity of the researchers to understand the complexity of social phenomena, especially in countries where qualitative research still needs further legitimacy and credibility.

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