To our students

GROUNDED THEORY IN PRACTICE

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Introduction

Grounded theory methodology and methods (procedures) are now among the most influential and widely used modes of carrying out qualitative research when generating theory is the researcher's principal aim. This mode of qualitative study has spread from its original use by sociologists to the other social sciences and to practitioner fields, including at least accounting, business management, education, nursing, public health, and social work. Its geographical spread is equally impressive. What this reflects is a great desire for theoretical explanations and, of course, the increasing use of qualitative materials and their analysis.

Most researchers who use this grounded theory style of social research learn its details from reading its specific methodological literature, including one or more of the following: *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), *Theoretical Sensitivity* (Glaser, 1978), *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* (Strauss, 1987), *Basics of Qualitative Research* (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), and *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Although many monographs and articles in the grounded theory mode are quite accessible, some are less so, and perhaps some people who use our approach do not seek out the substantive writing. From teaching research seminars, however, we know that students find invaluable, and probably essential, the study of substantive materials before they can become confident and skilled grounded theory researchers.

This book of readings is aimed at increasing the accessibility of such materials. The selection of published articles reproduced here is designed not so much to show the range of substantive topics or of the disciplines and practitioner fields in which grounded theory researches are written. The major principles of selection for these articles, aside from their generally high quality of research, is this: All of the authors (a) have studied directly with us,

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Time in the Recruiting Search Process by Headhunting Companies

KRZYSZTOF KONECKI

Commentary

Krzysztof Konecki is a Polish sociologist who has specialized in field studies of work and industrial organizations. He teaches in those areas at the University of Lodz. A year's fellowship in the United States brought him to the University of California at San Francisco and to Strauss' seminar on grounded theory (a methodology with which he was already well acquainted and had written about in Polish). In California, he did a number of intensive interviews with recruiters (so-called "head hunters") from executive recruitment firms who specialized in finding candidates for executive positions at client business companies. We have included this chapter by Dr. Konecki on this topic, written at our request for this book. It illustrates well several points, besides the usual ones, about the use of grounded theory methodology and methods.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This research was possible thanks to the Fulbright Foundation. I would also like to thank my California hosts for their hospitality and inspiring discussions, especially Anselm Strauss, Charlene Harrington, Leonard Schatzman, Adele Clarke, and many other friends from San Francisco and at the University of California in San Francisco, Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences. Correspondence should be addressed to Krzysztof Konecki, Institute of Sociology, University of Lodz, IS, ul Rewolucji 1905r, 41/43, 90-914 Lodz, Poland. E-mail: konecki@krysia.uni.lodz.pl

When attending the research seminar, he was particularly struck by the applicability of the discussion of conditional matrix to his interview materials. His chapter is a nice example of how this procedural device can guide a researcher. Of course, it does not at all guarantee that the researcher will tightly and specifically link intervening conditions with the particular form of interaction under research focus, but Dr. Konecki skillfully and convincingly weaves these sets of conditions into his explanations. Furthermore, he relates these sets of conditions to each other. You can see this clearly because he has taken pains to show this with the particular format of presentation he has used. (In fact, note how differently he has presented his materials than the authors of other chapters.)

Strikingly illustrated in the chapter, also, is the typical interactionist focus on temporal matters, when seemingly relevant in one's data. His treatment of temporal issues is subtle and refreshingly detailed, and specifically tied to conditions at all levels of the matrix—interactional, internal to the work itself, organizational, market and complex cultural conditions.

* * *

Introduction

This chapter presents a reconstruction of conditions for effective work by professional recruiters. These include the internal circumstances for recruitment searching work, as well as the organizational, interactional, market and cultural conditions of this work. Reconstruction of those conditions has involved use of two grounded theory conceptions. One was that of a "conditional matrix," and the other was that of a basic "paradigm." (Both conceptions are well known to readers of this chapter, so I will not discuss them as such.) These conceptions are useful for generating a grounded theory, because they reveal connections between *working time* and *different conditions* (and their permutations). This reconstruction of conditions also has practical implications because it gives knowledge about conditions that should be taken into account when planning recruitment work, thus helping to prepare recruiters for difficult work conditions that might influence coordination of their work and their interaction with clients and potential employees.

This chapter is based on qualitative empirical research conducted in the San Francisco Bay Area. The topic of the research was the following: The

process of recruitment and selection of candidates for working, as carried out by executive search companies. These companies are usually called "headhunting firms." A total of 22 interviews were conducted—20 with headhunters from 20 firms, one interview with a candidate later employed by the client company, and one interview with a client company that had used an executive search company. These interviews were open ended. The researcher wished to get a complete description of the recruiters' work and their vision of the basic pattern of the search process itself. The researcher also wished to obtain in each of the latter interviews at least one authentic story of a recruitment search. After each conversation, the interviews were completely transcribed, and analyzed according to the methodology of grounded theory (Konecki, 1989; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Also included in the analysis were previously published case study descriptions of the searching process. The cases were used as data for comparative analysis. Every interview was coded by open coding,[1] and during this procedure the concepts, hypotheses, and research questions were created. I went into the field once again to get answers to those questions. That procedure was repeated 21 times. During that period, I wrote theoretical memos[2] and compared data gathered from different kinds of headhunting firms (e.g., from companies of different sizes).

As mentioned previously, the basic paradigm characterizing grounded theory research was used, involving the connecting of theoretical categories by tracing of the relations between them and the following:

- The central phenomenon studied
- The conditions (causal and intervening)
- The context
- The strategies of action
- The interactions
- The consequences

The entire procedure for doing this work of relating is called *axial coding* (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, pp. 96-115). The category name that refers to the phenomenon that was researched is "*the length of time* of the searching process." (This is a subcategory of the more general category of "trajectory of the searching process.") In this chapter, I will concentrate on the axial coding of the first process. Also, I will indicate some practical consequences (sociotechnical) of this knowledge for increasing effectiveness of recruitment research, gotten from reconstructing the search conditions.

The effectiveness of the recruit's work (a category) is here defined (not measured) through a property of the category, *"the length of time* of the searching process." The employment of a suitable candidate is here the aim of the headhunter's work and, ideally, the aim should always be achieved by professional recruiters (Backer, 1993; Brown & Martin, 1991; Dingman, 1993; Sherman & Bolander, 1992). From this point of view the work of the search companies should always be effective.

1. The Effectiveness of the Consultant Work and the Length of Time of the Search for an Appropriate Candidate

Searching for candidates to fill new job openings has a temporal character. Respondents emphasized many times the temporal aspects of a search when they named "searching for candidates" by the formula, "a research process." The word "process" (an in vivo concept) underlines the temporal character of the recruitment search. The idea of process in search companies was, probably, taken from manufacturing and industrial settings in which the production processes are planned and strategized by sequence. The planning of production is aimed at saving time during the production process. One of the recruitment consultants also compared a recruitment search to a living being: "They are like pets." The search has a beginning, a growing stage, a loitering stage, and a death when the individual either is hired or the client drops the search. Thus a recruiter moves forward in a logical sequence. His or her search is based, however, on a specific requirement because some steps can be performed simultaneously. What is important here is the phasing of this recruitment process. This phasing indicates, in turn, a broader theoretical category—namely, "the trajectory of the searching process" (this category is analyzed in Konecki, in press).

Temporality is connected also with the timing of the recruitment search. "Timing" means the *amount of time* spent by a recruit for a search (see Figure 5.1). Timing depends on (is a consequence of) the organizational conditions that induce the search company to adopt appropriate strategies for conducting the search for making the placement. Effectiveness of this search means achieving the placement of an appropriate candidate in the client firm. This is defined (not measured) through a more general condition, that is, the length of time of the searching process.

Involved in the pattern of effectiveness are the following:

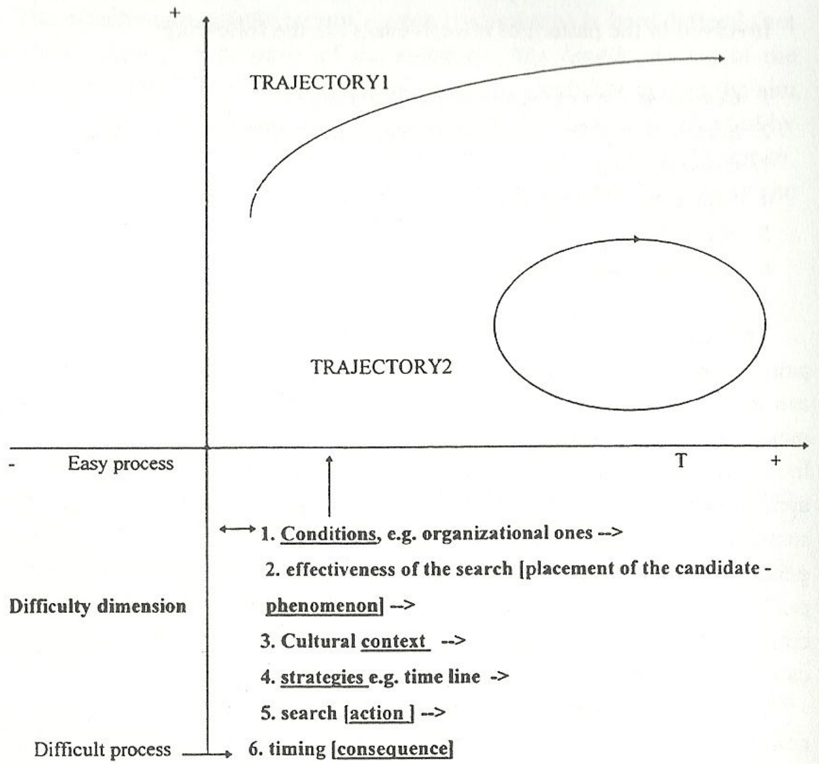
1. *Conditions,* for example, organizational ones →
2. *Effectiveness* of the search (placement of the candidate—phenomenon) →
3. *Cultural context* →
4. *Strategies,* for example, time line →
5. Search *(action)* →
6. Timing *(consequence)*

The structural organizational conditions, that is, the kind of search company (a retaining one or a contingency one) and recruitment company size, can influence both the length of time of a search and the search accomplishment. The retainer firms work on an exclusive basis—only one search firm looks for candidates, and is paid for the service even before finding an appropriate candidate. Some contingency companies also try to get their searches on an exclusive basis. But there is an opposite approach by contingency companies that generally accept orders on a nonexclusive basis and are paid after the employment of a candidate by the client. Many contingency companies look for candidates to fill the same opening but only one company can win the competition and receive payment for its search.

Client firms wanting a nonexclusive search will call a few headhunter companies to maximize the probability of a swift placement ("a shotgun approach"). This then, however, has a low probability of getting money from a placement. Only the consultant who has placed a candidate receives payment. If there are four consultants in the competition, the probability of getting money is only 25% per an individual recruiter. The consultant can spend a lot of time on a search without receiving any financial reward. The time spent on the search gives, in this situation, zero results and leads to an unsuccessful search. This anticipated possible consequence of the nonexclusive search is the reason (condition) that many consultants do not accept searches on a nonexclusive basis, or else they perform these jobs poorly.

2. The Difficulty Dimension of the Searching Process and Timing

"The length of time of a search" is a different concept from the temporality. Timing is a dimension of the search, and a search can be short or long.



T - time
TRAJECTORY1 - a linear schema of the search trajectory (*a priori* articulation of a trajectory.
TRAJECTORY2 - a concentric ordering schema of the trajectory (factual articulation of a trajectory).

Figure 5.1. The Conditions and Length of the Search Trajectory; Difficulty Dimension

Temporality is a category dimensionalizing the phenomenon of the search and dividing it into sequences, phases of the search (trajectory of the search: Konecki, in press; also see Figure 5.1).

Good timing seems to be fundamental to the recruitment business. This is not different from other kinds of business: "They must recruit fast, if they do not, they go to somebody else. Timing is everything" (a client). Timing in

searching for and selection of candidates is, however, a very difficult issue because of the nature of the headhunting industry. The recruiters deal mainly with human beings, so the work involves communicational and emotional aspects.

Timing is also a condition of client companies hiring the headhunters. Because the former want to hire new specialists or executives quickly, there can be stiff competition among them. These client firms hire headhunters to speed up this recruitment. Their sense of time, "being in a hurry," is transferred to a headhunting company that is also "in a hurry" to find the appropriate candidate as soon as possible.

The process of searching can be dimensionalized according to the criterion of "search difficulty" (the process can be difficult or easy). We can formulate a hypothesis that has emerged from our research: "The more difficult the searching process, the longer is the time spent on it." If so, we can note a difficulty dimension of this search for candidates.

We start from a descriptive list of conditions that influence this difficulty dimension:

1. Internal search work circumstances
    - 1a. The beginning of the search → difficult process
    - 1b. The next stages of the search → easy process
    - 1c. The first search for a client company → difficult process
    - 1d. The next searches for a client company → easy process
2. Organizational conditions
    - 2a. Hiring is not a priority for the client → difficult process
    - 2b. Hiring is a priority for the client → easy process
    - 2c. The client company is declining → difficult process
    - 2d. The client company is developing → easy process
    - 2e. High position of the candidate → difficult process
    - 2f. Lower position of the candidate → easy process
    - 2g. Good communication with Human Resources Department → easy process
    - 2h. Lack of communication with Human Resources Department → difficult process
3. Interactional conditions
    - 3a. Candidate, at the same time, looks for a job somewhere else; overselling practices by candidate → difficult process

3b. Candidate wants to work only in the client's company; lack of overselling practices by candidate→easy process

4. Market conditions
    4a. Vast supply of candidates→easy process
    4b. Shortage of candidates→difficult process
5. Cultural context
    5a. Cultural context not advantageous for headhunting (as in Japan)→difficult process
    5b. Cultural context advantageous for headhunting (as in the United States)→easy process

If we multiply the aforementioned conditions based on influencing the difficulty or ease of the search (the minus and plus signs), then we get a pattern of conditions influencing the timing of the search:

–1*–2*–3*–4*–5 → D, difficult search → T, poor timing of the search
or
+1*+2*+3*+4*+5 → D1, easier search → T1, good timing of the search

We can then formulate a hypothesis: Under the internal searching work circumstances (see Condition 1), organizational circumstances of the client company (Condition 2), interactional conditions of a candidate and a consultant dealings (Condition 3), the market conditions (Condition 4), and the cultural context (Condition 5), can cause a search to become more or less difficult—and the degree of the difficulty (*/–) leads to good or bad timing of the search (T/T1). If all the conditions have a negative sign (–), this leads to the multiplication of the degree of difficulty of the search, and at the same time leads to poor timing.

The Explanation of the Conditions

1. The Internal Searching Work Circumstances Are Very Important for the Difficulty Dimension of any Recruitment Search. The first week of the search is the most difficult. It is associated with the strategizing stage, when a job specification and a candidate's profile must be accurately described. Some consultants say that at this time the success of a search is really decided. If the job specification and desired person's profile are described adequately, then the next stages of the search can be easily

performed. There is, then, this responsibility at the beginning of the search—a consultant must learn a lot about the client company and the position that it is offering to a prospective candidate.

The first search done for a client firm is the most difficult. Moreover, if the first search is associated with the first week of the search, the level of difficulty for the researcher is multiplied. The client company is completely unknown and considerable effort and time is needed to learn about the position being offered, as well as the demands of the hiring manager and the company culture. The next searches for the same client company are easier and take less time. This is because the consultant already has learned a lot about the client. He or she can also refuse an order from a client who has proven to be uncooperative during a previous search. The good timing of future searches is then taken into consideration when making a decision to accept another job search for this particular client.

2. A Search Can be Prolonged or Delayed Because of the Following Organizational Conditions

A. The hiring manager travels and is not available for an interview with the candidate.
B. The client does not see the interview as a priority.

According to one recruiter, when the client receives a first candidate to interview, the search usually slows down. The client may lose motivation. Sometimes, too, it is difficult to get the client to meet the candidate for his or her interview. The recruiter's strategy then is to persuade the client to do the interview. If done, the search can be finished earlier and time is saved.

C. Internal communication problems in the client's company often occur, especially between the hiring manager and the Human Resources Department.

The recruiter's strategy is to encourage communication and to speed up the flow of communication between them.

The search can also be delayed because of poor communication between a recruiter and the Human Resources Department. The departmental managers can only give about 20% of their time to recruitment and to cooperation with the recruiter or hiring manager. This department's estimations of timing and temporal resources are different than the recruiter's. They concentrate more on other departmental functions, for recruitment is only part of their work. The opposite situation occurs with a recruiter who concentrates only on recruitment, and so the timing of a search is his priority. This recruiter's strategy in dealing with those managers effectively is to maintain good relations with their departments, and to communicate with them as a given search evolves.

D. Another organizational condition bearing on the difficulty dimension is the financial standing of the client's company.

It is very difficult to recruit somebody for a company that is known to be on the decline. In such a situation it is difficult to attract candidates to the client company. It is easier to attract candidates to one that is visibly growing and developing.

E. Another organizational condition can be the high or low organizational position of the candidate.

Those at the highest positions are very busy and very rarely available to the recruiter. This can create a problem with timing—for example, being able to arrange time for an interview with a client company.

F. Another organization condition can be the different time expectations of the client and the recruiter.

For instance, the client and the recruiter see the starting point of the search differently—"The client starts the search too late; even at the beginning of the search he is already a month behind. They don't start early enough. It takes longer to get approval. When the recruiter starts, they say 'We have already wasted 2 months, when are you going to do something?' [laughter] So they are working to a different time schedule."

3. Interactional Conditions

A consultant also tries to keep the candidate interested in the potential job during the search. The consultant wants to sell his candidate's qualifications. Sometimes a candidate makes the search difficult because he or she wants to oversell himself or herself—sometimes the recruiter must work to differentiate the candidate's self-evaluation practices from real qualifications. These interactional conditions also influence the timing of a search and can delay it.

It is often difficult to maintain the interest of a candidate in the search ("to keep the temperature of the candidate hot"), perhaps because the interview with the client has been postponed and the candidate may then think the client is not very interested in him or her. At the same time, the candidate may have other interviews lined up with other companies. The consultant tries, therefore, to persuade the client to do an interview immediately. Tactics for persuading the client can include the recruiter calling the client and urging an interview, then telling a story about the candidate's interviews with other companies. Sometimes the recruiting consultant will lie to push the client toward doing an interview quickly with the candidate.

Sometimes a candidate arranges an interview with a company other than the one proposed by the recruiter. Thus, the candidate maximizes his or her chances of getting a job, but at the same time minimizes the chances of the recruiter's accomplishment and lessens the recruiter's temporal efficiency. These actions by the candidate are conditions of a difficult search for the recruiter and casual conditions of a delay.

There are also other actors who participate in the searching game: the family of the candidate. It is very important in the searching process to include the family of the candidate. If, for example, a wife opposes her husband's moving, then the recruiter's work will not be successful. The candidate will have an opponent at home and this can be destructive the recruiter's work (Berger, 1990). Therefore, including the family in a search process is a condition of a successful or unsuccessful search. (This is important both in Japan and in the United States, so the condition seems to be transcultural.) If the wife is opposed to her husband's changing his job then the consultant has to spend a lot of time persuading her to agree to the move: "But his wife . . . was adamantly opposed, because she thought the new business might fail. It took me 11 months, including making full financial presentations to her on behalf of the new company, to convince her that the business would succeed" (example from Japan in Berger, 1990, p. 59). "They spent several days, they interviewed, they showed them (the family) houses. It was a big effort. And finally they made the offer" (an American executive recruiter). Even when the consultant and a client company make an effort to persuade the wife of a candidate to a move, she can refuse or change her mind after some time, and so a search or placement can fail.

4. The Vast Supply of Candidates in the Labor Market Makes the Search Easier for a Recruiter

This happens after the acquisition of large companies or their downsizing. There is a higher probability of choosing the right candidate for a position if a large number of candidates are available for screening. A shortage of candidates lessens the probability of finding the right candidate although it does not exclude matching an appropriate person to the position.

5. Cultural Context

From a cultural point of view, we can speculate that a value underlying the "assumption of a quick search" is the emphasis on time/timing—in the United States it is an important part of the culture. The phrase "time is money" should be transformed to "being fast is the value in itself." Money can be a consequence of fast work, but not necessarily. This assumption as a condition would influence all kinds of recruitment strategies. It would then be an intervening condition for recruitment actions.

Yet it is very difficult to specifically trace the cultural conditions that influence the temporal routines and procedures of work in U.S. companies. It is difficult to find research tools that can be used to connect the value of time to everyday life activities in a U.S. cultural context. It is more reasonable from an empirical point of view to look at the direct conditions that are connected with the timing of work, and that provide support in the data themselves. We can, of course, use cross-cultural comparisons to explain some differences in approach to time.

Japan, as usual, provides excellent comparative data (Konecki, 1994). For example, Western financial houses in Tokyo must accept the reality that searches for executives take 25% to 50% longer than in the West. The problem in Japan is not primarily in identifying suitable candidates, but in arranging meetings within the very long workday in Tokyo. The presentation of consultants to candidates also consumes a lot of time. The consultants need to explain the character of their work. Moreover, there appears to be a problem of trust between the recruiter and candidates. Trust is part of the credibility dimension. The Japanese cultural context influences the work that must be done on building trust and introducing it into relationships and achieving credibility. The work on trust then influences the timing of the search.

culture as a condition → work on trust → length of a search process

Moreover, the problem of timing is exacerbated by Western employers in Japan insisting on good English-language capability.

Veterans of headhunting, however, say that convincing Japanese executives to switch jobs usually has as much to do with opportunity, psychology, and timing as it does with money. Most managers who are recruited are in a state of disequilibrium. They might have been unhappy in their work, or have returned from overseas and no longer fit in with their Japanese colleagues at work, or perhaps they are in a business section that is being phased out. Even with the right psychological factors in place, convincing an experienced Japanese worker to make the big switch remains a time-consuming task (Berger, 1990, p. 59).

The everyday work of headhunters and their time schedules are also influenced by the Japanese cultural context. The long working hours mean that a recruiter can call a candidate only during the weekend. Usually a recruiter calls at 10:00 a.m. on Sunday because the candidate then is likely to be relaxed. Their meetings together also have a clandestine flavor. Secrecy is essential for any Japanese candidate who is still working; sometimes managers in Japanese companies can intercept mail to an executive who is suspected of wanting to leave the company (Berger, 1990, p. 59).

"Time is money," so recruitment in Japan can be costly for clients. The search firms that work there insist on payment according to the time and difficulty (dimension) of assignment, rather than on the basis of one third remuneration of the successful candidate—a system favored in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in Britain (Jones, 1988, p. 25; see also Berger, 1990). So the perception of time also becomes a condition influencing the structural factors of the recruitment business as, for example, is the payment for the search. Thus, the culture is an intervening condition that influences the work of recruiters, in this case influencing the length of the search process.

Some Theoretical Conclusions

The effectiveness of the search process has many conditions. We have reconstructed through the research the following conditions:

- Internal search work circumstances
- Organization conditions
- Interactional conditions

- Market conditions
- Cultural conditions

The conditions influence the degree of difficulty of the search positively or negatively, and consequently the length of a search process. There are several possibly different permutations of the aforementioned conditions. The headhunters when articulating their work[3] must take into account the conditions and prepare strategies to deal with them. A priori and fully worked out articulation of work is impossible because of the possibility of emerging unpredictable conditions of work. A suitable response to an emerging condition is, however, part of the permanent articulation of work. Adjusting to new and emerging conditions of actions would be impossible without permanent coordination of actions and lines of work by candidates, clients, and recruiters. Knowledge about the conditions may improve the effectiveness of work and actions of all participants in this process.

The methodology of grounded theory is therefore a very useful tool for the reconstruction of conditions and combinations of the conditions of a category. Knowledge of the conditions that influence the length of time of work is a first step toward an effective articulation of this recruitment work.

Notes

1. Open coding is a procedure by which empirical data are conceptualized. A transcribed text can be analyzed in this way, through examining minutely every line, sentence, or paragraph. The conceptual labels are analyzed and compared and subsequently a list of conceptual categories is created (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, pp. 61-74).

2. Theoretical memos refer to descriptions of important categories of generated theory, their properties, dimensions, relations between categories, and their conditions. This chapter is one of the many versions of some of my theoretical memos describing the temporal dimension of recruiters' work.

3. What is "articulation?" The several or many participants in an interactional course necessitate the coordination of their respective actions. Articulation is thus instrumental in the temporal ordering of social reality. It includes interactional processes of negotiation, persuasion, manipulation, teaching, the threat of coercion, and perhaps actual coercion (Strauss, 1993, pp. 40-41). "Articulation stands for the coordination of lines of work. This is accomplished by means of interactional processes of working out and carrying through of work-related arrangements" (Strauss, 1993, p. 87).

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