

## Misused and missed use – Grounded Theory and Objective Hermeneutics as methods for research in industrial marketing

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### ABSTRACT

Since qualitative research methods have always found strong representation within sociology it is warranted to look at the sociological discussion in order to challenge and enrich qualitative research in industrial marketing. With this mission in mind, we discuss two sociological concepts that constitute influential schools within the German-speaking sociology of language community: Grounded Theory and Objective Hermeneutics. The analysis of their suitability for research in industrial marketing along several dimensions shows that while both methods target the reconstruction of meaning, they pursue different paths. Grounded Theory strives to discover higher-ranked social patterns, while Objective Hermeneutics is concerned with universal motives underlying a specific interaction.

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### 1. Introduction

In industrial marketing, both the decisions made by individuals and their process-immanent behaviors, for example in intra- or intercompany business networks (Halinen & Törnroos, 2005), are of paramount interest (Woodside & Wilson, 2000). However, large-scale surveys cannot capture the subconscious motives and perceptions of the respondents (De Beuckelaer & Wagner, 2007; Wegner, 2003). Without a proper explication of these, in many cases, it is hardly possible to build a strong theoretical foundation for the explanation of inter-personal interaction (Woodside & Wilson, 2003). Here, qualitative methods which focus on individual cases and situations promise to uncover more of the underlying motivation than will quantitative methods aiming for general results. As a consequence, qualitative research and the case study methodology play an important role in theory development within industrial marketing and the industrial networks paradigm (Easton, 1995).

The use of Grounded Theory (GT) and Objective Hermeneutics (OH) has been recommended for qualitative B2B and industrial marketing research (Gummesson, 2003). However, GT is often misused, that is, used inadequately in the research process, while OH is virtually unknown. While there seems to be a gap between the methodological intention of GT and the focus of recent empirical studies employing GT (Hallier & Forbes, 2004; Suddaby, 2006), the problem with OH is its conspicuous absence. In other words, due to insufficient methodological knowledge on the part of the researchers, GT is often times

misused while OH is not used at all. Therefore, in order to assist researchers in the field of theory building in industrial marketing, this article will present and investigate the well-known GT-approach, and familiarize researchers with the little-known OH-approach. By introducing OH we borrow from other schools of thought in order to generate new insights and augment research results in the field of industrial marketing (Dubois & Araujo, 2004).

GT and OH both build on the early works on symbolic interactionism (e.g., Blumer, 1931; Cook, 1993; Hughes, 1971; Mead, 1967; Park & Burgess, 1921). The two approaches aim at the reconstruction of social patterns and their underlying constitutive structures (Hildebrand, 2004). This makes them valuable for industrial marketing where relationships in social networks are an important phenomenon (Dubois & Araujo, 2004).

GT is the most influential paradigm for the discovery of theory from empirical data (Denzin, 1997; Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. XX) and a popular approach in industrial marketing research (e.g., Drumwright, 1994; Gilliland, 2003; Wagner & Johnson, 2004). The seminal book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is extensively cited (e.g., Gebhardt, Carpenter, & Sherry, 2006; Narayandas & Rangan, 2004; Ulaga, 2003). However, methodological articles regularly criticize the way GT is used in current research. For example, many papers lack reference to subsequent works to *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. This is a serious shortcoming, because it means that most authors miss the methodical controversy between Glaser and Strauss (which we will discuss in Section 3.1) that led to two quite different approaches of GT. Moreover, many authors use the term GT in a much wider sense than did Glaser and Strauss (1967) who focused on the interpretation of meaning by social actors (Eisenhardt

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& Graebner, 2007; Langley, 1999). Furthermore, detailed application of GT techniques is either rarely discussed (Martin & Turner, 1986) or completely missing (Gephart, 2004). Additionally, as Hallier and Forbes (2004) point out, very few recent articles in business research use GT methods for actually developing theory (Sutton & Staw, 1995; Weick, 1995). Suddaby (2006) accuses many authors of having serious misconceptions about GT and Gephart (2004) observes a confusion regarding alternative epistemological approaches to qualitative research. All these problems show that GT is often cited only to invoke its authority (Locke, 1996), but not adequately used. An adequate use of GT would imply a statement of which of the two GT-approaches the research followed, to mention the specifically used techniques and to generate new, Grounded Theory and not simply case descriptions with references to existing theories. Furthermore, users of GT should be able to distinguish GT from other similar qualitative approaches such as *systematic combining* (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) or *dialectic interaction* between qualitative field observations and existing theory in order to *reconstruct theory* (Burawoy, 1991; Workman, Homburg, & Gruner, 1998).

OH provides researchers with a methodology to analyze real social phenomena, to discover structures of meaning, and to reconstruct decisions and decision patterns by individuals, groups or organizations (e.g., buying centers, cross-functional teams). The procedure for analyzing and interpreting data is very rigorous. The results of a thorough analysis of traces of decisions in social reality documents, such as letters, memos, transcribed interviews or videotapes, are used to develop theories about the structures of human reciprocity (Oevermann, Allert, Konau, & Krambeck, 1979; Oevermann, 2002). Hitherto, OH has been discussed almost exclusively within the German-speaking sociological community (Eberle & Elliker, 2005; Flick, 2002; Hitzler, 2005). Research which uses the OH-approach outside its sociological origin is limited, especially within business and marketing. To our knowledge the article by Lueger, Sandner, Meyer, and Hammerschmid (2005) is the only application of OH in business research to date.

Given the goals of presenting these two qualitative research methods and of giving advice on when to use them, the remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, the criteria for the evaluation of GT and OH are explained. Second, each research method is discussed and evaluated individually. Special attention is paid to the specific challenges of industrial marketing research, such as the problems of network boundaries, complexity, time dependence etc. (e.g., Halinen & Törnroos, 2005; Gummesson, 2003). Advice for the use of each research method in the industrial marketing context is given. Third, the two approaches are compared and contrasted on the basis of the prior analysis with respect to their suitability for industrial marketing research.

## 2. Criteria for evaluating the research methods

The methodological literature emphasizes various aspects of evaluation criteria for scientific methods (Campbell & Stanley, 1966; Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 4; Mentzer & Flint, 1997; Miles & Huberman, 1994, pp. 277–280). Some qualitative researchers, for example Glaser (2000), Ragin (1987) or Miles and Huberman (1994), adopt the traditional positivist approach and strive for objectivity. Consequently, they apply traditional scientific research criteria such as validity, reliability and objectivity (Patton, 2002, p. 545). The work of Workman et al. (1998) is an example of qualitative research in marketing that explicitly stands in this tradition.

Although criteria from the positivist approach are widely accepted for the evaluation of quantitative empirical research, they do not fit to qualitative research based on a constructivist approach. Therefore, different criteria are proposed by qualitative researchers, following the constructivist research tradition. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested replacing the traditional notion of internal validity with *cred-*

*ibility*, external validity with *transferability*, reliability with *dependability*, and objectivity with *confirmability*. These criteria seem to be adequate for the evaluation of GT and OH, because these methods are largely used for qualitative research following the constructivist perspective. At the same time, these criteria fit with the relevant challenges for industrial marketing and thereby allow for an evaluation of GT and OH in the context of B2B and industrial marketing research. As a consequence, we use the four Lincoln/Guba criteria and add “applicability” as a fifth criterion to evaluate GT and OH in the industrial marketing context.

- (1) *Credibility* is the naturalistic pendant of internal validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 189). Credibility is achieved, if the results are believable from the perspective of the subjects under investigation. Accordingly, it is important to understand and describe the situation from the participant's eyes. The developed theories should always be evaluated according to the criteria, whether they reflect and explain the mental models of the subjects.
- (2) *Transferability* is the naturalist analogy to the positivist criteria generalizability/external validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316) and deals with the question of whether findings from a research sample can be transferred to a broader population (Ellram, 1996; Mentzer & Kahn, 1995) or to more general theoretical propositions (Bonoma, 1985; Yin, 1981). Qualitative research is often accused of lacking generalizability (Kvale, 1995). Indeed, Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 316) point out that transferability is, in a strict sense, impossible. Therefore, this article discusses transferability in a broader sense (e.g., whether the research method is explicitly concerned about transferability, gives criteria how to provide thick description and makes transferability judgments possible for potential users). In the literature on industrial marketing research methodology, transferability is seen as a very tough challenge because of the uniqueness of many business networks (Halinen & Törnroos, 2005). Extraordinary efforts are necessary to conduct multi-case studies and cross-case analyses of networks (Halinen & Törnroos, 2005).
- (3) *Dependability* (i.e. reliability in the positivist paradigm) refers to the repeatability of a study with respect to two aspects: whether it is possible to replicate the study, and whether this will lead to the same results (Ellram, 1996; Yin, 2009). In other words, dependability is the probability of identical results being achieved by another researcher conducting the same research. Unless the results are dependable, the research has no potential validity (Mentzer & Flint, 1997). Although a large number of reliability tests can be applied to quantitative empirical research (e.g., split half, Cronbach's alpha), the possibilities considering GT and OH are limited. Two tests have at least some potential for evaluating qualitative methods. The first is *Test-Retest*: a method in which the same set of respondents is asked the same questions twice, with some time in between. This procedure is especially challenging for industrial marketing, due to its dynamic units of analysis – the so-called “problem of time” (Easton, 1995; Halinen & Törnroos, 2005). In addition to the dynamic on the level of the individual subject, the marketing organization as a whole is subject to substantive changes (Harris & Ogbonna, 2003). The second is the *Inter-Judge* test, where two or more researchers gather the data. The researchers independently record their impressions of each interview or case study and compare them afterwards. If the correlation between their interpretations is high, the study has a satisfactory Inter-Judge reliability. For a more comprehensive discussion of reliability tests, see Mentzer and Flint (1997).
- (4) *Confirmability* is the naturalist substitute for objectivity. Based on the assumption that all research is influenced by the researcher's personal perspective, confirmability is the degree

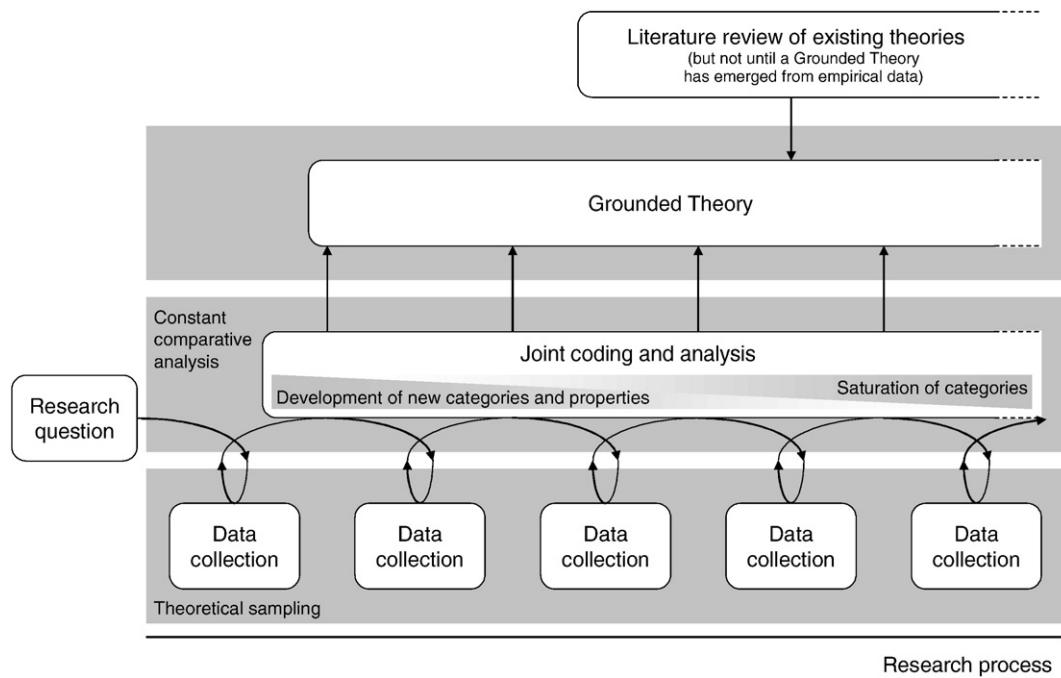


Fig. 1. Basic process of the Grounded Theory approach.

to which the interpretations and findings of a study can be confirmed by others. Confirmability can be increased by rigorous craftsmanship during the research process and by ex-post procedures (e.g., another researcher who takes the role of a “devil’s advocate”).

- (5) *Applicability* is a fundamental criterion for the evaluation of research methods. The term refers to the context in which a method should be used. Thereby, the researcher’s goal and the character of the research question to be examined determine the appropriate research method (Ellram, 1996). This article focuses on the applicability of GT and OH with regard to research in industrial marketing. Given the criticism that in traditional survey designs statistical rigor has often been expanded at the expense of practical relevance, the search for applicability is a driving force for qualitative research in industrial marketing as well as in other fields of business research.

### 3. Grounded Theory

#### 3.1. Exposition of the method

GT was developed by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss to offer new strategies for the generation of sociological theories. Its success in the last four decades has confirmed its value as a method for systematically gathering and analyzing data (Suddaby, 2006). It has proven useful in a variety of other fields, including business and marketing (Goulding, 2002, 2005; Locke, 2001).

The central operation of GT is the emergence of theories (Hildebrand, 2004). In order to derive theories, two questions have to be asked (Glaser, 1992, p. 4): (1) “What is the chief concern or problem of the people in the substantive area, and what accounts for most of the variation in processing the problem?” (2) “What category or what property of what category does this incident indicate?”<sup>1</sup> These questions are constantly asked during the process of comparing, coding and analyzing the empirical data (Glaser, 1992, p. 4). Accordingly, one “should not expect to proceed in a linear fashion from raw data to

concept cards to preliminary writing on theory to the final theory” (Martin & Turner, 1986, p. 150). Fig. 1 depicts the GT-approach.

Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection “whereby the researcher decides which additional data (events, activities, populations, etc.) is relevant to explicate and develop all properties of the evolving conceptual categories” (Locke, 1996, p. 240). Sampling is undertaken in advance of and parallel to the analysis. Thus, data collection can be controlled and directed by the emerging theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45).

Researchers in industrial marketing coined the phrase “problem of network boundaries” (Halinen & Törnroos, 2005). The term refers to the difficulties of defining the limits of the relevant network prior to conducting the research. Here, GT’s iterative approach of theoretical sampling proves to be very appealing for industrial marketing research, where no hard rules for specifying temporal frames and relevant network elements can be given in advance of most studies, but rather “emerge in the course of the research process as the nature of the phenomenon and its context become clearer” (Dubois & Araujo, 2004, p. 207).

Coding is “the analytic processes through which data are fractured, conceptualized and integrated to form theory” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 3). Coding consists of the development of categories, the specification of their attributes and the integration of the categories to form a theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 105). The structured process of coding is extremely helpful when dealing with high complexity, as it most likely occurs in the case of industrial marketing and business networks (Gummesson, 2003; Halinen & Törnroos, 2005). Without the coding procedures, industrial marketing case studies might never move beyond the point of thick description and researchers might fail to develop any new theory.

“As one’s theory emerges, more useful concepts will remain and less helpful ones will fall into disuse” (Martin & Turner, 1986, p. 149). A key element of this process is constant comparison, “where you go in with theory and see whether or not it helps to explain what you are seeing. If it doesn’t, you either add to theory or substitute another theory for the one that’s not helping you to explain what you are seeing” (Kaghan, Strauss, Barley, Brannen, & Thomas, 1999, p. 80).

In contrast to positivist research approaches, GT makes no clean break between gathering and analyzing data (Suddaby, 2006). The

<sup>1</sup> The terms “category,” “label,” and “concept” are used interchangeably in the GT literature (Martin & Turner, 1986).



research process can come to halt at the point of theoretical saturation, that is, as soon as data gathering and analysis cease to produce new insights (e.g., conceptual categories or properties of the developed categories) (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 143–161). Thereby theory is regarded as an ever-developing entity, never as a perfected product (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 32). Therefore “little in the Grounded Theory process is irreversible. If one’s concepts are too specific or too general this can be remedied, in the first case by combining specific categories into more general categories and, in the latter case, by breaking down a category that is too general into its more specific dimensions or aspects” (Martin & Turner, 1986, p. 150).

Revisiting the example of business networks, their complexity complicates the planning of the research design in B2B and industrial marketing. Accordingly, the described features make GT most suitable for the type of industrial marketing research that is characterized by dynamic, contemporary phenomena, which are difficult to separate from their contexts (Halinen & Törnroos, 2005). Using GT, the boundaries of the relevant network will reveal themselves during the research project. At the same time, the GT-approach of never regarding a theory as completely finished incorporates the problem of time as it is recommended for industrial marketing research (Halinen & Törnroos, 2005).

After Strauss and Corbin published *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (1990) fundamental differences between the respective conceptions of Glaser and Strauss surfaced (Glaser, 1992, p. 1; Hildebrand, 2004; Suddaby, 2006). Whereas Strauss and Corbin tried to make GT more tangible by introducing a large number of coding procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 55–241), Glaser regarded these procedures as contrary to the original approach. He accused Strauss of forcing data (Glaser, 1992, p. 122), culminating in the accusation that “[Strauss] never understood Grounded Theory from the start” (Glaser, 1992, p. 124). According to Glaser, the coding procedures led to theories based on preconceptions. “If you torture the data enough, it will give up!” (Glaser, 1992, p. 123). As a result, two methodological schools came into being (Stern, 1994). In order to differentiate the two, in this article the approach of Glaser/Strauss (or the Glaserian approach) stands for all publications in the tradition of the original concept (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992, 2000) while the approach of Strauss/Corbin (or the Straussian approach) is used as an umbrella term for the literature in the tradition of *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998).

### 3.2. Evaluation of Grounded Theory for research in industrial marketing

In the following, GT is evaluated with respect to the criteria introduced and described earlier. In cases where the Glaser/Strauss and the Strauss/Corbin approach have different strengths or weaknesses concerning the respective criteria, we differentiate the two.

- (1) *Credibility* has high status within GT. It is Glaser/Strauss’s explicit concern to generate theories that are credible, understandable and relevant to the participants in the research. The “process of understanding organizations from the inside” (McGuire, 1986, p. 8) leads to GT’s research topics and to explanations that the managers find relevant (McGuire, 1986). GT researchers do not aspire solely to propose academic insights but also intend to show “why and how the theory can be used in practice” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 237). Martin and Turner (1986, p. 149) state that “all concepts, including those by grounded theorists, are only more or less useful, not more or less true or valid.”

“Truth-in-meaning here is relative to assumptions and referents. This point is one of the main reasons why so many people seem to

misunderstand Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) notion of the discovery of grounded theory. Their project is *not* to discover a theory that explains the actions and understandings of the informant as it is so commonly assumed (i.e., a researcher-generated theory). The project is to discover the theory that the informants *themselves* are using to understand their experience, as it is grounded in their experience. It is crucial to understand this essential point.” (Gioia, 2003, p. 290)

GT is intended to be useful in everyday life. In order to achieve this goal, theories generated by the GT-approach have to be understandable and usable by the individuals in the situation that is being studied (Locke, 1996).

- (2) *Transferability* is a vital criterion within GT. Theories should be “a general guide to multi-conditional, ever-changing daily situations” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 242). Multiple sources of evidence are recommended for case studies in general (Yin, 2009) and should be applied for GT (for an example in marketing research see Harris & Ogbonna, 2003). A central question about transferability is: how many cases have to be examined in order to achieve generalizability of the outcomes? Whereas some scientists claim that this question must be answered before data collection (Ellram, 1996), Glaser/Strauss expect the researcher to collect, code, and analyze data simultaneously (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 71). Consequently the decision about the depth of sampling (i.e., the amount of collected data) is taken during the research process. For every key category, data collection continues until the researcher believes that saturation has been reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 70). The criterion for determining whether saturation has been reached is the cessation of attribute-generating data for a category (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 61). Since this determination can never be precise, the researcher has to be “theoretically sensitive” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 64). Thus, GT itself does not supply objective measures for transferability. The transferability of GT depends on the methods used for data collection. Insofar as case studies and experiments are used, GT will be transferable to theoretical propositions rather than to populations. These methods do not aim for statistical (i.e., enumerating frequencies) but for analytic transferability (i.e., expanding theories) (Yin, 1981).
- (3) *Dependability* is clearly one of the weaknesses of GT in comparison to purely quantitative approaches (Mentzer & Flint, 1997). Due to the qualitative nature of data and the necessary interpretation, the cognitive and emotive imprint of the researcher might influence the emerging GT. Wakeford (1969) claims that Glaser/Strauss did not always pay sufficient attention to this risk: “At times it seems to be implied that theories emerge uncontaminated from ‘the empirical world’” (Wakeford, 1969, p. 270). *Test–Retest* is quite difficult to apply in GT. Even the same researcher will never have the identical knowledge and mind-set at two separate points in time. Because of GT’s evolutionary concept, where every new insight is used to modify the research process, it is unlikely that Test–Retest will lead to identical results. *Inter-Judge* tests are not feasible for GT. The constant comparative method, one key element in GT, “is not designed (as methods of quantitative analysis are) to guarantee that two analysts working independently with the same data will achieve the same results; it is designed to allow, with discipline, for some of the vagueness and flexibility that aid the creative generation of theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 103). However, concerning dependability, the Glaser/Strauss approach departs from the Strauss/Corbin approach. Despite the important role of dependability, the original Glaser/Strauss version of GT lacks techniques used for codification. Some

might even regard it as “messy,” although it should be kept in mind that “messiness” is an integral, inescapable part of many research questions in business (Parkhe, 1993). Whereas the Glaser/Strauss approach puts emphasis on the emergence of theories without any restricting rules, the Strauss/Corbin publications provide numerous detailed procedures for coding. As a result, the Strauss/Corbin approach to GT provides more dependable results than the Glaser/Strauss approach.

- (4) *Confirmability* plays an important role in GT research. Corbin and Strauss (1990, p. 11) emphasize the importance of research teams, collaborative analysis and discussion groups. In order to improve confirmability further, additional activities are recommended and have been used successfully in industrial marketing research (e.g., Drumwright, 1994). For example, having finished the coding procedure, experts should be asked to review a subset of the data and the interpretations. Additionally, if multiple case studies have been used, the experts can be asked to read the transcripts and identify where a particular case fits the framework.

Confirmability can be increased by continually questioning the credibility, plausibility and trustworthiness of the results. Thus, the permanent revision of hypotheses (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 11) in GT-based research allows for a quite robust analysis (Wimsatt, 1981), because “the discipline urged upon grounded theorists through the processes of description, definition, and specification of relationships pushes such investigators toward a high degree of rigor in the handling and interpretation of the data” (Martin & Turner, 1986, p. 143).

- (5) *Applicability* is vitally important for Glaser/Strauss (1967, p. 1). The issue is reflected in the process of GT, wherein the collection and analysis of data are interrelated. The rationale for this design is not only to enhance validity but also to increase effectiveness (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 6) and thereby applicability. In accordance, all sources that may contribute to a research topic can be used for GT. These can include interviews, observations, government documents, videotapes, newspapers, letters, and books (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 5). The openness concerning potential sources of data contributes to the applicability of GT to a wide array of research in industrial marketing, such as B2B relationships in marketing channels, including the study of inter-organizational and inter-personal exchanges (Håkansson, 1982).

In general, grounded studies are especially appropriate for gaining an initial understanding of *complex transitions* (Hallier & Forbes, 2004). Given the debate about the fundamental changes in how firms operate with respect to corporate social responsibility (Drumwright, 1994), GT is a very appropriate method. Besides its applicability for gaining an initial understanding, GT can be used to connect or specify existing mid-range theories by introducing novel theoretical juxtapositions (Hallier & Forbes, 2004). Concerning the underlying epistemic assumptions, GT is most appropriate for developing statements on how actors interpret reality (Suddaby, 2006; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). This is of fundamental interest for B2B and industrial marketing research, where an understanding of the subject's mental models is necessary in order to “achieve deep understanding in research on thinking-doing processes” (Woodside & Wilson, 2003, p. 494). For example, apart from the actual prices paid, the buyer's behavior will be highly influenced by his interpretation (i.e. the mental model) of the supplier's performance, transaction risks and other costs (Dubois & Araujo, 2004).

The Glaser/Strauss approach is distinguished by the great amount of leeway that it gives to the researcher. It was founded as a pragmatic approach to help researchers to understand complex relationships among social actors (Suddaby, 2006). Therefore, it is highly applicable

and can be used as a (although unspecific) framework for empirical research in industrial marketing. In contrast, the Strauss/Corbin approach is more focused on specific techniques for coding of qualitative data. Therefore, this approach provides more accurate and detailed advice but at the same time it limits the researcher's freedom.

### 3.3. Implications for research in industrial marketing and advice for industrial marketing researchers

Locke (1996) argues that the differences between Glaser and Strauss originate from their respective renditions of researchers' relationships to the worlds they study (Locke, 1996). Glaser's image of the scientist is consistent with the positivist tradition, wherein the researcher tries to be neutral and reveals the natural world that is “out there.” Strauss/Corbin, in contrast, views the researcher as *interpreter* of the data (Locke, 1996; Patton, 2002, p. 445). Using a GT-approach, the researcher has to take into account his own position (i.e., personal biases, world view etc.) (Suddaby, 2006). This might be difficult for marketing researchers if they are not acquainted with a concept of science in which the personality of the researcher is explicitly seen as an important aspect of the process. Dubois and Araujo (2004) argue that the industrial networks paradigm is strongly influenced by a relational world view, so this might be a starting point for the industrial marketing researcher to reflect on his individual perspective on the world and to become more aware of its impact on the research results.

GT focuses on developing new theories rather than testing established ones (Finch, 2002). Opposing the positivist view that theory should be formulated in advance, Glaser and Strauss propose that theoretical formulations should be derived from the systematic study of social reality (Wakeford, 1969). Therefore, in contrast to much of the literature on qualitative methods concentrating on logical deduction *a priori* assumptions, GT emphasizes inductive theory development (Patton, 2002, p. 125). This is a strength of industrial marketing research, where, for example, new insights on business liaisons have been possible by shifting the research focus during the data collection process from rational buying criteria to interaction episodes and relationships (Dubois & Araujo, 2004).

Although some researchers disagree (e.g., Suddaby, 2006), Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommend that literature research be postponed until the main theories have emerged from empirical data:

“An effective strategy is, at first, literally to ignore the literature of theory and fact on the area under study, in order to assure that the emergence of categories will not be contaminated by concepts more suited to different areas. Similarities and convergences with the literature can be established after the analytic core of categories has emerged.” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 37)

It is legitimate, if the industrial marketing researcher wants to include existing theories from the literature during the iterative case study research process. The researcher, however, should not label these steps GT, but instead as *systematic combining* (Dubois & Gadde, 2002), which is more appropriate.

The fact that GT does not attempt to derive explanations of empirical data from existing theories (Hildebrand, 2004) has serious implications for the structure of articles that present research in marketing. Hallier and Forbes (2004) criticize research articles for breaking the rule. In the research process, literature comes in very late; in the written article, literature is integrated early. Grounded research is presented in the same way as deductive methods, starting with a review of the existing middle range models and deducing a rationale for the subsequent analysis of the empirical data (Hallier & Forbes, 2004). This mode of presentation might create the impression of a positivist research agenda for those who are unfamiliar with GT research (Suddaby, 2006). Therefore, Suddaby (2006) recommends

that the emergence of the theory from the data be stated at the outset, especially when the theory is described in an article.

When using GT, the marketing researcher should approach an inquiry with an open mind as to the kind of general theoretical account that is likely to emerge from the particular investigation (Martin & Turner, 1986). Siggelkow (2007, p. 21) even makes a stronger case for including prior knowledge by stating that “[i]n my view, an open mind is good; an empty mind is not.”

However, preconceptions cannot be wholly abandoned, as phenomenology and hermeneutics make clear (Locke, 1996). Nevertheless, researchers frequently seem to assume they can avoid discussing a priori assumptions or biases brought to the field by citing Glaser and Strauss' (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Kaghan et al., 1999). Instead of committing this methodological inaccuracy, it would be preferable to keep the individual preconceptions in mind.

“So what I try to do is set up two sets of books. One set of books has to do with everything that I think is going on, which I would like to bet is going on, which I would like to write about going on. And the other set of books is what I see. And I am constantly aware of the fact that what I see is influenced by what I want to see so I also create circumstances wherever possible where I might be surprised.” (Kaghan et al., 1999, p. 81)

Concerning the process of proceeding qualitative data, organizing information and performing analyses, software packages can increase speed and efficiency. For example, NVivo (Bazeley & Richards, 2000) has been used in recent GT studies in marketing (e.g., Gebhardt et al., 2006) and is recommended in the literature on industrial marketing research (Gummesson, 2003).

Despite the subtitle of Glaser and Strauss' (1967) book, ‘Strategies for Qualitative Research’ [italics added], GT is not strictly limited to qualitative data. “Since the process of generating theory is independent of the kind of data used” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 18), GT can be used on any data or combination of data (Glaser, 2000, p. 7). For a GT study combining interview and archival data, see Edmondson, Bohmer, and Pisano (2001). Since the majority of articles using GT deal with quantitative data, it is plausible to conclude that GT is especially useful to “‘make manageable’ seemingly unmanageable qualitative data” (Martin & Turner, 1986, p. 155).

Even high-quality scholarly research articles using GT often fail to provide enough detail about the method (Martin & Turner, 1986). Therefore the marketing researcher who is new to this approach should start with the following publications. For the Glaserian approach, see Glaser and Strauss (1967), Glaser (1978, 2000), Turner (1981, 1983), and Martin and Turner (1986). For the Straussian approach, see Strauss and Corbin (1998). For advice on the application of GT in management and marketing, see Locke (2001) and Goulding (1998, 2002, 2005).

## 4. Objective Hermeneutics

### 4.1. Exposition of the method

OH is a strictly rule-based method of textual analysis aiming for the identification of universal structures of meaning which underlie every interaction. It interprets the protocols of interaction among organizations and individuals. That is, inter-organizational and inter-personal interaction in industrial relationships (Håkansson, 1982) can be studied using OH. The question of its genesis is irrelevant. However, in order to receive a protocol which is as undisguised of social reality as possible, OH favors the use of open and unguided conversations and transliterated interview protocols over standardized interviews (Wernet, 2000, p. 57). With OH it is central to avoid any framing of the informant by following a questionnaire or other

types of pre-defined structures. In this respect, it is comparable to the autodiving approach of Heisley and Levy (1991) or Zaltman's Metaphor Elicitation Technique (e.g., Christensen & Olson, 2002).

Since interaction (i.e., integration, information exchange, operational linkages, legal bonds, cooperation) and inter-organizational personal contacts are at the core of B2B relationships in industrial marketing channels (e.g., Cannon & Perreault, 1999; Dubois & Araujo, 2004; Heide & Wathne, 2006), research in this area might benefit from this methodological approach. For example, Turnbull, Ford, and Cunningham (1996, p. 57) point out that “personal contacts occur between various individuals, groups and hierarchical levels in organizational structures. Information is exchanged, adaptations are agreed, negotiations are performed, crises are overcome and social bonding occurs.” Here, protocols which could be subject to objective hermeneutical analysis and interpretation in order to reconstruct objective structures in B2B channel relationships could be negotiation protocols or written communication documents. OH is probably the research technique that most exhaustively analyzes communication processes between subjects. Thereby it provides a way to analyze the “multiple mental processes in research on industrial marketing” (Woodside & Wilson, 2003, p. 495) more thoroughly.

OH is closely associated with the German sociologist Ulrich Oevermann and his colleagues (Oevermann et al., 1979; Oevermann, 2002) who based much of the theory and method on the works of anthropologists and sociologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss, 1963) or George H. Mead (Mead, 1967). Although the concept has not yet found recognition outside of the German-speaking sociological community, here, it constitutes one of the most influential approaches in qualitative research. OH has been discussed in almost all recent methodological articles and handbooks (Flick, 2005; Reichertz, 2004). Internationally, the qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) by Charles Ragin (1987, 2000) represents a similar approach (Smilde, 2005). More recently, the OH-approach has been associated with Soeffner's Social Science Hermeneutic (Soeffner, 2004), Luhmann's Constructivist Systems Theory (Luhmann, 1995) and even GT (Flick, 2005).

The term “Objective Hermeneutics” is, strictly speaking, a contradiction in terms. While hermeneutic deconstruction deals with the phenomenon of understanding and interpreting textual entities, this process is always bound to subjective restrictions (Gadamer, 1990, p. 1; Thompson, 1993), and is thus unable to reveal the *absolute truth* (Danner, 2006). However, contradictory to GT or hermeneutic is the claim of OH to be objective. Referring to the sociology of language (meanwhile sociology of knowledge) (Flick, 2005) and thus “to holistic and all embracing links between language, logic, and culture” OH “claim[s] that universal structures are tapped by the communicative process” (Gerhardt, 1988, p. 36). Every social action constitutes itself through some sort of language (Wernet, 2000, p. 11) and thus the examination and interpretation of any kind of socio-scientific operation has to be based on its material textual entity (Oevermann, 1986). It is of primary concern to carve out those latent structures of meaning, which are granted a reality of their own (Oevermann, 2002, p. 4; Lamnek, 1995, p. 219). The situation- and subject-specific intentions are secondary (Oevermann, 2002, p. 10).

Starting from the interpretational nucleus of the method, it has further implications for the selection of the unit of analysis, the type of inquiry to be used and the characteristics of the interpretations. Taken as a whole, OH is not only a procedure of textual interpretation but constitutes a qualitative sociological research design (Lamnek, 1995, p. 219).

A prototypical OH analysis consists of three phases (Fig. 2): the genesis of data, the phrasing of the question, and finally the interpretation of the central text (Hildebrand, 2004).

Whereas the genesis of data and the phrasing of questions is very close to the GT-approach, the interpretation method significantly differs from the coding and analyzing activities of GT, that seek for



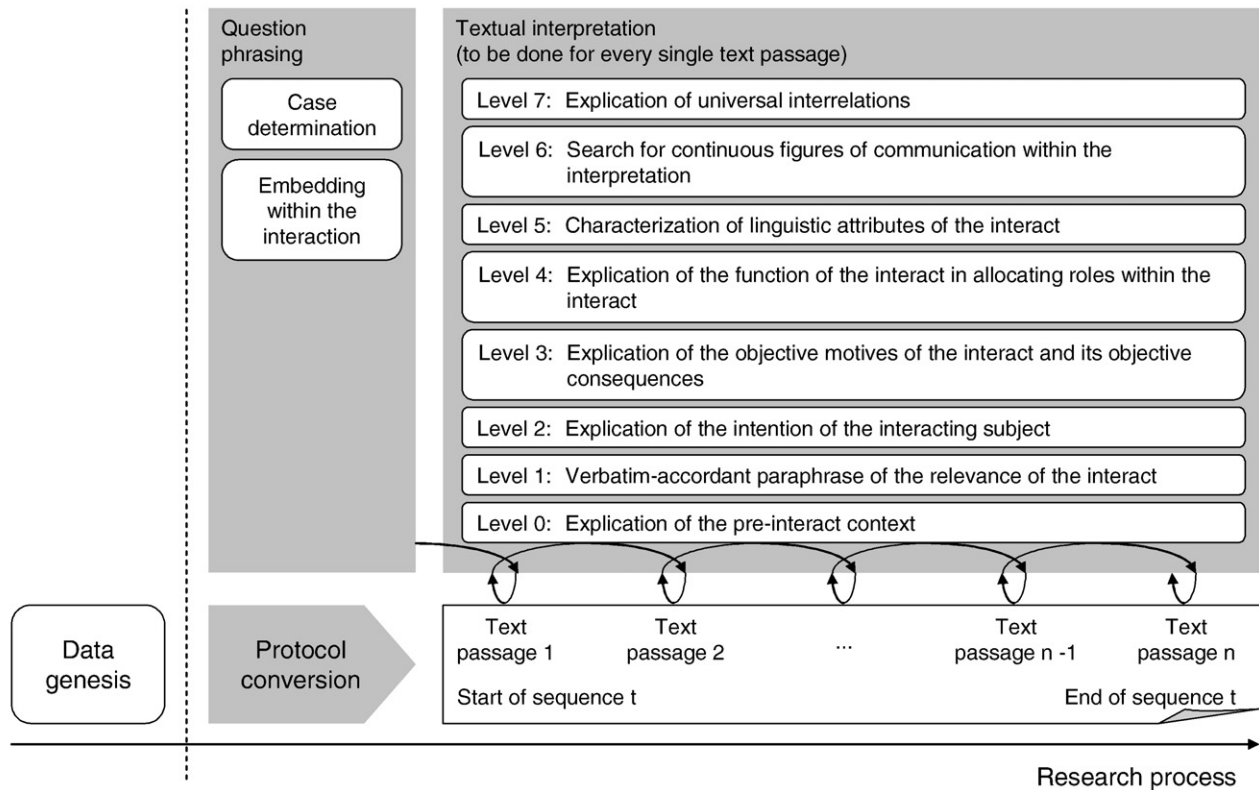


Fig. 2. Overview of the Objective Hermeneutic approach.

similarities among the scattered pieces of information. In OH, there is the request for a theoretical denotation of the intended interpretation. Starting from the formulation of the research interest, and alongside the clarification of the state of the protocol, the actual interpretation question can be expressed (Wernet, 2000, p. 53). The essential interpretation begins with the first relevant textual sequence, within which each text passage has to be analyzed in light of *all possible* readings on eight methodical levels. Therefore, in the beginning (Levels 0 to 2) the analytical focus narrows, thus eliminating possible interpretational strings, before the scope enlarges, revealing the underlying structures of meaning.

At first, the possible pre-interact context has to be explicated exclusively on the basis of the given passage. Second, the literal-consistent meaning of the interaction should be paraphrased. Thereafter, the objective motives and consequences of the interaction will be reduced. Based on these, by assigning roles, the function of the interaction can be explicated. In a next step, respective linguistic attributes should be portrayed. Then, before the final explication of the universal interrelations, one has to go beyond the actual passage, identifying unbroken communicational figures. Ultimately, once the sequence ends, the analysis proceeds with the next relevant sequence.

Since there are no clear-cut rules on how to determine relevant sequences, and since the latent structures of meaning are contained within all sequences (by methodological definition) it is possible that the protocol is incomplete as long as it is authentic (Oevermann et al., 1979). Thus it is in fact (only) vital to construe the considered sequence(s) exhaustively. Five principles, therefore, have to be respected: (1) freedom of context, (2) verbatim approach, (3) sequentiality, (4) extensivity (all possible interpretations have to be considered before proceeding) and (5) parsimony (only those interpretations are allowed which don't require additional information going beyond the present text) (Wernet, 2000, p. 21).

These five principles are quite different from the GT-approach: (1) Opposed to the freedom of context in OH, the researcher's knowledge of the context plays an important role in GT for the emergence of the theory. (2) Verbatim analysis can be used in GT. But if verbatim data are missing (e.g., because subjects did not agree to record interviews), GT is supposed to work well with researchers' notes that convey the general sense, even if those notes do not capture the interview verbatim. (3) In the coding procedure, the GT-approach intentionally breaks up the original sequences in order to extract categories and identify properties (for the categories) that are scattered among the whole dataset. (4) In terms of the detailed interpretation of a sequence, OH is more extensive than GT. While GT should also consider different interpretations, it is not required to take *all*, even far-fetched interpretations into account. (5) With respect to OH's parsimony principle, the OH-approach is opposed to GT. In GT, if a new idea emerges, it is highly desirable to go back into the field and collect additional empirical data that might support or reject the new idea.

Fig. 2 depicts the sequential and sophisticated nature of the interpretation procedure. Adhering to these rules is essential and explains the immense amount of time needed for interpreting protocols using OH (Lamnek, 1995, p. 218; Oevermann et al., 1979). Furthermore, the textual interpretation should be done by a team of researchers (Hildebrand, 2004). For examples of OH interpretations, see Wernet (2000), Oevermann (2000) or Lohfeld (2005).

#### 4.2. Evaluation of Objective Hermeneutics for research in industrial marketing

- (1) *Credibility* of OH findings is inherent in the approach. OH intends to reconstruct both objective and universal law-like social patterns (Gerhardt, 1988). Following this claim, every result of an OH study should be credible. However, by

neglecting a problem-driven pre-specification of the analysis there is a good chance that the results do not answer the questions thought to be essential by the participants. Thus, with OH, credibility is much harder to assess than with GT, where it is inherent by starting with the observation of peoples' problems.

- (2) *Transferability* of obtained results depends on the suitability of the research question examined. With OH it is possible to reconstruct general sociological patterns (Mayring, 2003, p. 33). Thus, the findings of an OH guided case analysis can be expected to be highly transferable with respect to the explanation of a social phenomenon (e.g., influence activities within organizations) (Lueger et al., 2005). However, the explanatory power with respect to object-specific matters (e.g., the performance of an individual business unit) is limited.
- (3) *Dependability* is difficult to test for OH. For methodical reasons the use of questionnaires or other pre-specified and thus potentially respondent-influencing elements is rejected. This way, an (identical) replication of the conversation is not possible. Consequently, neither the reliability approach following Ellram (1996) nor the Test–Retest procedure (Mentzer & Flint, 1997) can be employed. The Inter-Judge process could be adopted; nevertheless it would entail significantly more effort since the interview impressions are to be excluded from an OH interpretation.
- (4) *Confirmability* is strongly supported. First, the textual analysis has to be extensive and it must follow strict rules. In this respect, it comes closer to the Strauss/Corbin approach of GT. Second, in order to avoid external inference, OH's analysis is supposed to be detached from any contextual knowledge. This is an even stronger postulation than GT's request to start with an open mind. Third, the interpretation should not be done independently but by a team of other researchers aiming for intersubjectivity. This requires intensive discussions in addition to reciprocal check-ups and control (Oevermann et al., 1979).
- (5) *Applicability* of OH for research in industrial marketing has to be seen problem-dependent. As mentioned earlier, the medium of analysis are protocols of human practice, thus standardized sources of data like surveys or interviews which have a long tradition in marketing research are not suitable. However, research into behavioral aspects – the home turf of OH – such as the behavior of humans involved in buyer–supplier relationships, seems to have become more widespread. For example, Doney and Cannon (1997) study the role of the supplier's salesperson on the development of inter-organizational trust and the purchasing firm's buying behavior. Nicholson, Compeau, and Sethi (2001) add personal and emotional factors (i.e., the customer's liking of the sales representative) in influencing trust. Heide and Wathne (2006, p. 100) conclude from their research on relationship roles that it “reinforces the importance of continuing to direct relationship research toward improving the understanding of human behavior.” For such and similar research on behavioral issues, protocols of interaction can be compiled and analyzed.

The interpretation process of OH is very time-consuming, even much more so than the procedures for coding and analyzing in GT – which themselves cannot be done quickly. Therefore, the feasible number of potential cases to be observed is limited. Yet, several authors use OH in order to analyze specific cases, and to compare them afterwards (Lueger et al., 2005).

OH proposes to deliver superior results dealing with socio-relational issues of a few distinct cases, not across a multitude of similar ones. With the former, OH quickly becomes too time-consuming when dealing with more cases, while with the latter, the relevant universal pattern of the specific situation has already been explicated in the first case.

#### 4.3. Implications for research in industrial marketing and advice for industrial marketing researchers

OH is an adequate method for the analysis of sociological phenomena not only in its original environments (psychology and sociology) but also in industrial marketing. The method lends itself to the analysis of specific, individual cases. Thereby, it is possible not only to analyze the immediate declarations of the parties involved, but to reconstruct their underlying motives. The application of OH undertaken by Lueger et al. (2005) is an excellent example. They chose three different organizational settings with the objective of studying the influence activities. By using OH they were able to show that former research had frequently limited influence activities to direct face-to-face interactions to the exclusion of other representations (Lueger et al., 2005).

Thus OH may reveal phenomena in B2B channel relationships which are ‘invisible’ on the surface, but which, however, are of great importance for the functioning of the relationship (Heide & Wathne, 2006). Just as the visible part of an iceberg is only a small fraction of the whole, the obvious expression of meaning is only a limited part of its sociological dimension.

Likewise, there is a multitude of potential applications of OH for research in marketing, for example, in cultural settings the analyses of power distances in North America vs. Japan or in organizational settings the communication in matrix organizations vs. line hierarchies. Yet, the method does not support the search for specific empirical cause–effect relationships, such as explaining the performance of a company or business unit. Overall, OH might contribute to a better and deeper understanding of new phenomena in industrial marketing research which, in turn, may induce further empirical research.

#### 5. Summary and conclusion

This article examined the conditions under which marketing researchers can benefit from the employment of two sociological methods: GT and OH. With respect to GT it is necessary to distinguish the original formulation by Glaser/Strauss from the later developments by Strauss/Corbin.

By applying both methods (GT and OH), we want to point out that they are better suited for the development of new theories than for testing existing ones. This is especially true if the field of research is new or lacks established theories, if the existing theories are too remote or abstract to offer much detailed guidance and assistance (Martin & Turner, 1986), or if the established theories cease to apply to a changing environment (Kaghan et al., 1999).

In addition, they go beyond the production of a thick description or an impressionistic account (Martin & Turner, 1986) and thus, by verifying hypotheses, may serve as a thorough basis for successive quantitative research, such as large-scale surveys and/or modeling (Martin & Turner, 1986; Skinner, 1985). However, sometimes it might be useful to adopt them the other way round, as for example in the study of Sutton and Rafaeli (1988) on the relationship between displayed emotions and organizational sales. In this case, survey results were opposed to hypotheses and GT was used to arrive at a better theory that might explain the data.

Approaching a research question in the industrial marketing field with GT (Straussian and Glaserian approach) is particularly suitable if

- it is intended to generate theoretical statements which are relevant and understandable to the people in the area studied and which are useful in giving these people a superior understanding of their own situation (Turner, 1983), e.g. socially responsible organizational buying (Drumwright, 1994).
- the data to be analyzed consists of participant observation, direct observation, semi-structured or unstructured interviews or case



studies collected within organizations (Turner, 1983). The study on cultural transformations of market orientations by Gebhardt et al. (2006), for example, uses all of these sources. In contrast to OH, the GT-approach can handle structured interviews, all sorts of archival material and even quantitative survey data.

- large amounts of data have to be sifted and analyzed, and the data will be accumulated in nonstandard and unpredictable formats (Martin & Turner, 1986), e.g. the study of Morgan, Anderson, and Mittal (2005) with 142 interviews in 38 firms and additional focus groups. If a vast amount of information has to be analyzed and the researchers' time constraints have to be taken into consideration, GT is clearly more appropriate than OH.
- credibility is of high importance, e.g. the managerial implications of market orientation (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990).
- the descriptive relevance for managers is more important than dependability aspects, e.g. in Gilly and Wolfinbarger's (1998) study that makes the point that advertisements can have negative consequences on the internal audience (i.e. the employees).

However, the correct use of GT requires profound studies of the sociological terminology in order to avoid misinterpretations. Furthermore, the effort necessary for understanding the multifaceted (and partly controversial) concepts of GT should not be underestimated.

In contrast, taking an OH-approach promises to deliver intriguing results, if

- the analysis focuses on sociological issues (Lueger et al., 2005; Reichertz, 2004; Titscher, Meyer, Wodak & Vetter, 2000, p. 198), e.g., why does the reaction of sales representatives to failure differ with seniority (Dixon, Spiro, & Forbes, 2003; Dixon, Spiro, & Jamil, 2001), or how do the patterns of social ties relate to cross-unit competition for a market charter (Houston, Walker, Hutt, & Reingen, 2001).
- the relevant information cannot readily be uncovered by standardized or structured questioning, for example because of internal cultural issues. This is the case with turf wars between marketing and other departments (Koku, 2007).
- the focus of the research is on a specific case and not on a general assessment across an industry, e.g., how are growth strategies decided upon and revised afterwards (Turner & Gardiner, 2007).
- the interest of the researcher is in the effect of specific procedures on the awareness of individuals, e.g. design of an advertisement with respect to subconscious effects (Coulter, 2002).
- it is intended to analyze the empirical data in more depth than it would be possible with GT. As a result of the analysis of *all possible* meanings, OH is able to provide more detailed interpretation on empirical data than any other research method can.
- confirmability is of overriding importance.

Researchers following an OH-approach benefit from its structural stringency and rigor, which may help to avoid the presentation of mere situational descriptions by explicitly requesting in-depth analysis of unsaid phenomena.

Our analysis and discussion shows that GT and OH present valuable research possibilities for industrial marketing research. For example, OH lends itself to research focusing on the uncovering of implicit networks between individuals in a given setting (Lee, 1989). GT is better suited for research that investigates multiple cases, such as the comparison of purchasing networks. However, no single research concept can satisfactorily address all aspects of validity. Every scientific method sets its own standards, evaluative criteria and procedures on how to achieve knowledge. What is important is that these be made explicit in order to allow other researchers to evaluate the rigor of a research project. Moreover, validity is not determined by methodology alone. In fact the researchers' diligence (Kvale, 1995) might be even more important in a flawless outcome, especially when dealing with qualitative data using GT or OH.

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