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## CHALLENGES TO GROUNDED THEORY

Starting from a comparison of the various meanings given to the term “theory” in social science (Mjøset 2001, revised Mjøset 2004), the strategy of grounded theory can be specified: It is less ambitious than high-level notions such as the idealizing models of rational choice theory, and the search for “general presuppositions” among social philosophers. It differs from notions of “middle range theory” by not striving to generalize beyond context. It is thus a programme of gaining as general knowledge as necessary (given the research problem), without losing context. It is a more ambitious notion than that explored by deconstructionists, who take sociology of knowledge skepticism to the limits by doubting any knowledge beyond the level of specific cases.

Based on this specification, the paper addresses a number of challenges facing the programme of discovering grounded theory. The question of whether grounded theory can be defended with reference to state of the art philosophy of science can be illuminated by discussing three kinds of criticism waged against the programme. First, those who hold the standard, natural science and variables-oriented point of view claims that grounded theory is not theory at all, but rather purely inductive descriptivism. Second, many social philosophers insist that since grounded theory does not entail a high level clarification of “presuppositions”, it cannot really be counted as “social theory”. Third, some critical theorists claim that grounded theory is deficient since it does not “reach out” to trace the connection between the macro-context and the case-level.

Addressing the first challenge, the paper emphasizes that grounded theory roots in the philosophy of pragmatism, which is a strong influence on contemporary philosophers of science from Putnam to Hacking. Paying attention to this link, the analytical aspects of grounded theory clearly emerges: the impossibility of pure description is realized, while empirical evidence is collected with reference to distinct research problems. Thus, grounded theory contributes to the consolidation of *local research frontiers*, pragmatically devoted to



the illumination of questions arising in the process of social development. In this connection, the relation between grounded theory and network theory (White, Granovetter) is explored.

As to the second challenge, the paper argues that grounded theory implies an interdisciplinary approach to the question of action theory, one that is linked to progress within the field of cognitive science (typically pursued in the work of scholars such as Barry Barres, as well as Lakoff/Johnson, and others). Thus, grounded theory does imply principal discussions of the notions of action, interaction, structure and knowledge, but in a way that differs from the high-level, transcendental — and highly individualized — discussions of the social philosophers.

As to the third challenge, the paper argues that critical theory can be seen as a specific version of grounded theory. With reference to the principal parallels between American pragmatism and the “standpoint” theories that first emerged within the European 19th century socialist movement, it is argued that critical theory is grounded theory developed in conflictual situations involving one or more organized social groups which have legitimate claims to social change. Furthermore, the question of the micro/macro-link is addressed, and against Burawoy’s criticism of grounded theory, it is argued that any “reaching out” from cases to the macro-context requires that the macro-context is analysed in line with the principles of grounded theory. This argument reminds us that even in Glaser & Strauss’ original discussion of grounded theory, it was emphasized that the programme was as relevant for macro-studies as for micro-studies.

The paper concludes by a discussion of the relation between substantive and formal grounded theory as two approaches to generalization in social science.

### *References*

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