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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 GTapproaches 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

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