Observation in Grounded Theory and Ethnography: What are the Differences?

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Dear Editor,

Concurrently with the development of qualitative research methods, the tools of data collection have also greatly developed. Observation along with an interview helps researchers to understand the participants' experiences in more depth. The observation means applying eyes more than ears and tongue through the data collection process. It is also a practice for better understanding of the facts and their relationship to each other, which is achieved by the use of all five senses (1).

The observation in qualitative research differs from observation in daily routines (2). Daily observation is just limited to people's visual sense, but observation in qualitative research is the use of all senses to better understand the phenomenon (2). A qualitative researcher is looking for an answer to these two questions: "What do people do" and "why do they do it?". Also careful observation is a very useful method used to understand the hidden meanings of a phenomenon (2).

Grounded theory and ethnography are two research methodologies which use observation as data collection tool. However, there are differences in the focus of observation in these two methodologies. The objective of this paper is to discuss the differences between the focus of observation in grounded theory and ethnography. Grounded theory allows the researcher to explore the process of the occurrence of a social process in a particular context and is used in order to study the social processes in human interactions, the structure, and the process that led to it. The widespread use of grounded theory in explaining the social processes is related to its underlying philosophical perspective, which is a symbolic interaction (3). Apparently, observation in ethnography is like as grounded theory and the other qualitative studies but ethnography observers

have more holistic views. In a way, Charmaz believes that the observer in the grounded theory, according to the objectives of the research, discusses the details of only one aspect of the research, whereas the observer in the ethnographies examines the details of all the aspects available, therefore, she believes that the observation in grounded theory has a narrower lens than in ethnographies (4).

While sociology scholars emphasize on the role of culture in shaping human behavior, researchers who adopt symbolic interactionism prefer to observe human behavior in present and changeable circumstances and consider it as an active issue (5). Therefore, the dynamic approach in dealing with symbolic interactionism and the static approach in ethnographies separate the path of these two (2).

Furthermore, due to the research method being convergent, by focusing on actions-interactions in the grounded theory studies and interactions in ethnographic approaches, it can be acknowledged that these two methods are different (6). In the grounded theory, the researcher relies more on the phenomenon and the process and revolves all field notes around these two issues, which results to the researchers concepts becoming senses of actions and interactions. He also moves from setting the process details, but in ethnography the focus is more on the social setting (7). On the other hand, the approach of ethnography is often in a way that focuses on issues such as religious beliefs and networks of kinship or culture in specific communities and pays more attention to structure than process; therefore, it deals with observation with respect to the purpose and the title of the research (8). However, field notes in ethnography describe the research subject as an object, without considering the available process which is incorporated in it (9, 10).

Moving from data to the analysis and back enables the

researcher to get a full mastery over the data and prevents the researcher from dodging in the data analysis. Moreover, this helps the theoretical purity of the output of the study to be increased, however the lack of a two-way path for observation in the ethnographic studies only increases the amount of data, which sometimes may lead to confusion of the novice researchers because it has not been as focused on as an observation in the grounded theory studies (11).

Sometimes the mass of data with no relationship to each other is a common problem in ethnographic observations (4). However, the observation of grounded theory, due to explaining the process incorporated in the phenomenon, creates a comprehensive picture and leads the observer to shift from the state of being completely inactive, which exists in ethnographical observation, towards the desired scene and the scenes surrounding it, and with a very careful observation through scrutinizing the evolution of social processes, actively (4). Charmaz states that researchers have faced a dilemma trying to identify the knowledge and enhance the understanding of the phenomenon, one way is around the subject and the other is the entrance way (4). She believes that the ethnographers choose the second option, and the grounded theorists, initially conduct their study around the subject to get a complete picture of the phenomenon from outside. Then in order to proceed they may enter the second option. However, they eventually will be able to provide a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon from different perspectives and views (4). Table 1 showed some differences.

Table 1. Different Perspectives and Views

Items	Grounded Theory	Ethnography
The aim of observation	To explore the social processes in human interactions	To explore the hidden layers of cultures
The type of approaches	Dynamic	Static
Data	Focus on details of one aspect	Focus on details of all the aspects available
Type of consideration	Actions-interactions	Interactions
Setting	from setting to the process details	More on the social setting
Field note	Describe the process	Describe the research subject as an object
Data analysis	Moving from data to the analysis and returning back	lack of a two-way path
The volume of data	Adequate	Mass of data have confused researchers
The dilemma of way inside or around the subject	Firstly, around then inside	Inside way

Footnote

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