

Empirically Grasping the Institutional: Methodological Reflections on Institutional Research Using Grounded Theory

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Abstract

The article draws on the multi-level perspective on adult education and considers institutional conditions as important influencing factors which enable adult learning. It is characteristic of these institutional conditions (especially in a highly institutionalised form) to appear self-evident, without alternative and therefore self-explanatory. This poses challenges for the empirical analysis of the institutional in general and its comprehension using qualitative data collection and analysis methods. Against this background, the article focuses on the extent to which the institutional can be systematically grasped in verbal data. For this purpose, the article refers to grounded theory according to Strauss and Corbin, which is often used in organisational research but discussed controversially in neoinstitutionalist research.

Keywords: Multi-level perspective on adult learning; Institutional conditions; Grounded theory

Abstract

Der Beitrag schließt an die Mehrebenenperspektive auf das Weiterbildungssystem an und versteht vor diesem Hintergrund auch die institutionellen Rahmenbedingungen als wichtige Einflussfaktoren für die Ermöglichung des Lernens Erwachsener. Dabei ist für institutionelle Rahmungen (vor allem in ihrer hochinstitutionalisierten Form) charakteristisch, dass sie selbstverständlich, alternativlos und daher oftmals auch nicht erklärungsbedürftig erscheinen. Dies stellt die empirische Analyse des Institutionellen im Allgemeinen und seine systematische Spezifikation anhand qualitativer Methoden der Datenerhebung und -analyse im Besonderen vor Herausforderungen. Vor diesem Hintergrund rückt der Beitrag die Frage in den Mittelpunkt, inwiefern das Institutionelle in verbalen Daten systematisch erfasst werden kann. Hierfür nimmt der Beitrag auf die Grounded Theory nach Strauss und Corbin Bezug, da sie in der Organisationsforschung häufig Verwendung findet, in der neoinstitutionalistischen Forschung aber durchaus kontrovers diskutiert wird.

Keywords: Mehrebenenperspektive auf das organisierte Lernen Erwachsener; institutionelle Rahmenbedingungen; Grounded Theory

1 Introduction

‘How is education possible?’ (Tenorth, 2003). In adult education, this genuinely pedagogical question has often been discussed from a multi-level perspective (e. g. Boeren, Nicaise & Baert, 2010; Flechsig & Haller, 1975; Tietgens, 1984; Schrader, 2011). Central to this is the assumption that adults’ learning processes cannot be adequately understood and explained if only the teaching-learning level is taken into account but not its organisational framing and institutional anchoring (Herbrechter & Schrader, 2018).

Empirical studies also point to this assumption of the organisational and institutional embeddedness of adult education. For example, with regard to the increasing spread of quality management systems, Hartz (2011) conveyed that this primarily improves the structures and processes of the adult education organisation but has little impact on the teaching-learning process itself. This finding draws special attention to institutionalised process qualities of the organisational and teaching-learning levels. Furthermore, the findings of a study on leadership in adult education organisations indicate that adult education leading staffs’ ideas of appropriate leadership are also shaped by the institutional context and influence the development of the educational offer. The organisation thus seems to have an impact on the educational via the institutionally influenced understanding of leadership (Herbrechter, 2016a). In addition, empirical findings on the pedagogical staff indicate that they refer to organisation-specific patterns of interpretation in their offer development decisions, which make certain offer decisions more likely than others (Dollhausen, 2008).

Such studies on the organisational and institutional conditions of adult education have become increasingly important in recent decades, especially in adult education research in Germany (Klingovsky, 2016; Herbrechter & Schrader, 2018; for the international discussion, see e. g. Rubenson & Elfert, 2014; Yelich-Biniecki & Schmidt 2021). However, how the organisational and institutional conditions are empirically grasped varies with regard to methods and theoretical assumptions (Dollhausen, 2010). For a long time, adult education research theoretically did not distinguish between the terms ‘organisation’ and ‘institution’ (Dollhausen & Schrader, 2015; e. g. Kade, Nittel & Seitter, 2007; Strunk, 1999). In the meantime, a more differentiated view with reference to sociological assumptions has been considered (e. g. Hartz & Schardt, 2010; Koch & Schemmann, 2009; Herbrechter & Schrader, 2018). In this understanding, organisations are defined by membership, programmes, hierarchy and specific goals towards which all members’ activities are directed (Schreyögg, 2008). Institutions are understood as permanently established, collectively shared orientation patterns that legitimise and regulate social action (Schimank, 2008; Lipp, 2002). Nevertheless, organisations and institutions share a common core in that they ensure a regulated interaction which is neither random nor arbitrary (Gukenbiehl, 2000). Beyond these general definitions, an analysis of conference proceedings and journal articles indicates that, in addition to assumptions from Luhmann’s systems theory, neoinstitutionalist approaches are frequently used to address the organisational and institutional conditions of adult learning (Pätzold, 2015).

Although neoinstitutionalist research activities have developed great productivity since the 1980s, the operationalisation of theoretical key concepts and their systematic identification in empirical data is still considered methodologically challenging (Hellmann, 2006; Deephouse & Suchman, 2013; Senge, 2006). This especially applies to measuring the institutional construct (Koch, 2018). A particular challenge here is the definition of clear measurement procedures which determine how institutions are to be accurately grasped. This methodological challenge mainly occurs because institutions are typically self-evident and therefore do not necessarily need to be verbalised or explained (Senge, 2011). Basically, institutions elude direct measurement; instead, their impact must be gathered through the traces they leave behind (Walgenbach & Meyer, 2008, p. 180).

Even if such questions about the precise specification of measurement operations arise in quantitative research contexts, the methodologically controlled empirical search for a social phenomenon whose existence is characterised by the fact that it does not require explanation or verbalisation is problematic, especially for qualitative research designs that often rely on verbal data. Although quantitative designs still dominate neoinstitutionalist research today, qualitative case studies also play a role. Especially since the turn of the century, they have been increasingly used to analyse the successive emergence, change and social meaning of institutional orientation patterns (Walgenbach & Mayer, 2008). Methodologically, methods such as discourse analyses (Strang & Soule, 1998), content analyses (Koch, 2018), and grounded theory (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Zilber, 2002) are applied, although the usefulness of grounded theory for neoinstitutionalist research is discussed controversially. On the one hand, its usefulness is emphasised for research areas for which no precise or exhaustive assumptions can yet be derived from neoinstitutionalist theory (Zbaracki, 1998). On the other hand, especially with regard to the 'classical' variant of grounded theory initially advocated by Strauss and Glaser, it is criticised for not methodologically supporting an intersubjectively comprehensible analytical approach (Lueger, 2007). Due to its iterative procedure, Lueger (2007), for example, cautions using grounded theory as a 'methodological fig leaf' and warns against misunderstanding the methodological flexibility of grounded theory as 'anything goes'. Suddaby also critically remarks, 'grounded theory is not an excuse for the absence of a methodology' (Suddaby, 2006, p. 640).

This scepticism about the usefulness of grounded theory is linked, at least in part, to its differentiation into variants. Especially the classical variant, now represented by Glaser alone, has been criticised for its naïve, inductivist approach (e.g. Kelle, 2011; Strübing, 2008; Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2009, p. 187). In contrast, Strauss (in collaboration with Corbin) made efforts in later years to further elaborate and substantiate grounded theory in terms of research logic (Strübing, 2011). In the neoinstitutionalist discussion, these developments, which ultimately led to variants of grounded theory, are rarely considered.

Against this background, and due to the previously outlined relevance of institutional conditions for enabling adult learning, this article is dedicated to the question of how to grasp the institutional in verbal data with grounded theory. Before discussing

the analytical potential of grounded theory with a view to systematically grasping the institutional, Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of the general epistemological interest and the methodological research traditions of neoinstitutionalism. Chapter 3 is dedicated to the research question of the article. It exemplarily discusses the analytical possibilities of grounded theory for neoinstitutionalist research questions by means of a case study on the ideas of good leadership in different organisational and institutional contexts in the field of adult education. Section 3.1 briefly introduces the case study, and Section 3.2 explores the potential of grounded theory using the data material of the case study as an example. The article ends with a summary and a concluding discussion (Chapter 4).¹

2 On the Epistemological Interest and Methods of Neoinstitutionalist Research

Neoinstitutionalism in organisational sociology is currently an influential approach in social science organisation theory. On the one hand, a boom in neoinstitutionalist research is evident from the growing number of (inter-)nationally edited volumes, introductory books and journal articles which explicitly address this ‘new’ perspective on organisations and their institutional environment (e. g. Bonazzi, 2008; Clegg, Hardy & Nord, 1996; Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin & Suddaby, 2013a; Greenwood, Oliver, Lawrence & Meyer, 2017; Kieser & Ebers, 2014; Senge, 2011). On the other hand, the increasing influence of neoinstitutionalism is seen in the growing interest of various disciplines. Not only sociology, but also political science, economics and education are turning to neoinstitutionalist reflections on the interaction of institutions and organisations (i. e. from the perspective of educational science in Germany, e. g. Koch & Schemmann, 2009; Klingovsky, 2016; Kuper, 2001; Kuper & Tiehl, 2018; Schaefers, 2002; Schemmann, 2016; Tippelt & Lindemann, 2018). For educational science and adult education, research questions come into focus about

- the dissemination of educational policy programmes, such as the lifelong learning programme (Jakobi, 2006; Schemmann, 2007);
- questions about the institutional conditions for securing the existence of adult education organisations (Schrader, 2010, 2011); and
- the perception and implementation of external requirements (e. g. quality management systems and reform model of school autonomy) by educational organisations (Hartz, 2011, 2015; Schaefers, 2009).

The intensive research activities of academics from various disciplines have led to a wide range of theoretical concepts and empirical findings that make it difficult to define neoinstitutionalism as a uniform theoretical approach. As DiMaggio and Powell

¹ This article is based on parts of the text from an earlier publication (Herbrechter, 2018) which have been translated and re-accentuated to make them accessible for international discussion.

stated in the early 1990s, “it is often easier to gain agreement about what it is *not* than about what it *is*” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991, p. 1; emphasis in original).

Against this background, the guiding epistemological interest of the neoinstitutionalist approach is at best outlined in terms of a minimal consensus. In this sense, the main focus of neoinstitutionalist research is on the conditions and forms of expression of the institutional embeddedness of organisations and its consequences for external and internal activities. Organisations are understood to be socially generated “open systems” (Scott, 2003), which in their formal structure, everyday practice and existence are decisively shaped by the institutional influences of their environment (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Walgenbach & Meyer, 2008). Regarding the key neoinstitutionalist term, ‘institution’, various definitions are found in the literature. Among the classic definitional contributions is Scott’s proposal: “Institutions are composed of cultured-cognitive, normative, and regulative elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life” (Scott, 2001, p. 48). Especially for the neoinstitutionalist perspective on organisations, the cognitive side of institutions is of particular interest. With reference to Scott, neoinstitutionalists often assume that the structures and processes in organisations can only be adequately understood if the self-evident ideas and action routines of the actors involved are also considered. Such cognitive institutions have a strong impact because their self-evidence makes it unlikely that their validity will be questioned (Senge, 2011).

With this in mind, neoinstitutionalist researchers typically follow an understanding of science which refers to understanding and explaining social reality. Other positions in science, such as critical questioning of social conditions and the development of social counter-designs as the purpose of science (Habermas, 1968), do not seem to be decisive, at least not for the relevant contributions of previous research. With reference to Berger and Luckmann (1991), a social constructivist understanding of reality is held (Meyer, 2013, p. 519): social reality is based on a collectively shared knowledge basis that has been created socio-historically by people in interactions but has become objectified over time through processes of externalisation, typification, habitualisation and institutionalisation from the situation of their social production. “The reality of everyday life is taken for granted *as* reality. [...] It is simply *there*, as self-evident and compelling facticity. I *know* that it is real” (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 37; emphasis in original).

Due to this social constructivist understanding of reality, neoinstitutionalist research is not fixed on specific methods of gaining knowledge. On the contrary, neoinstitutionalism has a social-theoretical foundation which, on the one hand, refers to regularities and institutional structures of social reality (i. e. institutions as social facticity), which can be examined in a standardised way with quantifying methods. On the other hand, it can also focus more strongly on the fact that institutional structures emerge from the generalisation and objectification of collective ways of perceiving and acting (i. e. institutions as the result of joint beliefs and action in interaction). It then comes into view that institutions require interpretation, the nature of which can be analysed more appropriately with the help of qualitative methods. Although quantita-

tive and qualitative methods can be used, quantitative methods of data collection and analysis have predominated in neoinstitutionalist research to date and are mainly applied in studies on the adaptation or diffusion of institutions (Walgenbach & Meyer, 2008, p.179). As mentioned previously, in these diffusion studies the institutional is typically gathered dichotomously (i. e. non-existing versus existing). The frequency of its adaptation is taken as an indication of progressive institutionalisation or alignment of organisations within an organisational field or, in the case of low diffusion, as an indication that weak institutionalisation or deinstitutionalisation has begun (Senge, 2011, p.165). How the institutional is adopted and with what meaning is usually not the focus of research interest (Zilber, 2013, p.161), and it requires more qualitative research (Walgenbach & Meyer, 2008).

Against this background, the article now explores how grounded theory, as a frequently used method of qualitative research (Lueger, 2007), supports researchers in identifying the institutional and the associated attributions of meaning in the data material in a methodologically controlled manner.

3 Grasping the Institutional Using Verbal Data: Methodological Considerations Using a Grounded Theory Case Study to Analyse Ideas of Good Leadership

As noted, a basic assumption of neoinstitutionalism is that organisations depend on the legitimacy of the environment relevant to them to ensure their survival. For their formal structural design and internal action practice, organisations adapt institutional ideas of what is appropriate to present themselves as a valuable organisation, which conforms to the applicable rules (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In neoinstitutionalist research, the fact that such adaptations are based on the views and actions of individual actors is typically regarded as such a basic prerequisite that they rarely come into view as a unit of analysis (Senge, 2011). How individual actors perceive and interpret institutional expectations, how they refer to institutional specifications and to what extent they thereby contribute to their emergence, maintenance and changes are questions that have increasingly received attention in recent years (e.g. Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). A stronger micro foundation of neoinstitutionalism is called for, which specifies the neoinstitutionalist understanding of actors without disclosing the interplay of individual contributions to interpretation and action with institutional influences and organisational framework conditions (Powell & Colyvas, 2013; Powell & Rerup, 2017; Meyer & Hammerschmid, 2006).

In this context, qualitative methods of data collection and analysis have gained importance in neoinstitutionalist research. For example, in the context of an ethnographic field study, Hallett (2010) explores how institutional myths and organisational practices in a US elementary school, which were once loosely coupled are gradually becoming more closely linked. Based on field notes, interviews and participant observation (e. g., of teaching), he finds that institutional requirements (i. e. accountability)

become so internalised over time by individual actors that they are linked back to the originally relatively autonomous level of teaching. Significantly, such 'recoupling' processes are driven by local agents who bring the given structural element of 'accountability' to life at both the organisational and interactional levels (i. e. inhabited institutions).

Furthermore, in a rape crisis centre in Israel, Zilber (2002) analyses the development of professional agency practices within the organisation. By using grounded theory according to Glaser and Strauss (1967) and techniques of narrative, discourse, conversation and script analysis, she evaluates ethnographic field notes, interviews, organisational documents and archival materials. On this basis, she conveys that the established practices of action persisted relatively unchanged for 20 years, although their interpretation and legitimating rationale changed over time. While the crisis centre emerged from the feminist movement in the late 1970s and was run by feminists, in the 1990s it employed mainly professionally trained therapists who were committed to reorganising the centre as primarily a medical rather than a political institution. Nevertheless, they clung to established practices whose feminist origins they were no longer aware of and which they instead legitimise therapeutically with reference to their professional background. Zilber's findings indicate that ways of seeing and ways of acting are not necessarily inseparable. Even if the institutionally based interpretations and assignments of meaning change over time, for example, due to the addition of new actors, the observable interactions can persist relatively unchanged.

From a methodologically interested perspective, both case studies' results unfolded in an intersubjectively comprehensible way. However, one does not learn more about the methodical means used to systematically explore the interaction of institution, organisation and individual actor. In this respect, the studies do not represent an isolated case. Overall, there is a lack of a differentiated discussion of the methodical procedures used in neoinstitutionalist research (Senge, 2011, p.164).

For instance, questions about the precise specification of measurement operations tend to arise in quantitative research contexts. To test whether (and how) social reality can be explained more adequately, hypotheses must be extracted from theories at the beginning of research and made measurable so that they can subsequently be tested for falsifiability (i. e. critical rationalism; Raithel, 2006, p.13). Although in qualitative social research, no importance is attached to the translation of theoretical concepts into unambiguous measurement instructions – due to their explorative, theory-building claim – the handling of theoretical (prior) knowledge is definitely discussed (partly controversially). In grounded theory, the differently evaluated significance of theoretical prior knowledge has led to the fact that its two founding fathers (i. e. Glaser and Strauss) have each shaped their own variant of grounded theory over the course of time. Glaser, for example, now claims to represent 'classical grounded theory', which has an unbroken connection to the methodological considerations of their joint founding paper, "The Discovery of Grounded Theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser & Holton, 2004). For him, grounded theory is still based on a primarily inductive pro-

cedure, which rejects theoretical prior knowledge until a categorical core of the data material is discovered through permanent comparison.

“I wish to remind people, yet again, that classic GT [grounded theory] is simply a set of integrated conceptual hypotheses systematically generated to produce an inductive theory about a substantive area. [...] To undertake an extensive review of literature before the emergence of a core category violates the basic premise of GT that being, the theory emerges from the data not from extant theory” (Glaser & Holton, 2004, p. 3, 12).

In contrast, Strauss held theoretical (prior) knowledge in greater esteem in his later publications, which he published alone or with Corbin. For him, prior theoretical knowledge is part of ‘contextual knowledge’, which includes not only researchers’ expertise but also their accumulated research skills and individual experiences (Strauss, 1998, pp. 36–37). Following his former teacher Herbert Blumer, Strauss understands this contextual knowledge as something that researchers possess to an extent that is unique to each individual and that can repeatedly be a sensitising source for data generation and analysis (Blumer, 1954, pp. 7–9; Blumer, 2004, pp. 359–360; Strübing, 2007, pp. 15–16; Strübing, 2008, p. 59). Against this background, reading literature both before and during the research phase is legitimate, provided that the relevance of the prior knowledge is grounded in the data at hand in each case and is an expression of the researchers’ discovering attitude (Strauss & Corbin, 1996, pp. 38, 33). Unlike Glaser, Strauss thus clearly distances himself from the principle of inductive theory building and instead opposes it with a continuously circulating process of induction, deduction and provisional verification of generated categories (Strauss, 1998, pp. 37–40). In retrospect, Strauss thematises “The Discovery of Grounded Theory” with regard to its pointed linguistic style as an expression of its time-historical context of origin. From his perspective, it needed further methodological elaboration in later publications, for at that time, the ‘Discovery Book’ programmatically opposed existing conventions of US research in which qualitative research work was not recognised (Interview ‘Research is hard work, ...’, 2011, p. 73).

“Because of the partly rhetorical purpose of that book [“The Discovery of Grounded Theory”] and the authors’ emphasis on the need for *grounded* theory, Glaser and Strauss overplayed the inductive aspects. Correspondingly, they greatly underplayed both the potential role of extant (grounded) theories and the unquestionable fact (and advantage) that trained researchers are theoretically sensitized. Researchers carry into their research the sensitizing possibilities of their training, reading, and research experience, as well as explicit theories that might be useful if played against systematically gathered data, in conjunction with theories emerging from analysis of these data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 277, emphasis in original).

Not least due to this differentiated approach to theoretical knowledge and the systematically elaborated methodical means, the following reflections on the systematic analysis of the institutional with qualitative methods refer to the grounded theory according to Strauss and Corbin. To explore the potential of grounded theory for the

analysis of the institutional in the field of adult education using data from a case study (see Section 3.2), Section 3.1 first briefly describes the case study.

3.1 Case Study on the Ideas of Good Leadership of Adult Education Leading Staff

In addition to formal and informal structures, the perceptions and actions of leading staff members are central to successful working relationships in (adult education) organisations. In examining issues of leadership, previous (psychological) research has focused primarily on the leading staff, their employees and the situation of the work group (Bryman, Collinson, Grint, Jackson & Uhl-Bien, 2011). In contrast, the meaning of the institutional environment for leading staff members' ways of thinking and acting needs further study. Against this background, the case study focuses on the institutional and organisational foundations of leading staff members' understanding of leadership in adult education. Inspired by considerations of organisational sociological neoinstitutionalism, the case study pursues the following research questions: (1) 'What do leading staff members in adult education understand to be good leadership and to what extent do they succeed in realising it?' and (2) 'How do leading staff members in adult education relate to institutional requirements of the environment and structural conditions of the adult education organisation?'

For the analyses, publicly accessible organisational data were collected and guided interviews were conducted with leading staff members of adult education organisations, which offer educational programmes but operate under different organisational and institutional contextual conditions. The diversity of contextual conditions was empirically determined based on the organisational purpose, number of employees and public funding. Overall, the sample consists of publicly funded organisations, adult education organisations sponsored by social interest groups and private-sector adult education organisations (Herbrechter, 2016c). The data analysis is based on grounded theory according to Strauss and Corbin (1996), as this variant of grounded theory offers helpful methodical means for the analysis of the research question (Strauss & Corbin, 1996, p. 135 ff.).

A contrastive case comparison of adult education organisations embedded in primarily state- or market-regulated contexts indicates that in their understanding of good leadership, leading staff members not only refer to the theoretically expected form of coordination by 'hierarchy' (Schimank, 2007b; Herbrechter, 2016a), but also draw on the institutional logic of the context relevant to them. In their understanding of good leadership, they adapt typical media of action coordination for the respective institutional context (e.g. money for the market context) to the organisation and, through their understanding of leadership, also make them valid for action coordination with their employees (Herbrechter, 2016b). They actively aim to compensate for the 'shadow sides' of these media (e.g. a tendency to 'hidden action' through primary leadership via monetary incentives by advocating an open error culture). Even if leading staff members are primarily concerned with ensuring the smoothest possible action processes within the organisation, they perform institutional work by adapting

context-specific media and compensating for the typical downsides of these media by indirectly contributing to the stabilisation of the institutional logic of the respective context through their idea of good leadership.

3.2 Analysing the Institutional with Grounded Theory Coding Techniques

In this section, quotations from the case study interview material are used to illustrate grounded theory analysis techniques, which can support researchers in systematically seeking the institutional within the generated data material. The exemplary interview passages are taken from the aforementioned case study. The quotations refer to an interview with the head of a publicly funded adult education organisation (A05).

Analysing institutional influences systematically and in-depth is challenging. Their effectiveness can only be traced indirectly – for example, through their existing or non-existing manifestation in the organisational structure or in the attribution of meaning of the individual actors. Special attention should be paid to problematic situations in which the institutional context of expectations no longer appear self-evident, alternatives become conscious and, if necessary, justifications for deviating ways of seeing and acting are developed. Conversely, however, assumed self-evident facts and ideas about what is considered appropriate also allow an analytical approach (Walgenbach & Meyer, 2008, p. 180; Senge, 2006, p. 43).

With regard to data analysis, Strauss and Corbin recommend continuously asking questions and making initial comparisons in the first phase of open coding. One technique related to institutional influences is the so-called ‘waving of the red flag’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1996, p. 70). That is, researchers should pay particular attention to what is self-evident.

“Words like ‘never’, ‘always’, ‘it can’t possibly be like this’, ‘everyone knows it’s done this way’, ‘there’s no need for discussion’. Every time you hear such a word or phrase, you should wave the red flag – in your mind! *These words and phrases can be seen as signals to look more closely.* What is happening here? What do you mean by ‘never’? Or ‘always’? Why is that? Never, under what conditions? How is this condition of never maintained? What are its consequences? [...] *The analytic consequence is to never take anything for granted*” (Strauss & Corbin, 1996, p. 71; emphasis in original; translation by the author).

An example of an institutional-sensitive phrase taken from the aforementioned case study and referring to the importance of the coordination medium ‘rules’ institutionalised in the state context (Schrader, 2011) is a statement by the head of a publicly funded adult education organisation (A05), in which he emphasises the relevance of rules for smooth intra-organisational coordination.

“And when I notice, for example, that in an organisation, [...], there are no rules in important things, but rather that somehow actions are taken quite arbitrarily and situationally. And then I see what negative consequences this has on the willingness to work, on job satisfaction, on the overall organisation or something like that, then I already feel confirmed that one should look for and define these rules and areas of responsibility and then can better deal with them within such a framework. So that’s also a piece of philosophy again, when you see how many possibilities are laid out in the music in counterpoint, that

you actually have infinite possibilities of expression with such a system, but without the system somehow you get lost very quickly – so then you can also recognise this connection there. Or there is even a composer in the twentieth century who, after a long search, decided on one-note music. An Italian Giacinto Scelsi, he has composed orchestral works and works of all kinds in large numbers and is increasingly performed in recent years, he died at the end of the last century, where it consists only of the tone F, for example. One hundred twenty musicians in the opera and all of them play only F in different octaves, but only F, for 20 minutes and out of it becomes a complex and impressive diverse whole. It is not a contradiction” (A05, ll. 705–734).

The statement, “[...] I already *feel confirmed* that one *should* look for and define these rules and areas of responsibility”, as well as the comparisons with orchestral works and orchestral musicians, indicate the high importance of rules for A05 as a structural condition for successful interaction. Following Strauss and Corbin, the way A05 explains the meaning of rules for successful employee leadership gives indications of self-evidence, which point to an institutional embeddedness of what is being stated.

Furthermore, for later phases of the advanced coding process, Strauss and Corbin recommend referring to two general heuristics: the coding paradigm and the condition matrix. With the coding paradigm (see Figure 1), Strauss and Corbin integrate a basic action model into the coding procedures of grounded theory with reference to basic pragmatic-interactionist considerations. The starting point is the following assumption, also referred to as the Thomas theorem: individual actors are involved in interaction contexts, the nature of which is only constituted by the interpretation and situation definition of the participants. Nevertheless, interaction situations are real and practically significant because the situation definitions and associated courses of action of individual actors have concrete consequences. Once set in motion, the situation is subsequently different from what it was before due to the actors’ contributions to interpretation and action. “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572). With this in mind, Strauss and Corbin call for searching the underlying data for strategies of handling situation definitions and for explanations of action choices made because these contain clues to the (institutional) conditions and consequences of the situation at issue. The targeted search for situation definitions, their conditions, chosen strategies and emerging consequences is intended to support researchers in systematically relating the initially openly formed codes to each other (Strauss & Corbin, 1996, pp. 75–85).

With the condition matrix (see Figure 2), they differentiate various levels on which conditions (and consequences) may be located. Although Strauss and Corbin do not analytically distinguish institutional systems of rules, norms, values and beliefs from the level of the organisation within the condition matrix, the coding paradigm and the condition matrix support researchers in systematically seeking connections between institutional influences, organisational conditions and individual actors’ perspectives and strategies.

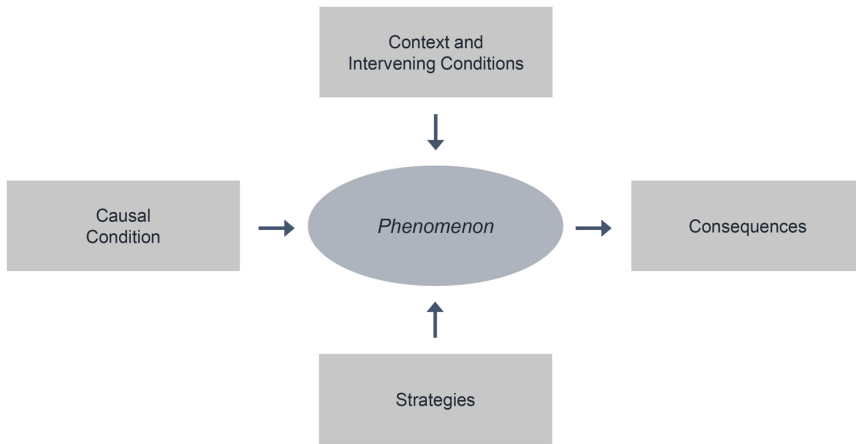


Figure 1: Coding Paradigm (Source: Böhm, 2008, p. 479, reproduced figure)

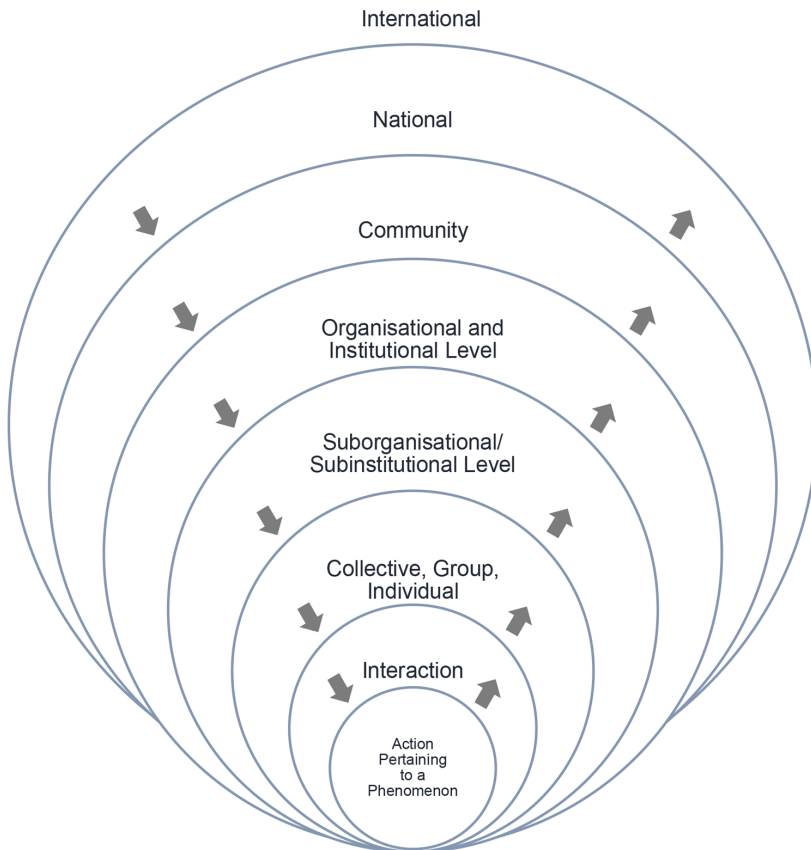


Figure 2: Conditional Matrix (Source: Strauss & Corbin, 1996, p. 136, reproduced figure)

4 Summary and Discussion

This article takes up the multi-level perspective of adult education, which draws attention to the fact that adult learning is influenced by the organisational and institutional conditions in which it is embedded. However, neoinstitutionalist research in particular focuses on the fact that a systematic and in-depth analysis of the institutional can be challenging (Deephouse & Suchman, 2013; Senge, 2011). On the one hand, a high degree of institutionalisation is characterised by a high degree of self-evidence, so that highly institutionalised ideas, requirements or practices are difficult to identify in empirical data (Walgenbach & Meyer, 2008). On the other hand, qualitative research methods, which enable in-depth analysis may be accused of a lack of systematicity and intersubjective comprehensibility. Grounded theory in particular has been confronted with this accusation in neoinstitutionalist research (Luger, 2007; Suddaby, 2006), as it remains a frequently used method in qualitative organisational research (Goulding, 2009). Against this background, this article also concentrated on grounded theory and addressed the question of whether and in which manner grounded theory is useful for identifying the institutional in-depth and simultaneously systematically in the data material.

A closer look at the methodical procedures of grounded theory has shown that especially the variant of grounded theory elaborated by Strauss and Corbin provides concrete analytical techniques, which also support researchers in identifying the institutional conditions of the social phenomenon of interest in their data material. In particular, the application-oriented publication co-authored with Juliett Corbin names concrete procedures and heuristics with the technique of ‘waving the red flag’ for early phases of analysis and with the ‘coding paradigm’ and the ‘conditional matrix’ for the advanced analysis. These methodical tools appear promising because they support researchers in systematically identifying the institutional conditions in their analyses and documenting them in an intersubjectively comprehensible way but without anticipating the actual analysis findings (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

However, within qualitative social research, the techniques of grounded theory according to Strauss and Corbin are appreciated differently. For example, Oevermann criticises grounded theory coding procedures for succumbing to a “classificatory subsumption logic” and therefore inevitably groping “around the surface of the expressed phenomenon” (Oevermann, 2001, p. 61; translation by the author). Among the harshest critics, however, is Glaser himself. He considers the techniques of coding elaborated by Strauss and Corbin (i. e. primarily the coding paradigm) to be an inadmissible methodical procedure which forces a specific code structure on the data material rather than allowing it to emerge from the data itself (Glaser, 1992). This accusation can be countered by the fact that Strauss and Corbin consider general principles of gaining knowledge more strongly than Glaser does. Without an orientation of the analytic gaze, researchers will see nothing in the plethora of data generated because (potentially) everything seems relevant to them. With the coding paradigm, Strauss and Corbin propose a basic model of action for the analysis of the collected data appli-

cable to different social phenomena. It provides a useful structuring of the analysis process and does not jeopardise the open-ended character of grounded theory (Kelle & Kluge, 2010, p. 63–64).

Finally, it remains to be asked which ability to generalise empirical results achieve that have been determined with the coding procedures of grounded theory according to Strauss and Corbin. In their publications, Strauss and Corbin emphasise that assumptions about relationships between codes are formed with the goal of specifying conditions, strategies and consequences for a particular empirical situation to develop theory-building assumptions which reveal starting points for further research. What matters here is not the representativeness of the selected cases for the entire population, but rather “*the representativeness of the concepts in their varying forms*” (Strauss & Corbin, 1996, p. 161; emphasis in original). While quantitative research uses randomisation to draw a representative sample, qualitative research chooses contrast with a view to adequately representing the social phenomenon of interest. This is not about playing the two methodological approaches against each other. Quite the contrary: both were and are necessary and useful for research on the institutional. Especially with regard to the interplay of institutional conditions, organisational structures and teaching-learning processes in adult education, further research is needed (Herbrechter, Hahnraht & Jenner, 2022; Jenner, 2022; Herbrechter & Schrader, 2018; Rubenson & Elfert, 2014). Which methodological approach is chosen for this remains open at first and is ultimately decided by the object of research, the state of research and the research question.

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