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GIGA Research Programme:
Legitimacy and Efficiency of Political Systems

Too Abstract to Be Feasible? Applying the Grounded Theory Method in Social Movement Research

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No 247

May 2014

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GIGA Research Programme “Legitimacy and Efficiency of Political Systems”

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Editorial Assistance and Production: Silvia Bücke

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Abstract

Grounded theory methodology (GTM) has become a popular approach in the social sciences. Based on an iterative research design and reconstructive hermeneutic procedures, it enables scholars to reveal and comprehend patterns of understanding that are reproduced through linguistic and nonlinguistic symbols. Yet the vast literature on GTM often leaves scholars wondering how the method can be operationalized. This paper serves the dual purpose of providing a precise and comprehensive review of GTM sensu Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin while at the same time discussing its application in a social movement research project. Done thoroughly, GTM demands high levels of reflexivity, transparency, and openness from the qualitative scholar. I propose that these requirements concern not only the sampling and data collection but also the researcher's previous assumptions, transcription, translation, and data quality. As the latter aspects are frequently neglected, the paper calls for more accuracy in the application and documentation of research methods.

Keywords: qualitative research methods, grounded theory methodology (GTM), field research, semistructured interviews, foreign languages

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Too Abstract to Be Feasible? Applying the Grounded Theory Method in Social Movement Research

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1 Introduction

Qualitative research undertakes in-depth analysis of complex social structures.¹ By using interpretive approaches and reconstructing meaning from the subjective statements of individuals, the qualitative researcher seeks to develop a comprehensive understanding of mean-

1 Qualitative research should be understood as an umbrella term for a vast number of methods and approaches applied in the social sciences (Flick 2005: par. 1). The special issue of *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* on “Qualitative Methods in Europe” discusses the methodological variety in detail, focusing on the European perspectives on qualitative research and their differences vis-à-vis the Anglo-Saxon literature (*Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, Vol. 6, No. 3, September 2005).

ing (*Sinnverstehen*). Metaphorically speaking, qualitative researchers embark on “a journey of knowledge acquisition” (Corbin/Strauss 2008: 16) that takes them into “unknown territory” (Friese 2012: 4). The aim of qualitative research is to analyze an empirical phenomenon in its own right by acknowledging its specific structure and dynamics and developing an understanding of the same. Consequently, qualitative research is particularly suited to exploratory research that aims to build theory and/or develop hypotheses.

However, researchers seeking to apply grounded theory methodology (GTM) to their specific research projects often feel at loss as to how the methodology should be operationalized. GTM’s complexity and vagueness tend to discourage first-time users from applying the approach in their research projects and, especially, in PhD theses. This paper serves the dual purpose of providing a precise and comprehensive review of the constitutive characteristics, assumptions, and requirements of GTM *sensu* Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin and, at the same time, discussing the application of the methodology in qualitative interview research in political science. Throughout the paper, the methodological discussion of data collection and handling, data processing and analysis, quality assessment, and the generalization of empirical findings is illustrated by a detailed description of a research project on social movements in Brazil. Particular attention is paid to the implications of conducting interview research in a foreign language, an issue that is frequently neglected in political science.

Most of the ideas regarding the application of GTM discussed in this paper were developed over the course of a qualitative research project on the social movement opposing the Belo Monte Hydropower Dam, which is currently under construction on the Xingu River in the Brazilian Amazon state of Pará.² The objective of this study was to investigate how collective identities and collective action frames have contributed to longevity and cohesion in the social movement, which originally emerged in 1989 and continues to fight against Belo Monte today. The lack of empirical studies on social movement dynamics in the Belo Monte case, my attempt to apply “Western concepts” from social movement theory to a case study from the “global South,”³ and my focus on individual-level experiences called for a qualitative research design that would allow the reconstruction of meaning pertaining to identity and framing processes in the movement. The experiences from the Belo Monte research project are used to illustrate the methodological discussion in this paper in order to demonstrate and promote possibilities for the application of GTM in foreign-language interview studies.

2 I would like to thank Sebastian Elischer, Kai-Uwe Schnapp, and Roland Willner for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

3 While it is an obvious simplification to speak of “Western” and “non-Western” countries, the terms are used as shorthand for more complex ideas about the implications of the “traveling” of theories and concepts. Hence, in this paper the term “Western” refers to North America and Europe, and to the theories and methods of social movement research developed there. “Non-Western” refers to any other country that becomes the object of research and the destination where “Western” theories and methods are applied.

2 GTM as a Qualitative Research Method

Grounded theory methodology was developed in the 1960s by the US sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss with the objectives of disclosing their own research procedures and offering a formalized research program that emphasized openness and unbiasedness towards the empirical phenomenon. Glaser and Strauss deliberately framed their method as a reaction to two major trends in research in the 1960s – namely, a tendency to formulate grand theories on the one hand and a disposition towards mere description on the other (Kuckartz 2010: 73; Mey/Mruck 2009: 104). Against this background, GTM strove to develop empirically grounded middle-range theories by providing an unbiased and open approach.

GTM focuses on interpersonal relationships and the actions of individuals in groups and larger social settings (Mey/Mruck 2009: 101–102). Due to its microsociological perspective, it has been applied in a variety of disciplines and in interdisciplinary research. However, its application in political science is a relatively recent phenomenon (von Oertzen 2006: 146). The objective of GTM is to investigate individual and social practices by taking empirical findings to a higher level of abstraction and developing hypotheses and/or middle-range theories that are empirically grounded – hence the name “grounded theory” (Mey/Mruck 2009: 104; Strauss 1998: 50–51; von Oertzen 2006: 146).

Initially, Glaser and Strauss called upon researchers to ignore their theoretical knowledge and to fully immerse themselves in the data (Glaser/Strauss 1967: 37). This instruction led to the classification of GTM as an inductive approach (Kuckartz 2010: 73), even though it actually contains both inductive and deductive elements (Corbin/Strauss 2008: 325–326). GTM is inductive in that the developed categories are grounded in data. Yet, qualitative studies generally rely on deduction when empirical material is interpreted and contextualized in light of the research question (Corbin/Strauss 2008: 326; Kelle 2011: 236–237; Mey/Mruck 2009: 105). The grounded theory methodology *sensu* Strauss and Corbin makes a virtue of necessity by deliberately using the researcher’s ideas and previous knowledge to build a heuristic framework that guides the analysis. Because hypothesis development and theory building depend on the creative combination of empirical facts and existing theoretical knowledge, classifying GTM as either an inductive or a deductive process is misleading (Kelle 2011: 247–249).

Although GTM offers an entire research program, the methodology does not prescribe a precise procedure and can even be applied selectively throughout the research process (Mey/Mruck 2009: 148; von Oertzen 2006: 146). Consequently, the research design should be explicitly tailored to the research question and the particular circumstances of the research project in order to generate the intended contribution to theoretical knowledge (Mey/Mruck 2009: 139; Strauss 1998: 32–33). Researchers are free to choose their instruments for data collection, the degree of abstraction of the theory they seek to develop, and their hermeneutic procedure (von Oertzen 2006: 146) Yet, as Juliet Corbin emphasizes, they “should be very clear at the beginning of a study what it is they are setting out to do” (Corbin/Strauss 2008: x).

In an effort to structure the extensive literature on concepts and approaches in GTM, Mey and Mruck select three elements they consider constitutive of the methodology (Mey/Mruck 2009: 108–114):

- 1) Building of concepts instead of description: The principle task of GTM is the analytical step from data to concepts. It is assumed that any data segment, for example, an interview statement, points to broader underlying ideas. Relevant data segments are therefore considered empirical indicators of theoretical concepts (Strauss 1998: 54). Concepts are developed through constant comparison, interpretation, and abstraction of data segments, and they eventually form the building blocks of an empirically grounded theory (Mey/Mruck 2009: 109).
- 2) Theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation: When GTM is used, data collection and analysis should be iterative, meaning that a first round of data collection should be followed by data analysis and a subsequent round of data collection based on the initial findings. This procedure leads to the theoretical sampling of interviews and contributes to the theoretical saturation of the concepts.⁴
- 3) Writing of memos throughout the whole research process: GTM requires that the decisions regarding case selection, sampling, and analysis that are taken repeatedly throughout the research process be documented in memos.

Based on these characteristics, GTM was identified as the most suitable approach for the investigation of the social movement opposing the Belo Monte Dam, for three reasons. First, the study aimed to critically apply existing theories and to contribute “theoretically grounded” concepts to the existing theoretical body, with the objective of developing empirically grounded middle-range theories. Second, when applying “Western” theories to “non-Western” case studies, attention should be paid to possible differences in the meaning of concepts. This necessitates an open approach that uncovers indexicality.⁵ Third, GTM is particularly well suited for research conducted in foreign languages, as discussed in Section 5.

2.1 Data Requirements and Data Collection Method

Social science methodology offers a variety of techniques for the collection of original data. The selection of an appropriate method depends first and foremost on the research interest, the theoretical perspective, and the associated data requirements (Helfferich 2009: 26). How-

4 In a strict sense, saturation does not refer only to interviewees giving similar responses to interview questions. Instead, theoretical saturation refers to the gradual development of concepts based on the purposeful and selective collection of those data that contribute to the analysis.

5 The term “indexicality” stems from linguistics and was introduced to sociology by US sociologist Harold Garfinkel. Indexicality refers to the fact that language is vague and that verbal expressions merely point towards meaning that is dependent on context (Przyborski/Wohlrab-Sahr 2010: 29; Garfinkel 1981: 204–205). Hence, a statement can have different meanings in different contexts, and it may only be comprehensible for those people who are familiar with the context. The implications of indexicality are discussed further in Section 2.1.

ever, the constraints and costs of data collection have to be considered as well. As for the data requirements, an important aspect is the level of analysis the study aspires to.

The Belo Monte study required qualitative data on the motives, objectives, ideas, and beliefs of the social movement participants. Qualitative data refers to descriptive, nonnumerical data in the form of written text, including field observations, interviews, and documents as well as images, video, and audio material that has been transcribed (Miles/Huberman 1994: 9). Qualitative data are usually produced through field research – that is, extended stays in a specific local setting (Miles/Huberman 1994: 9). They are particularly suited to the analysis of meanings that people attribute to structures, processes, and events. Moreover, they are especially useful in exploratory studies and in the development of hypotheses (Miles/Huberman 1994: 9–10). While social movement organizations and activists have produced written material about the Belo Monte conflict and the associated collective action, this material generally does not provide personal accounts of the individuals' motives, objectives, ideas, and beliefs. Therefore, original data had to be collected through semistructured interviews as part of this study.

According to Hopf, qualitative interviews offer the opportunity to discover actor-specific interpretations of situations and of the motives that guide their actions (Hopf 2012: 350). The literature distinguishes between a variety of qualitative interview types, which differ in terms of

- 1) the structuredness or predetermination of the interview content,
- 2) the assessment of truth and accuracy,
- 3) the role allocation between interviewer and interviewee,
- 4) the degree of steering on the part of the interviewer, and
- 5) the existence of previous knowledge on the part of the interviewer (Helfferrich 2009: 37–38).

Accordingly, qualitative interviews may range from narrative interviews, which are characterized by a monologic report from the interviewee, to focused interviews that are more structured with respect to the topics, the involvement of the interviewer, and the development of the discussion (Helfferrich 2009: 38–39). According to Willner, researchers should consider these dimensions before collecting data in order to ensure the generation of high-quality data (Willner 2012: 629). As semistructured interviews determine the structure of the conversation, they risk restraining the interviewee from explicating his or her own relevance system and communicative patterns (Przyborski/Wohlrab-Sahr 2010: 138–139). Therefore, it is important that the researcher designs the interview guide carefully and takes the particular interview situation into account when using it⁶ (Przyborski/Wohlrab-Sahr 2010: 139). Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr recommend starting the interview with an open question that allows

6 Notably, the interviewer should avoid sticking too closely to the interview guide (so-called *Leitfadenbürokratie*, cf. Hopf 1978: 101–106) and imposing her own relevance system onto the interviewee's statements.

the interviewee to explicate his or her view of the relevant issue(s) in a narrative (Przyborski/Wohlrab-Sahr 2010: 140).

Even if interviewees are given room to express their relevance systems autonomously, it remains challenging for the researcher to fully comprehend the respondent's structuring of social reality (*Fremdverstehen*, understanding the other). Understanding between two or more actors always requires intersubjectivity – that is, a shared understanding on the part of persons A and B with respect to the meaning of A's action (cf. Schneider 2009: 13). The exact meaning of verbal and nonverbal expressions is always specified by context, making communication indexical (Przyborski/Wohlrab-Sahr 2010: 31). Qualitative research seeks to uncover this indexicality by enabling research participants to explain their relevance system, and by systematically addressing potential differences in the interpretive frames of the researcher(s) and research participants (Przyborski/Wohlrab-Sahr 2010: 31).

The interview guides for the Belo Monte study were developed in consideration of these issues. I chose semistructured interviews based on interview guides because my objective was to collect personal accounts from social movement participants about the conflict and the collective action, while at the same time focusing on specific aspects of the collective action. Hence, I paid attention to enabling interviewees to express themselves freely and openly within the realm of the specific themes. To that end, all but one of the interviews were conducted in Portuguese, the interviewees' native or working language. The implications of doing interview research in a foreign language merit a separate discussion, which is presented in Section 5.

All interviewees were provided with information materials about the study and an informed-consent form stating the purpose of the interview and guaranteeing confidentiality to research participants.⁷

2.2 Interview Guides

The interview guides comprised four sets of questions for social movement participants and seven sets of questions for key informants,⁸ with the additional questions demanding a higher degree of reflection about the social setting and the collective action. All interview questions were printed on index cards using a consistent layout, the structure of which was based on Kruse (2010: 67). This structure provides a table for each issue area the researcher wants to address during the interview. The respective topic is displayed above the table, and the corresponding interview question or story-telling prompt is provided in the main field. Three smaller fields at the bottom of the table display a list of key issues that should be addressed (subject matter), as well as two sets of additional questions. The so-called "perpetuation questions" offer alternative formulations in case the interviewee does not understand the

7 For matters of research ethics and data protection, see Helfferich (2009: 190 et seq.).

8 In the context of this study, a key informant is a person who is perceived by movement participants and the media as a leader of the social movement.

question or does not seem talkative. These are basically reformulations of the original question or story-telling prompt. The so-called “specification questions” are used to narrow the scope of the question in order to address specific aspects, underlying issues, and relevant background knowledge. Because they induce the interviewee to explicate his or her perceptions and beliefs, specification questions can be used to uncover indexicality. Table 1 shows the opening question from the interview guide for social movement participants that was used to collect qualitative data in Belém and Altamira in 2012.

Table 1: Opening Question of the Interview Guide for Activists, 2012

1) Interpretive Frameworks: How Do Actors See the Conflict?		
<p>The Brazilian government wants to build a large hydropower dam, the so-called Belo Monte Dam, on the Xingu River. However, the project is highly controversial and has generated a very emotional, polemic discussion. Many arguments have been presented in favor of and against the hydropower dam.</p> <p>How would you describe the core issues in the Belo Monte conflict? Beyond the arguments, what does Belo Monte <u>really</u> mean for the people, for the Amazon, and for Brazil?</p>		
Subject matter	Perpetuation	Specification
<p>The key issues: justice, development, progress, etc.</p> <p>The consequences and effects of Belo Monte</p> <p>The classification of the contentious issue as a conflict/fight/war</p> <p>The broader implications of dams in the Amazon</p>	<p>Why do you think the government wants to build the dam, and why is it controversial?</p> <p>What will happen (to people and the environment) if Belo Monte is built?</p> <p>What does it mean to build a hydropower complex on the Xingu River?</p>	<p>Why is there a conflict?</p> <p>What are the consequences of the project in social, environmental, and economic terms?</p> <p>What does it mean to oppose the building of the dam?</p> <p>Does the project have broader consequences beyond this region?</p>

To operationalize the theoretical concepts for data collection, identity was defined as participants’ personal motives for collective action and their role in the social movement. Collective action frames, defined as “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings” (Benford/Snow 2000: 614), were operationalized as the interviewees’ perception of the “real meaning” of the Belo Monte Dam and the associated costs and benefits. In the opening question, interviewees were asked to describe what they perceived as the core issues of the conflict beyond the arguments prevalent in the public debate. The allusion to the “real meaning” was supposed to prevent the interviewees, and especially those with media experience, from giving standard or desirable answers.

2.3 *Sampling Procedure*

The sampling strategy suggested by grounded theory methodology is called “theoretical sampling” and reflects the reiterative approach to data collection and analysis that is typical of GTM. Theoretical sampling is a circular process that is characterized – and differentiated from other sampling procedures – by the immediate analysis of the collected data. In an ideal case, the researcher starts the analysis right after collecting the first piece of data, develops preliminary concepts and subsequent questions, and continues the data collection with a specific focus on the concepts she is interested in. Hence, the researcher is not sampling research participants (i.e., people) but concepts (Corbin/Strauss 2008: 144). Theoretical sampling continues until data saturation is reached, meaning that all categories are sufficiently developed in terms of their properties and dimensions. However, many researchers (have to) finish data collection (too) early because of limited resources (Corbin/Strauss 2008: 148–149). Because every research project faces constraints, the ideal practice of theoretical sampling is often unfeasible, especially if the research takes place abroad (Corbin/Strauss 2008: 58). Many researchers rely on variations of theoretical sampling that align the formal requirements with the practical constraints of the research project (Corbin/Strauss 2008: 153 et seq.).

Most important, the sampling and data collection procedures have to be consistent with the theoretical perspective and associated data requirements of the particular study. In the Belo Monte study, the sampling procedure was based on initial document research that resulted in the identification of more than 130 social movement organizations participating in the collective action. These organizations were grouped into categories according to their interests and areas of expertise. The sampling strategy was designed so that at least one organization in each category was investigated by means of a semistructured interview and a standardized questionnaire on institutional relations. To ensure that the interviewees were representative⁹ of their organizations, the following criteria were established: Interviewees should have comparable positions within their respective organizations but they should not merely occupy representational posts. Instead, interviewees should be involved in the actual work and activities of the organization related to the Belo Monte conflict so that they are able to make knowledgeable statements. Despite these rather strict selection criteria, interviewees were recruited not because of their particular status and formal expertise but as “experts” on their personal involvement in the collective action against Belo Monte (cf. Helfferich 2009: 163). The sampling procedure also allowed the interviewees from the above organizations to nominate further research participants whom they considered to be important actors with a strong and positive reputation among movement participants. Thus, the identification and selection of interviewees was based mainly on substantial criteria that considered the context of the individual organization rather than on formal criteria.

9 In this context, representative means that people fulfill a number of criteria that make them eligible to speak on behalf of a collective. It does not refer to representativeness in the strict statistical sense.

As the data had to be sampled in one go, I postponed the theoretical sampling until the data analysis. The sequence I chose to code the interviews during the data analysis was based on the principles of theoretical sampling, in that I sought minimal and maximal contrasts in the data (cf. Corbin/Strauss 2008: 150). Based on my knowledge of the interview contents and peculiarities, I always tried to select an interview that would contribute to the elaboration of the concept(s) I was working on at that time.

3 Data Analysis

Since the development of GTM in the 1960s, a number of scholars have contributed to advancing the methodology and various approaches have emerged.¹⁰ Researchers are free to tailor their methods and procedures to their particular research project in order to obtain an adequate analytical framework, yet they are requested to explicate their analytical approach and objectives. This section discusses the process of data analysis, from interview transcription and the disclosure of previous knowledge and assumptions to coding and conceptualization. The discussion draws upon and emphasizes the actual course of action taken in the Belo Monte study.

3.1 Interview Transcription

The transcription of interviews is an important step in the research process that tends to receive too little attention from researchers – especially in the social sciences (Davidson 2009: 46; Lapadat 2000: 204). The process includes a number of decisions with respect to the transcription of verbal and nonverbal information (e.g., utterances, gestures, and mimics), the representation of timing and sequence of speech (e.g., overlaps, pauses, and silence), the representation of dialects, and other factors. As Ochs states, “transcription is a selective process reflecting theoretical goals and definitions” (Ochs 1979: 44, bold in the original), and some information is omitted for practical and theoretical reasons. As a general rule, the transcript should be limited to the level of detail and accuracy that is necessary to answer the research question (Meuser/Nagel 1991: 455–456; Strauss 1987: 266–267). The numerous choices a researcher makes before and during the transcription process need “to be acknowledged and explained in relation to the goals of a study rather than taken to be unremarkable” (Davidson 2009: 38).

In political science, qualitative interviews are viewed as a means to gather information and data about the issue(s) under investigation (Behnke et al. 2006: 234). Hence, the focus is on the subject matter. Transcription rules tend to be simple, and researchers rarely report on the decisions taken during the process. Although the qualitative interviews in the Belo Monte

¹⁰ For an overview of the method and of its application in practice and in the context of different disciplines, see Bryant/Charmaz (2007).

study provided not merely factual information but also personal accounts of subjective meanings, the study did not pursue a linguistic analysis. Simple transcription rules were applied in order to facilitate the transcription process and produce a legible written document. It is important to note that it was not the transcripts but rather the research recordings – that is, the conversations I engaged in with research participants – that I considered to be “data.” I viewed transcripts as a tool to help with the analysis of original data. Whenever there was doubt about the reliability of the transcript or an indication that pauses in speech or the tone of voice might be relevant to the interpretation, I turned to the original audio files in order not to lose contextual information.

In the Belo Monte study, a research assistant transcribed the interviews.¹¹ For data security and confidentiality purposes, this person signed a written agreement specifying concrete measures for data protection and handling. Moreover, the research assistant was properly informed about the research project and its objectives, and provided with all the material required to facilitate his work.¹² The outsourcing of interview transcription to a research assistant is controversial; first, because it might distance the researcher from the data and, second, because the transcriber assumes an analytical role and takes interpretive decisions that should actually remain with the researcher (Lapadat 2000: 215–216). Therefore, he or she should be not only well trained but also familiar with the research process and its objectives, and he or she should ideally be included in other steps of the research (Lapadat 2000: 216). In the Belo Monte study, the transcription process was expected to be particularly time-consuming due to the mediocre quality of the audio files and the additional challenges of transcribing interviews in a foreign language. Therefore, the outsourcing of the transcription to a qualified research assistant seemed justified.

The transcription rules applied in the Belo Monte study were based on Kuckartz (2010: 44), and I developed additional rules in collaboration with the transcriber to accommodate the particularities of the study. The focus of transcription was placed on the content of the conversation in order to allow for alignment with written language. Paralanguage (e.g., gasps and sighs) and short pauses in the flow of words were considered irrelevant for the purposes of this study. However, longer pauses and exceptional reactions, such as crying and struggling to retain composure on the part of the interviewees, were considered relevant and therefore noted in the transcripts.

11 The research assistant was a Portuguese native speaker and language teacher who had extensive experience in the transcription of semistructured interviews. He was involved in the translation of the interview guides and the transcription of the interview audio files.

12 The information included (1) written instructions for data handling in general and transcription of the interviews in particular (transcription rules); (2) the interview guides used; (3) a complete list of interviews with additional information on how to proceed with the data; and (4) a list of people, places, indigenous tribes, organizations, and documents that were mentioned frequently in the interviews.

The transcription of oral conversations automatically reduces the complexity of the data. The disadvantages arising from the determination of certain readings or interpretations of the data, however, are balanced by the advantages of improving the manageability of the data through data reduction (Kruse et al. 2012b: 61). Data reduction is almost unavoidable in the transcription of spoken language as interviewees tend to splutter, to merge or invent words, or to break off mid-word or mid-sentence. In these cases the transcript can only approximate the original utterance. As the Belo Monte study was not interested in linguistic analysis, the transcription rules instructed the transcriber to note the broken-off utterance and transcribe the next intelligible word. Moreover, the transcription rules allowed for the correction of small grammatical errors such as linguistic agreement in order to approximate standard written Portuguese and improve the manageability of the transcript for non-native researchers.

3.2 *Sensitizing Concepts*

Because they were concerned with openness and unbiasedness towards the empirical phenomenon, the early founders of grounded theory methodology proposed that previous knowledge and literature should be largely ignored at the beginning of a new research project (Glaser/Strauss 1967: 37; Mey/Mruck 2009: 105). While this direction was historically justified, it lost its strength over time, and a dispute about the “correct” handling of previous knowledge led to the parting of Glaser and Strauss in the 1990s (Kelle 2011: 242–243).¹³ Subsequently, Strauss and his student Juliet Corbin developed an independent strand of GTM that continued to demand conceptual openness from the researcher but that Glaser nevertheless criticized harshly.

Data analysis *sensu* Strauss and Corbin is based on a coding paradigm and so-called “sensitizing concepts” that facilitate the deliberate use of previous theoretical knowledge in the analysis.¹⁴ Researchers following Strauss and Corbin’s argument emphasize that referring to existing literature throughout the research process contributes to a better understanding of one’s own empirical work (Corbin/Strauss 2008: 75). At the end of the research project, the concepts and/or theories developed from the empirical data can be compared with existing theories (Mey/Mruck 2009: 108). According to Kelle, the development of empirically grounded theories should always be guided by an adequate epistemological model that relates data to theory (Kelle 2011: 258). Yet the reference to literature and previous knowledge in the data analysis entails the risk of constricting the analysis and predetermining the research outcome (Kruse 2010: 305). The researcher’s ideas, interests, and previous knowledge make up her relevance system and work like “scanners” on the empirical data (Kruse 2010: 190;

13 A detailed discussion of the controversy between Glaser and Strauss and the underlying theoretical traditions of their approaches is provided in Kelle (2011).

14 The idea is based on the work of Strauss’s mentor Herbert Blumer, who elaborated on the costs and benefits associated with the inaccuracy and vagueness of sociological concepts (Blumer 1954: 7, as cited in Kelle 1997: 235). Kelle (1997: 232–241) provides a detailed discussion of Blumer’s work on sensitizing concepts.

cf. Corbin/Strauss 2008: 32–33; Kelle 2011: 237). By highlighting certain elements in the data and omitting others, the “scanners” restrict the range of possible interpretations the researcher is able to identify. Hence, in order to remain as open and unbiased as possible, she should reflect upon her relevance system and disclose its elements in the sensitizing concepts (Kruse 2010: 190).

The Belo Monte study was likely influenced by my theoretical knowledge about social movements, by practical experiences that I gathered during field research in Brazil, and by my expectations about the outcome of the analysis. These elements constitute my relevance system. They determined my view of the empirical phenomenon and my interpretation of the data. In order to open my mind and avoid bias in the analysis, I developed six sensitizing concepts that explicated my previous knowledge, my experiences, and my expectations. They were formally included in the analysis in that each sensitizing concept was evaluated in comparison with empirical data. Based on the literature review, I decided to treat the collective action against Belo Monte as a social movement. A review of the different research strands in social movement research led me to focus on collective identities and collective action frames. The following sensitizing concepts thus guided the data-analysis and hypotheses-generation processes:

- 1) *The collective action against Belo Monte constitutes a social movement.* This sensitizing concept was based on movement participants’ and observers’ denotation of the collective action as a social movement. Because this classification was set forth not as an assumption but as a sensitizing concept, I was able to analyze it in detail throughout the research process and revise if necessary.
- 2) *Collective identities and collective action frames are the object of analysis.* In the Belo Monte study, collective identities and collective action frames were assumed to be central to the successful mobilization of actors and the maintenance of movement cohesion. Therefore, they constituted the theoretical perspective taken in the study.
- 3) *Western theories and concepts need to be problematized.* Social movement theory was largely developed in Europe and North America, and is therefore rooted in Western history and theory. This sensitizing concept enabled me to problematize and discuss the applicability of “Western” theories in the particular case study, and to address issues such as the “travelling of concepts” and “conceptual stretching.”¹⁵
- 4) *Amazonia constitutes a specific setting for social movements.* The Amazon region is very diverse in terms of settlement and living conditions as well as the inhabitants’ sociocultural structures – among other things. This sensitizing concept draws attention to the particular problems in the region and their implications for the development and maintenance of a social movement.

15 For a discussion of the applicability of Western concepts in non-Western cases, see Abers/von Bülow 2011, Mercer 2002, and Zinecker 2011; for conceptual stretching, see Sartori 1970.

- 5) *The Catholic Church plays a central role in the lives of the local population.* The Prelature of Xingu was founded in 1934. Media coverage of the collective action against Belo Monte indicates that the current bishop of Xingu, Erwin Kräutler, as well as several organizations associated with the Catholic Church of Brazil (e.g., the Indianist Missionary Council) have played an influential role in the collective action against Belo Monte. The sample of interviewees therefore included clergy members and employees of church organizations.
- 6) *Women have taken on leadership positions in the collective action.* Media coverage of the collective action also demonstrates the strong involvement of women in the protest. This sensitizing concept enabled a close analysis of leadership in general and the diverse roles of women in the social movement against the Belo Monte Dam in particular.

Sensitizing concepts can only be used as a starting point for the analysis of data and the development of theory (Charmaz 2003: 259). In contrast to hypotheses, which can be tested using standardized methods, sensitizing concepts do not make predictions about the relationships between variables; rather, they reflect the researcher's preliminary ideas about the research object and her research interest (Kruse 2010: 191; Kelle 2011: 250). Because they explicated my expectations and disclosed my relevance system with respect to the Belo Monte case, the sensitizing concepts structured the data and drew my attention to those aspects that were relevant to the research question (i.e., identities and collective action frames).

3.3 Coding and Conceptualization

The central element of data analysis within GTM is the thorough coding of the empirical material. Coding refers to the development of concepts and categories and to the assignment of corresponding codes to the data (Kuckartz 2010: 74). The general aim of coding is to veer away from the empirical material in order to avoid its mere reproduction (Kuckartz 2010: 96).

According to Strauss, the researcher develops concepts on the basis of empirical indicators that capture events and actions of interest to him or her (Strauss 1998: 54). Categories are more abstract concepts, and they thus group together concepts with lower levels of abstraction (Corbin/Strauss 2008: 52; Kuckartz 2010: 75). Once the analysis moves up the conceptual ladder, the concepts become broader and gain explanatory value, while at the same time losing some of their specificity. Consequently, higher-level concepts (=categories) have to rest solidly on lower-level concepts, which are in turn based on data (Corbin/Strauss 2008: 52). The term "code" refers to the word or short phrase that denotes an underlying concept or category (Mey/Mruck 2009: 114).¹⁶

Concepts and categories are developed gradually throughout the analysis; the codes may be revised, merged, or discarded completely. The denotation of the empirical phenomenon (i.e., the code) can derive either from theoretical knowledge ("conceptual codes") or from the original data, in which case it uses the exact wording of the research participants ("in-vivo

¹⁶ Some authors discard the term and speak directly of concepts and categories instead.

codes”) (Corbin/Strauss 2008: 65; Kuckartz 2010: 75; Mey/Mruck 2009: 114–115). Each type of code is analytic, in that it enables the researcher to abstract from the data and relate the concept to other concepts (Strauss 1998: 64). At the beginning of data analysis, concepts tend to be located at different levels of abstraction. Over the course of the analysis they are gradually refined, related to each other, and grouped into categories (von Oertzen 2006: 149). This process involves the constant comparison of concepts and categories within and across documents, something that is typical of GTM (Mey/Mruck 2009: 109).

The coding procedure introduced by Corbin and Strauss is characterized by three steps, called open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin/Strauss 2008: 66, 159–160; Mey/Mruck 2009: 117; von Oertzen 2006: 148). However, the differentiation between these steps is first and foremost an analytical one. Although the procedure is rule-based and systematic (Mey/Mruck 2009: 116), it is also repetitive, meaning that the three steps cannot be separated nor put into sequential order (Kuckartz 2010: 79). The coding process is characterized by an increasing degree of abstraction with repeated returns to lower levels of abstraction (Mey/Mruck 2009: 117). Due to space limitations, the following section focuses on the predominant tasks involved in coding – illustrating them with references to the Belo Monte study – rather than recounting open, axial, and selective coding in detail.¹⁷

The first predominant task is for the researcher to immerse him- or herself in the data, which is mainly done using open coding. Open coding focuses on breaking up, investigating, conceptualizing, and categorizing the data (Kuckartz 2010: 75) through the constant comparison of statements and with a focus on the properties and dimensions of the concepts (Corbin/Strauss 2008: 73–74; Strauss 1998: 100). During this initial phase it is essential that the researcher remain open-minded and willing to be surprised by the data. In the Belo Monte study, I initially advanced line by line,¹⁸ asking myself questions about the meaning, conditions, causes, objectives, and results of the action and about alternatives to it, and then drawing comparisons to similar incidents. This enabled me to understand how the interviewees developed their arguments and to engage with the internal logic of their narratives. After coding each interview, I identified the categories that seemed central to the respective interviewee’s arguments about (1) the meaning of Belo Monte and (2) his or her mobilization and participation in the social movement.

I was thus able to quickly identify recurrent themes and relevant categories that I could elaborate on in the next step of data analysis. Over time, relationships between codes started to emerge and more conceptual work on individual codes was initiated; meanwhile, other

17 The interested reader is referred to the relevant literature by Corbin and Strauss (2008), Mey and Mruck (2009), and von Oertzen (2006).

18 The in-depth analysis of single words or phrases has been termed “microanalysis” and is considered particularly useful at the beginning of the research process as it enables the researcher to develop ideas about the empirical phenomenon (Corbin/Strauss 2008: 59; Strauss 1998: 100). However, as microanalysis is a time-consuming tool, it can also be applied selectively to the data set (Corbin/Strauss 2008: 71).

codes remained at a preliminary stage and new codes were still in the making. Hence, the coding process was characterized by the movement back and forth between interviews and the elaboration of codes and categories at various levels of analysis.

The second predominant task of coding is the constant comparison of categories, concepts, and empirical incidents. This is mainly done using axial and selective coding. Axial coding aims to elaborate on the concepts and categories developed during open coding with the objective of establishing the relationships between them (Kelle 2011: 241; Mey/Mruck 2009: 117; von Oertzen 2006: 150–151). As the transition from open to axial coding is fluent, the researcher can return to open coding and review codes and categories at any point in time (Mey/Mruck 2009: 129). In the Belo Monte study, open coding led to the development of three broad categories entitled framing, identity, and movement dynamics that comprised a large number of lower-level concepts. During the axial coding I developed these concepts and the relationships between them by constantly comparing the underlying empirical incidents. The analytical tools of posing questions and drawing comparisons led to the further development of concepts and categories. These then guided the theoretical sampling and analysis of the next interview (Strauss 1998: 42). To advance the theoretical integration of the interpretive work – the main purpose of selective coding – I then focused my attention on a limited number of core categories. Selective coding comprises the identification of a core category¹⁹ and the elaboration of its relationships with all other categories through constant comparison (Corbin/Strauss 2008: XX; Kuckartz 2010: 77). Its connection with all the other categories means that the core category plays a central role in integrating, densifying, and saturating the theory. While the number of categories is reduced to a minimum in this process, special attention is paid to the properties and dimensions of the concepts in order to develop a parsimonious but far-reaching theory (Strauss 1998: 66).

From the very beginning I drafted coding notes for each interview as well as analytical memos about individual concepts and their relationships with other concepts. This procedure produced a large amount of written material; however, it also raised the analysis to a more conceptual level and facilitated the elaboration of categories and their relationships (cf. Corbin/Strauss 2008: 120).

4 Quality Assessment

Not only quantitative but also qualitative empirical research has to meet certain quality standards. The evaluation of quantitative research is generally based on three criteria: objectivity, reliability, and validity. They derive from measurement theory and are thus based on the assumption that empirical phenomena are generally measurable.

¹⁹ Most authors acknowledge that there may be more than one core category (Kuckartz 2010: 82; Strauss 1998: 65; von Oertzen 2006: 150).

- 1) Objectivity exists when the results of measuring procedures are independent of the researcher applying the procedures (Przyborski/Wohlrab-Sahr 2010: 40).
- 2) Reliability refers to the reproducibility of empirical results by different researchers applying the same procedures (King/Keohane/Verba 1994: 25–26).
- 3) Validity refers to the adequateness of an indicator (the theoretical conceptualization) for measuring a certain empirical phenomenon (King/Keohane/Verba 1994: 25).

However, many scholars consider these criteria inappropriate for the evaluation of qualitative research, as its focus on the analysis of meaning inevitably leads to subjectivity. Therefore, qualitative scholars have to decide whether they want to “accept subjectivity as an unavoidable shortcoming; consider this a fault that can be partially eliminated through careful research design; or embrace this phenomenon as a natural part of research” (Bergman/Coxon 2005: par. 29). Some scholars, proposing that any kind of scientific research should meet the classic criteria, have sought to operationalize these criteria for qualitative studies (Przyborski/Wohlrab-Sahr 2010: 35 et seq.). However, many phenomena studied in the social sciences are difficult to measure due to the potential for conceptual inaccuracy, sampling errors, and measurement errors. Qualitative studies (which are based on linguistic and nonlinguistic symbols such as speech, music, or art) are especially prone to misunderstandings and manipulation, which impair the validity, reliability, and objectivity of the data. Consequently, some scholars claim that the classic quality criteria cannot be transferred to qualitative research as the objectives and approaches of qualitative and quantitative research are different (Bergman/Coxon 2005: par. 8; Steinke 2005: 322). Grounded theory methodology *sensu* Corbin and Strauss makes a virtue of necessity in that it embraces subjectivity as natural and acknowledges the role of the researcher in the research process. Specific tools (e.g., sensitizing concepts) are used to disclose the researcher’s previous knowledge and assumptions and to evaluate the role of subjectivity in the analysis.

In an attempt to define quality criteria for qualitative research, Steinke (2005) proposes the elaboration of criteria that are consistent with the epistemological underpinnings and methodological approaches of qualitative research. However, rather than offering a number of independent criteria, she suggests that qualitative research be evaluated using a system of criteria. As qualitative research projects differ significantly in terms of their research interests, objectives, and procedures, quality criteria should be applied selectively and operationalized to meet the specificities of the particular research project (Steinke 2005: 322–324).

Steinke’s proposed system pertains to seven areas of quality assessment:

- 1) intersubject comprehensibility,
- 2) indication of the research process,
- 3) empirical foundation,
- 4) limitation,
- 5) coherence,

- 6) relevance, and
- 7) reflected subjectivity (Steinke 2005: 232–331).

While Steinke does not expect a qualitative research project to fulfill all of these criteria, she proposes that several of them should be met in order to ensure that quality standards in qualitative research are achieved. The Belo Monte study paid special attention to the following five criteria, which are also discussed in the literature on GTM:

- 1) Intersubject comprehensibility: While the identical replication of qualitative research is impossible due to a lack of standardization in methods and procedures, qualitative studies should aim for intersubject comprehensibility. This includes
 - (1) providing comprehensive documentation of the research process that allows for the evaluation of a study on the basis of its own criteria,
 - (2) conducting interpretations in groups, and
 - (3) using codified procedures in the research design (Steinke 2005: 324–326).

The Belo Monte study sought to achieve intersubject comprehensibility through the comprehensive documentation of the research process; the introduction of sensitizing concepts; and the thorough discussion of data requirements, data quality, data collection methods, sampling methods, and transcription methods. Particular attention was paid to the implications of conducting interview research in a foreign language. As coding and data analysis are at the heart of GTM, the study thoroughly explained and reflected upon both with a view to creating intersubject comprehensibility. Throughout the study, the empirical results were substantiated using the original statements of the interviewees. The introductory chapter documented the development of the entire research process in a research biography. While data interpretation in groups was hampered by the multilingual character of the study, a native Brazilian colleague periodically provided advice; her influence on the interpretation was documented accordingly.

- 2) Indication of the research process: A second set of criteria is concerned with the appropriateness of
 - (1) the research procedure,
 - (2) the choice of methods and procedures,
 - (3) the transcription rules,
 - (4) the sampling strategy, and
 - (5) the quality criteria, as well as with
 - (6) the coherence of methods and procedures and their adequacy in light of the available resources (Steinke 2005: 326–328).

The evaluation of the appropriateness of the researcher's choices depends on the proper documentation of the research process, as outlined above. The applicability of the GTM approach to the Belo Monte study's research interest and objective was carefully evaluated based on the three constitutive elements of the methodology (see Section 2).

- 3) Empirical foundation: Qualitative research, whether theory testing or theory building, should rest solidly on empirical data. The use of codified methods, the citation of original statements, analytic induction,²⁰ the generation of prognoses, and communicative validation contribute to the empirical foundation of a qualitative study (Steinke 2005: 328–329). The empirical foundation of the Belo Monte study results was ensured via the thorough application of GTM, which aims to develop theoretical concepts on the basis of empirical data. The coding process helps the researcher define categories that rest solidly on lower-level concepts, which are in turn based on data. The Belo Monte study thus cited original interview statements in its presentation of results to demonstrate the latter's empirical foundation.
- 4) Limitation: Another set of criteria refers to the generalizability of a study's results. The contrasting of cases that are most similar and most different, as well as the investigation of deviant, negative, and extreme cases, contributes to the evaluation of this aspect (Steinke 2005: 329–330). The generalizability of the Belo Monte study's empirical results has to be evaluated in light of the objectives of qualitative research in general and of GTM in particular. Qualitative research aims to achieve an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon. While a single case study cannot be representative of a universe of cases, it can contribute substantially to the understanding of certain phenomena by identifying relevant concepts in understudied areas (Corbin/Strauss 2008: 319–320). The Belo Monte study's objective was not to generalize from the collective action against Belo Monte to all other cases of collective action against hydropower projects, or to all other cases of collective action in Brazil. However, this study's findings provide insights regarding the relevant issues and the underlying theoretical concepts associated with the construction of a hydropower dam in the Brazilian Amazon.
- 5) Reflected subjectivity: As mentioned above, qualitative research acknowledges that the personality of the researcher influences the research process. As subjectivity is unavoidable, it should be reflected through self-observation and a critical assessment of one's own position vis-à-vis the research project and the possible research participants (Steinke 2005: 330–331). The Belo Monte study reflected critically on the role of the researcher and the impact of subjectivity on the analysis using the tools proposed by GTM: sensitizing concepts and memo writing.

Corbin and Strauss also propose the criterion of sensitivity. Claiming that "objectivity in qualitative research is a myth" (Corbin and Strauss 2008: 32), they suggest that researchers should not even try to create an objectivity that cannot be achieved. Instead, they should deliberately immerse themselves in the research and try to adopt the perspective of the research participants (Corbin/Strauss 2008: 32). The Belo Monte study sought to achieve sensitivity by

20 Analytic induction is a method of theory generation described by Bühler-Niederberger (1985).

(1) explicating and reflecting upon the researcher's perspective using the sensitizing concepts and (2) seeking to interpret the results from the interviewee perspective.

5 Conducting Interview Research in a Foreign Language

A key challenge of the Belo Monte study was the multilingual nature of the research: the interviews were conducted in Portuguese; the report was produced in English; and the researcher's native language was German. As Kruse and Schmieder stress, reconstructive-hermeneutic procedures²¹ are especially appropriate for understanding meaning in foreign-language situations (Kruse/Schmieder 2012: 251). GTM was therefore particularly well suited to the Belo Monte study.

Qualitative researchers agree that interviews should be conducted in the interviewees' native language, as research participants feel more comfortable and express themselves more precisely in their native language (Kruse/Schmieder 2012: 248). Most researchers seek to use as little support as possible from native speakers and focus on acquiring adequate language skills themselves (Kruse et al. 2012b: 32–33). For the Belo Monte study, I generally conducted the interviews in Portuguese, the native language of most interview partners and the working language of non-Brazilian interviewees.²² While the interviews were deliberately conducted without an interpreter, a research assistant helped with the translation of the interview guides from English to Portuguese and with the transcription of the audio files in Portuguese. Although the literature stresses that interview guides should not predetermine the formulation of questions and should not be read out to the interviewees (Helfferich 2009: 180), the interview guide was an indispensable instrument in this multilingual study.

In order to ensure the quality of the outsourced tasks, I:

- 1) ensured that the research assistant was adequately qualified and experienced;
- 2) provided the research assistant with clear, written rules for transcription as well as information about the research project and how to handle the audio data;
- 3) consulted frequently with the research assistant and revised the transcription rules as necessary; and
- 4) proofread the transcripts to assess the transcriber's interpretations of the audio data.

In the Belo Monte study, the quality of the transcripts was high, meaning that only minor revisions were required.²³ Small grammatical corrections made by the transcriber, such as ad-

21 Kruse understands GTM as a reconstructive-hermeneutic procedure. Even if one does not share this view (due to the deductive elements in GTM or for other reasons), it is reasonable to conclude that GTM is an adequate approach for understanding meaning in foreign-language situations.

22 The latter included mainly clergy who had been working in Brazil for many years.

23 Most of these concerned the names of places, people, events, etc. that were unknown to the transcriber and therefore misunderstood.

justments for linguistic agreement, were accepted, as they contributed to the legibility of the transcript without changing the content or the tone of the statements.

While interview research in foreign languages and foreign cultures demands additional effort in terms of quality control and the monitoring of research assistants, it offers some interesting opportunities (Kruse et al. 2012b). Due to their imperfect language skills, interviewers tend to reduce the pace of the conversation and the number of interruptions they make, thus enabling the interviewee to explicate his or her answers at length. Language difficulties can also be used deliberately as an excuse to request further explanations, examples, or paraphrasing of previous statements, which may result in more detailed narratives. Hence, imperfect language skills can lead to more comprehensive and detailed responses, which make the interviewee's relevance system clearer to the interviewer (Kruse et al. 2012b: 40).

Another challenge of multilingual research is the presentation of the results in a written report. While it is certainly difficult from a linguistic point of view to convey meaning in another language, political science generally pays little attention to the translation of research. In the Belo Monte study, the interview guides, audio files, and transcripts were in Portuguese, while the results were reported in English. Hence, I used English to develop codes and categories²⁴ and to draft memos. The translation of interview statements from Portuguese to English was limited to key passages intended to provide the reader with some insight into the interviewees' thoughts and speech. As translations can never be "exact equivalents," I applied a set of rules developed by Nelofer Halai (2007) to the translation of interview statements. Seeking to reach "inexact equivalence" in her translations, Halai "tried to translate the interview text in such a way that the basic requirements of (a) making sense, (b) conveying the spirit and manner of the original, and (c) have [*sic*] a natural and easy form of expression were all met adequately" (Halai 2007: 351).

While this definition of the translation procedure is vague, it draws an effective line between literal and content-based translation. As the aim of qualitative research is to understand meaning, translation rules should be open enough to enable an adequate and authentic expression of meaning given the linguistic and cultural context of the target language.

6. Conclusion – The Applicability of Grounded Theory Methodology

While GTM represents a fascinating approach to qualitative research, its comprehensiveness and flexibility also lead to complexity and vagueness, thus hampering its application in research projects and, especially, in PhD theses. As a comprehensive research program, GTM offers a variety of instruments and procedures that enable researchers to use it in the most

24 In-vivo codes – i.e., codes that adopt the exact wording used by research participant to denote an underlying concept – were assigned and reported in Portuguese, and complemented by a detailed explanation of the underlying concept in English.

diverse projects. However, this methodological freedom requires that the researcher explicate her approach and critically reflect upon the objectives, procedures, and results of her study. Simply stating that a study is “based on grounded theory methodology” is not sufficient.

What are the challenges of using GTM in an actual research project? First of all, GTM is a time-consuming methodology as it is based on an iterative design. Theoretical sampling – one of the constitutive elements of GMT – is a circular process that requires the researcher to alternate between the collection and the analysis of empirical data. Consequently, researchers have to make concessions when data is collected abroad if time and/or resources are limited. However, Corbin and Strauss, as well as other qualitative scholars, have developed a number of useful tools that help researchers adapt the methodology to their needs. In response to students’ questions, Corbin has emphasized that theoretical sampling can also be applied to already-existing data. In the Belo Monte study, the sampling and data collection were based on the “expected theoretical relevance”²⁵ of the interviews (Mey/Mruck 2009: 110). The comprehensive data produced during the field research and my detailed knowledge of the interview contents allowed for subsequent theoretical sampling during the data-analysis stage that resembled the approach proposed by GTM. Interviews were selected one after another for analysis based on their content and their expected contribution to the elaboration of the theoretical concepts at a particular point in the data analysis (cf. Corbin/Strauss 2008: 317). Second, the coding process and the analysis of data demand openness and patience on the part of the researcher, who should be prepared to abandon her previous assumptions if necessary. While the search for the internal logic of the empirical phenomenon may cause anxiety, it also offers the chance to gain unexpected insights into the empirical phenomenon under investigation.

Hence, it is precisely the constitutive elements of GTM that improve its applicability. The critical appraisal of one’s own process through memo writing and the iterative research design enable the scholar to reconsider her procedures and results, and to make the necessary adjustments throughout the research process. In the Belo Monte study these tools allowed for the modification of theoretical concepts based on empirical findings. In this sense, GTM is particularly adequate for application in foreign countries and cultures, where conceptual stretching in the development of theoretical concepts has to be avoided.

25 The expected theoretical relevance pertains to the research interest and the theoretical focus on collective identities and collective action frames.

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