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International Graduate Student Life: Building Grounded Theory

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Research methods: qualitative data analysis, in-depth interview, focus group interview

The aim of the paper is to analyse the qualitative data on the topic of ‘international graduate student life’, and especially on the cultural and academic adaptation processes that graduates go through in a new environment. The paper describes and discusses the process of the work on the data. It deals with the theories and hypotheses that were generated during the process of analysis. It also describes some limitations and complexities that were encountered while working with the data and different computer packages.

The report also tries to put the main story and the findings in the wider context of the existing sociological literature on the present topic of adaptation, managing change and intercultural relations between the representatives of different nationalities.

As the topic seems interesting from cultural as well as academic viewpoints, it presents an interest to have an insight into what ideas and thoughts can be generated from the interview data combined with the theories existing in literature in view of building ultimate grounded theory as a final outcome of the research. ‘A discovered, grounded theory, then, will tend to combine mostly concepts and hypotheses that have emerged from the data with some existing ones that are clearly useful’ (Glaser,B. and Strauss,A. 1967: 46).

Three in-depth interviews were analysed, two of which were individual interviews and one focus group interview.

Some Major Features of Grounded Theory

The concept of grounded theory has become increasingly popular in the literature on qualitative data analysis since its discovery by Strauss and Glaser (Glaser,B. and Strauss,A. 1967). As it is well-known, its main idea is to discover theory in the process of analysis. As Glaser and Strauss define, it is ‘the discovery of theory from data (Glaser,B. and Strauss,A. 1967: 1). Theoretical sensitivity, sampling and saturation constitute the basis for the grounded theory.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) offer the characteristics of a grounded theorist. According to their descriptions, a grounded theorist should develop the following characteristics in the process of work:

- ‘1. The ability to step back and critically analyze situations
2. The ability to recognize the tendency toward bias
3. The ability to think abstractly
4. The ability to be flexible and open to helpful criticism
5. Sensitivity to the words and actions of respondents
6. A sense of absorption and devotion to the work process’

(Strauss,A. and Corbin,J. 1998: 7).

Ian Dey (1999) defines the features of the grounded theory: ‘A theory is not just a haphazard collection of concepts – the ideas in a theory are related in a systematic way. To be well-grounded conceptually, the relationships between concepts used in a theory must be set out systematically’ (Dey,I. 1999: 242-243).

Categorization as a Cognitive Process

It is widely assumed that categorization is an intrinsically cognitive process. It is underlying cognitive concepts and models that direct the categorization process. One has to look for the regularities and repeated patterns throughout the data and elicit the conceptual model that lies behind them and that regulates them. ‘Creating categories is both a conceptual and empirical challenge; categories must be ‘grounded’ conceptually and empirically. That means they must relate to an appropriate analytic context, and be rooted in relevant empirical material. Categories which seem fine ‘in theory’ are no good if they do not fit the data. Categories which do fit the data are no good if they

cannot relate to a wider conceptual context. We could say that categories must have two aspects, an internal aspect – they must be meaningful in relation to the data – and an external aspect – they must be meaningful in relation to the other categories’ (Dey,I. 1993: 96-97).

It was decided to define the categories in each interview and try to find some common categories to build one meaningful story. For this purpose it would be logical to follow the steps outlined by Ian Dey: ‘Identify a ‘core’ category or main ‘story line’ for the study. Integrate the analysis around this framework. Use memos and coded data to amplify and modify the resulting analysis. Stop when an adequate theory has emerged’ (Dey,I. 1999: 9).

After identifying key categories, or applying open coding, the next stage would be connecting the categories of all three interviews, or applying theoretical or axial coding, and finally, using theoretical saturation for selective coding. It was decided to use both representational coding and heuristic coding (Dey,I. 1999: 123), as the content of data also helped to interpret its meaning. These two components were closely connected in the data. For instance, the way the respondents constructed their ideas, whether they gave priority to studies and academic life, to cultural environment or friendship network, or to accommodation, was helpful in interpreting their opinions in the corresponding way.

The Process of Data Analysis

Data was analysed paragraph by paragraph and sometimes even larger speech units were used because the topic continued throughout several paragraphs. Besides, there were cases when several topics emerged during one paragraph, therefore several nodes had to be attached to such parts of the interview, e.g. the node 2 1 1 (friendship ties) could be associated with the node 3 2 (academic life), because when a respondent was asked about the number of friends that she had, she started talking about the academic life connecting the small number of her friends with her busy academic life.

As a final result of theoretical saturation, the two main categories that were used for the interview data were ‘cultural adaptation’ and ‘academic adaptation’. Any part of the interview fell under either of the two categories. The category ‘cultural adaptation’ was number 2, and the category ‘academic adaptation’ was number 3. Then these head categories were subdivided into subhead categories and the following Index Tree Root result was received:

2 Cultural Adaptation

1 First Impressions (2 1)

1 Friendship Ties (2 1 1)

2 Landscape (2 1 2)

3 Architecture (2 1 3)

4 People (2 1 4)

2 Adaptation Strategies (2 2)

3 Cultural Differences/ Culture Shocks (2 3)

4 Leisure Activities (2 4)

5 Strong Emotions (2 5)

6 Accommodation (2 6)

3 Academic Adaptation

1 Expectations (3 1)

2 Academic Life (3 2)

1 Advantages (3 2 1)

2 Disadvantages (3 2 2)

3 Future Prospects (3 3)

4 Academic Background (3 4)

Each of the above-mentioned nodes was attached to the relevant piece of the interview.

The next step was to attach memos to the parts of the interview that seemed interesting from the viewpoint of generating ideas and building grounded theory. In fact, these memos constitute substantial part of the grounded theory.

The parts that were attached to memos were 2/ 2 4, 3/ 3 3.

Relating the Findings to the Existing Scholarly Literature

The issues of managing change, approaching and adapting to new environment, and building relationships with the representatives of different nationalities have been discussed in the works of Alfred Schutz (Schutz,A. 1964), Georg Simmel (Simmel,G. 1964), Emmanuel Levinas (Levinas,E. 1979).

Although they do not talk about graduate student approaching new culture as such, the general questions that they raise about any foreigner facing the problems while coming into contact with new culture can be applicable to the topic of graduates' adaptation to new cultural and academic environment.

The terms that are used in the indicated scholarly literature are 'stranger/in-group', or 'other/host'. These are different ways of generally calling a newcomer or foreigner on the one hand, and the local people or natives that he/she approaches on the other.

As Alfred Schutz (1964) points out: 'He (the stranger) becomes essentially the man who has to place in question nearly everything that seems to be unquestionable to the members of the approached group... the cultural pattern of the approached group is to the stranger not a shelter but a field of adventure' (Schutz,A. 1964: 96/104).

Georg Simmel (1964) talks about the position of a stranger in the approached group and the relationships that are formed between them.

Emmanuel Levinas (1979) discusses the first steps in building relationship between the 'Other' and the 'Host'.

Throughout the interviews the respondents were describing their first encounters with the new culture, local people, and the interesting point is that the majority of them described their experiences as approaching 'a field of adventure' full of excitements, unusual situations, disappointments, and adaptations. Similar opinions are given in the mentioned literature.

The main theory that could be offered about the process of adaptation could be formulated as follows.

When approaching a new group the 'stranger' faces two levels of new culture. One is readily observable, i.e. so-called surface level that is mainly reflected in the arts, literature, drama, music, dancing, dressing, cuisine, etc. of the given group. Another level could be called as the deep or unobservable level that is beyond the sight of an outsider. It requires a certain period of time and a process of conscious and unconscious comprehension and

analysis from the ‘stranger’ to understand and adjust to the given group. The following categories can be named as the examples of the deep level of the culture of a certain social group: notions of leadership; conception of justice; incentives to work; notions of modesty; conception of beauty; patterns of superior/subordinate relations; tempo of work; approaches to problem-solving; nature of friendship; ordering of time; patterns of visual perception; ways of handling emotions; etc. These are only a few examples of those unobservable sociocultural categories of a social group that are ready-made and unconsciously implemented by the group members but which are to be observed and comprehended by the outsider.

The stages that graduate students undergo while coming into contact with these two layers of culture are as follows: first they observe the ‘surface’ layer, after a while they start observing certain elements of ‘deep’ layer depending on the situation which they have experienced. The relationships that they form with different people, either local or foreigners, are hugely determined by the observations that they have made on these two layers of culture.

Building Grounded Theory

1. The research revealed some common stages of adaptation that the graduates went through and the emotions that they experienced during this period: excitement and interest while encountering a new culture, disappointments, exhaustion, missing their home countries, families, friends; loneliness, coping with unfamiliar and strange situations. This stage was mainly followed by getting accustomed to the new environment, and changing the negative attitude towards new country by a positive one. This latter case was especially noticeable among those graduates who had been in a university for a relatively long period of time and therefore, could recollect their first thoughts and feelings as compared to later ones. As for the ‘newcomers’, i.e. those graduates who had been in a university for a relatively short period of

time, these stages were not so distinctly marked. They were mainly in the stage of starting to get accustomed to the new environment.

2. Other theories that were generated were concerned with managing changes, and how the adaptation strategies implemented by graduates could be used by other foreigners (i.e. non-graduates, individuals who change living place for a number of different reasons).

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