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## The Importance of Ethnographic Observation in Grounded Theory Research

*Jarrah FitzGerald & Jane Mills*

**Key words:**

grounded theory  
research;  
ethnography;  
qualitative  
research;  
observation;  
research design;  
reflexivity

**Abstract:** Even though observational data have contributed to grounded theory research since the method's inception, it is interview data that is most often analyzed. In this article we argue for the greater inclusion of ethnographic observational data in grounded theory research, as this practice offers several benefits. By witnessing and experiencing for oneself the various social processes experienced by and impacting on participants, ethnographic observational data represent both a unique source of data and a way to enhance one's theoretical sensitivity. Additional benefits relate to sampling and recruitment, the development of interview guides, coding, and analysis. As such, conducting ethnographic observations supports grounded theory methods and can enhance the use of interview data to improve the quality of final theory. The writing of observational field notes overlays with traditional grounded theory memoing, compounding the analytical benefits to researchers, while providing an audit trail of the research process, and supporting reflexive practice.

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## 1. Introduction

Grounded theory research has become one of the most popular designs for qualitative data analysis worldwide, with interviews being the most common approach to data generation (BRYANT & CHARMAZ, 2012). While interview data is useful for exploring participants' understandings, experiences, meanings, and processes (EDWARDS & HOLLAND, 2013), we wish to draw attention to the additional benefits of ethnographic observations in a grounded theory design. As a way of supplementing interview data, observational data have many benefits for grounded theorists. While GLASER's dictum "all is data" (2001, p.145) provided for the use of many data sources within grounded theory research (e.g., formal

documents, poetry, visual communications, to name a few), these alternative forms are not often utilized (CRESWELL & POTH, 2018 [2016]). [1]

The inclusion of observational data in a grounded theory design is far from novel, with GLASER and STRAUSS (1967) making repeated reference to the use and importance of observations in their foundational work. In this article we seek to restate the importance of observation for grounded theory methods. Ethnographic observations, with their cultural overlay, can assist grounded theorists to extend their analysis of interview data, enhance theory construction, and improve their theoretical sensitivity. [2]

Grounded theory research has been developed along several different paths since its inception, each with its own set of methods, philosophical, and epistemological foundations (see KENNY & FOURIE, 2015 for an overview of key differences). It is our position that ethnographic observations can enhance any grounded theory design, regardless of philosophical foundation or methodological version. Whether one believes the act of ethnographic observation (or interviewing for that matter) results in objective data that are captured free of a priori assumptions or that data generation is a negotiated and collaborative act—conducting ethnographic observations provides opportunities for researcher immersion in participants' worlds, while the resulting data present additional avenues for understanding what a researcher encounters in the field in ways that interview data alone cannot provide. [3]

We begin with a brief discussion of the origins and aims of ethnography and grounded theory as research designs (Section 2). Following this, a definition of ethnographic observation is provided (Section 3). The importance of documenting contexts and settings within grounded theory studies is then identified (Section 4), along with the usefulness of ethnographic observational data in grounded theory research (Section 5). Afterwards, the ramifications of such data for grounded theory methods (Section 6) and for researcher development (Section 7) is discussed. Finally, the benefits of note-taking practices are explained (Section 8), before providing our conclusion (Section 9). [4]

## **2. Shared Foundations, Different Aims**

Grounded theory research and ethnographic research share common roots in symbolic interactionism and pragmatism, with ties to the Chicago School of Sociology (BRYANT, 2009; TIMMERMANS & TAVORY, 2007). As a result, grounded theorists and ethnographers seek to explore and understand the social worlds of their participants (CHARMAZ & MITCHELL, 2001; STARKS & BROWN TRINIDAD, 2007). The terms "grounded theory" and "ethnography" are both used to describe research designs, as well their respective outputs (COFFEY, 2018). While grounded theorists and ethnographers may both engage with the investigation of processes, it is the particular focus and intent of each research approach that differs (discussed in more detail below). As qualitative research designs, grounded theory methods and ethnography can include a range of data

collection methods, with observations and interviews the particular focus of this article. [5]

## **2.1 What is ethnography?**

Ethnographic researchers seek to explore the social worlds and cultures of a given group (ATKINSON, COFFEY, DELAMONT, LOFLAND & LOFLAND, 2007 [2001]). This includes the ways in which internal beliefs and symbolized meanings are developed, practiced, and perpetuated through patterns of behavior, values, language, and beliefs (COFFEY, 2018). Ethnographic methods are synonymous with participant observation, though a diverse range of methods and analyses can be utilized in this design (ATKINSON et al., 2007 [2001]). Participant observation refers to the ethnographers' involvement in the daily lives and activities of their participants, often taking place over an extended period of time (LINDLOF & TAYLOR, 2011). Access to and interaction with a group helps an ethnographer to understand the ways in which cultural processes are enacted and understood by members of that group (WOLCOTT, 2010). Participants' own understandings are critical in ethnographic research (FETTERMAN, 2010), as it is participants' beliefs that "give order and meaning to [their] social life" (COFFEY, 2018, p.9). An ethnography is presented as a reconstruction of participants' worldviews, extended by the cultural interpretations of the ethnographer (ATKINSON et al., 2007 [2001]; TIMMERMANS & TAVORY, 2007). [6]

## **2.2 What is grounded theory methodology?**

The research methodology of grounded theory was originally developed in the 1960s by Barney GLASER and Anselm STRAUSS (1967). Grounded theory research designs present a systematic approach to data collection (or generation) and the development of theory, with a focus on identifying basic social processes, conditions, and the ways in which participants respond to these (BRYANT & CHARMAZ, 2007; CORBIN & STRAUSS, 1990). While various adaptations, resulting from different epistemological foundations, have developed since the inception of grounded theory as an approach to research, there remains a core set of research methods, that together form the essential components of a grounded theory study (CHARMAZ, 2006; CORBIN & STRAUSS, 2008; GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967). This set of methods includes the concurrent collection and analysis of data, iterative rounds of coding towards a core category, constant comparative analysis of codes and categories, theoretical sampling, and theoretical sufficiency or saturation (BIRKS & MILLS, 2011). The aim of using these methods is to construct explanatory theories that are grounded in the real-world actions and conditions of participants. [7]

The focus of a grounded theory is not on participants' own understandings per se, nor the description of cultural beliefs or practices. Rather, grounded theory methods result in the development of conceptual categories, abstracted from multiple accounts, to derive theory related to the properties of said categories, any relationships between them, and the conditions under which they operate (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967). While rich descriptions aid in the presentation of

final theory (discussed later), it is the development of substantive theory that guides grounded theory methods and it is towards this end that ethnographic observations must be directed in a grounded theory design. [8]

### **3. What is Ethnographic Observation Within Grounded Theory?**

The term ethnographic observation refers to a participatory form of observation, beyond the simple construction of lists or quantifications. Participation in this context has a dual meaning, referring to the various levels of direct participation researchers may engage in during fieldwork and the role researchers take in deciding what to investigate and where to turn their attention (COFFEY, 2018). On the continuum of "complete participant" to "non-participant observer" (p.46), COFFEY explained that most researchers will operate as partial participants, engaging with the setting only as much as is necessary to conduct observations and make sense of what they see. Grounded theorists will likely tend toward the midpoint of this scale, as their focus is on elaborating social processes in the context of cultural description and interpretation. As such, observations within grounded theory research need not achieve the same level of researcher involvement or exploration as an ethnographic study where complete participant observation may be required (CHARMAZ & MITCHELL, 2001). Nonetheless, conducting ethnographic observation results in a deeper engagement with research settings and participants than non-participant observation and is an important part in theorizing about such settings and the interactions that take place there (TIMMERMANS & TAVORY, 2007). [9]

Ethnographic observations may include descriptions of material settings, as well as details about the interactions and practices observed there (COFFEY, 2018). Observations about the quality of light, smells, and sounds might also be documented, as essential parts of the day-to-day reality of each setting. Timelines of events, observed activities or behaviors, and overheard conversations, are all important sources of data. As discussed by STARKS and BROWN TRINIDAD (2007), observations in a grounded theory study allow "the researcher to see how social processes are constructed and constrained by the physical and social environments in which they are practiced" (p.1375). A grounded theory approach allows researchers to narrow their view to aspects of a setting or to specific activities and interactions, using ethnographic observations to draw inferences about the social processes underlying these practices. As theoretical categories about these processes develop, researchers may be able to quickly observe all that they need to know about a given theoretical point (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967). In combination with interview data, ethnographic observations can help a grounded theorist achieve the theoretical abstractions necessary to elevate conceptual categories beyond description and beyond the understanding of participants themselves, to extend the sociological usefulness of theory (BIRKS & MILLS, 2011). [10]

#### **4. Observing Context in Grounded Theory Research**

Grounded theory researchers seek to avoid contrived settings. Due to the grounded theorist's focus on the explication of social process (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967), an understanding of the conditions that bear upon participants is critical. This preference for context and its associated complexity contrasts with positivist designs of controlled environments (GUBA & LINCOLN, 1982). Natural settings allow for the documentation of contextual influences on social actions (LINDLOF & TAYLOR, 2011), while qualitative research in general recognizes the context, theory-, and value-ladenness of data (GUBA & LINCOLN, 1994), including observational data (GLÄSER & LAUDEL, 2013). Grounded theorists attempt to account for contextual characteristics in any theoretical explanation of social processes. Including periods of ethnographic observation in a grounded theory design allows researchers to take full advantage of the access to settings and people that they have been given. Given the various "interactional rules" (HOLLAND & RAMAZANOGLU, 1994, p.135) governing the interview process, conducting observations provides researchers with an opportunity to witness behaviors and interactions in a more natural context (GUBA & LINCOLN, 1982). As a result, a researcher may experience or observe the various conditions that participants face, "while [participants] are responding to what life does to them" (GOFFMAN, 2010 [1989], p.125). Considering these conditions is essential in a grounded theory study and will enhance the explanatory power of the final theory. [11]

#### **5. The Gathering of Rich Data**

More generally, the inclusion of ethnographic observational data within a qualitative research design provides for a full examination of everyday activities and the structures and processes that shape them (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2017). Observational data, like any other, can be constantly compared (GLASER, 1999). Analyses of the characteristics of settings, as well as comparisons between different locations, and the activities and interactions that take place within them, can inform each step of a grounded theory study. [12]

Starting a research study with ethnographic observations familiarizes the researcher with the environments that support participants' lives and activities. These settings are also likely to be the sites where interviews are conducted and prior experience of them will allow the researcher to feel more at ease. Observing the various aspects of these environments, their structures, layout, and other basic conditions generates data for analysis, as these are the same set of contingencies that influence participants' lives (GOFFMAN, 2010 [1989]). Given the importance of context in qualitative research (GUBA & LINCOLN, 1982), observing the specific characteristics of settings is critical to understanding the lives and activities taking place within them. Human beings create spaces for a reason. The ways in which these spaces are used and the degree to which a setting might help or hinder any activities or interactions is an important research consideration. The data generated from observing the circumstances of participants inevitably prompt questions about inner worlds, the ways in which

individuals navigate the environments they find themselves in, and the interactions and behaviors that occur there. [13]

Time spent in the environments of participants will allow the researcher to place participants' accounts in context—providing the "where" for what is being said. Building familiarity with the settings and conditions that participants experience provides for greater analytical insights, as what is recounted by participants can be recalled and visualized by the researcher. In this way, subtle yet important details of time and space are less likely to be missed or misunderstood by the researcher (GOFFMAN, 2010 [1989]). Conducting ethnographic observations can improve a researcher's comprehension of participants' accounts to better understand what various events or practices may indicate. [14]

Data generated from conducting observations in this way can be used to inform early interview questions. What is witnessed might lead to questions about how participants arrived in the environment they now find themselves in, how these environments compare to previous or preferred ones, or the ways in which structures or people within these environments help or hinder various pursuits or goals. Ethnographic observational data and a researcher's first-hand experiences of settings and conditions can sometimes yield "better empirical material than asking respondents to retrospectively reflect on past events or questioning them about their general attitudes" (TIMMERMANS & TAVORY, 2007, p.498). This acknowledges that interviews themselves can be seen as performative acts which "do not convey unmediated private 'experience'" (ATKINSON, 2005, §10). As a result, ethnographic observations can be made within and about the interview itself, as personal spaces, participant behaviors, and interactions all provide rich data. In this way, observational data are an important supplement to data gathered via interviews, with the insights gleaned from ethnographic observations helping to guide the implementation of subsequent grounded theory methods. [15]

## **6. Ethnographic Observation and Grounded Theory Methods**

Different approaches to grounded theory research contain their own variations on coding. However, all follow an iterative process (CHARMAZ, 2006; CORBIN & STRAUSS, 1990; GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967), where an initial stage of coding is followed by more abstract coding that elevates codes to super-ordinate categories and, finally, the construction of a core category that captures the process explained by the grounded theory (KENNY & FOURIE, 2015). Initial codes label actions participants undertake and help to establish participants' primary concerns. Early attempts at coding will benefit from ethnographic observation of interactions and behaviors, along with the greater understanding of physical and social environments that such periods of observation can provide. As interactions and behaviors are amenable to observation, witnessing events first-hand improves a researcher's comprehension of participant accounts and can help reduce the ambiguity and uncertainty of early coding. While line-by-line coding interview data results in the researcher considering each account in isolation, subsequent analysis of these codes and data can be subjected to constant comparative analysis in relation to observed environments, activities,

and interactions. Records of ethnographic observations complement interview data in this way, allowing a researcher to analyze what participants say they do and compare this with what they actually do (WOLCOTT, 2008). Where interviewees recount the same instances directly observed by a researcher, great insights may be gleaned from the comparison of both accounts. [16]

Another important aspect of grounded theory methods that can benefit from ethnographic observation is sampling. Rather than sampling for statistical generalizability, grounded theory researchers start with a purposive sample, seeking those with direct experience of the substantive area of inquiry (BIRKS, HOARE & MILLS, 2019). By observing relevant environments and interactions, researchers can identify individuals to approach during their initial recruitment phase. Conducting observations early in the research process will help to identify a range of relevant sample characteristics, maximizing comparative potential. Once initial interviews have been coded, tentative categories are created into which various codes are sorted. These categories need further development through theoretical sampling, whereby a researcher uses salient codes and categories to guide sampling efforts to further understand and explore the various characteristics and boundaries of each conceptual category (CHARMAZ, 2006). In this way, theoretical sampling is an extension of analysis and serves an analytical end. [17]

In practical terms, theoretical sampling may benefit from periods of observation in several ways. Firstly, interviewees may discuss situations or places unknown to the researcher, necessitating the observation of these new environments, to witness the structures, relationships, and processes at work there. Where participants' accounts do not accord with what has been witnessed by the researcher, sampling efforts might be directed towards investigating these anomalies. Alternatively, those who might possess knowledge about such disparities may be sought out, even if they are not members of the original group. Family members, professionals, even members of similar but unconnected groups, can all provide important data. It is also vital to note that interview data and observational data need not match. In fact, such instances represent a unique opportunity for exploration, as these discrepancies can offer insights into the various operational conditions of social processes and the crucial ways in which settings and practices might influence outcomes. [18]

Theoretical sampling in grounded theory research is concerned with sufficiency of data and not statistical generalizability (DEY, 1999; GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967). Saturation of categories requires the study of multiple incidences and perspectives, as it is through comparisons between these that variations, discrepancies, and biases are understood and potentially reconciled (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967). As such, the importance of various settings, people, and practices may only retrospectively become clear (COFFEY, 2018). Interview data is heavily reliant upon participants' own understanding of a given phenomenon, including any issues with their recollection, and a researcher's ability to comprehend, reconstruct, or co-construct participants' meanings (ATKINSON & SILVERMAN, 1997). All of this supports the need for additional sources of data,



such as observational field notes, to fully realize the constant comparative method in the analysis of grounded theory data. [19]

Constant comparative analysis refers to the constant scrutiny of data throughout the research process (BRYANT & CHARMAZ, 2007). While often thought of in relation to codes and categories—whereby similarly coded instances in the data are compared to other instances and tentative categories are constantly audited to confirm their superordinate status—observational data can also be subjected to constant comparison. Research designs should include multiple periods of observation, which can take place across all the environments in which research is undertaken. Each location can be observed across different times of day, across the months, or years of the research project. Again, familiarity with these environments will increase the more time is spent in them and repeated accounts can be compared within and between settings. In so doing, the changes that occur in each setting, who occupies them, and what occupants do there, can all be compared and analyzed over time. This is because "processes emerge when snapshots of action and interaction are linked together" (TIMMERMANS & TAVORY, 2007, p.499). This practice provides for the presentation of theoretical concepts in practice, which itself can help locate theoretical gaps in analysis that require further exploration. Constant comparisons such as these prompt further questions to be explored via repeated observations. These can easily be conducted before or after interviews, when the researcher is already scheduled to attend these places. [20]

The combination of theoretical sampling and constant comparative analysis results in a type of triangulation of findings (GUBA & LINCOLN, 1982; NEWBY, 2014). This is not an attempt at pinpointing objective facts, but a way of delineating the conceptual boundaries of your categories and any relationships between them with the aim of aiding theory development (DENZIN, 1971). Discussing the idea of falsification within grounded theory methods, TIMMERMANS and TAVORY (2007) presented constant comparative analysis and theoretical sampling as a continual internal falsification of "micro-theories" (p.501), whereby both the phenomenon being explored, and the theory posited are constantly tested in relation to multiple contexts and accounts. Observations contribute additional data and points of comparison to this process, to help tailor the fit and relevance of a theory to the contexts from which the theory has been developed (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967). [21]

The inclusion of ethnographic observational data within grounded theory designs allows for the explicit inclusion of context in all its human complexity. In addition to the benefits outlined above, the inclusion of field notes in a grounded theory design can also enhance the presentation of a final theory. Direct observations can provide vivid accounts that help communicate abstract concepts with the aid of concrete examples, re-grounding these concepts in everyday reality (ATKINSON, 2005). Additionally, GLASER (2012) outlined that grounded theory research requires a researcher to go on a journey, from knowing nothing about the main concerns of participants to understanding what these concerns are and how participants resolve them. The real-world illustration of such resolutions

helps bridge the gap between sociological thinking and the more pragmatic and useful language required by those who might want to apply a grounded theory in practice (COFFEY, 2018; GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967). Being able to draw upon first-hand experience and observations will allow researchers to better conjure in the minds of their audience times and places central to participants' concerns, to more accurately communicate the meaning and import of their grounded theory. [22]

## 7. Ethnographic Observation and Theoretical Sensitivity

Earlier in this piece, the quality of a grounded theory study was linked to the research methods used and the researchers' understanding of their data. By conducting periods of ethnographic observation, researchers increase their knowledge of and insights into participants' actions. In other words, their theoretical sensitivity. Theoretical sensitivity improves one's ability to "pick up on relevant issues, events, and happenings during collection and analysis of the data" (CORBIN & STRAUSS, 2008, p.32). While there are many ways to cultivate this sensitivity, such as entering the field of research with an open mind (GLASER & HOLTON, 2004), the use of various coding families or paradigms (CORBIN & STRAUSS, 1990; GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967), comparative analysis, and exposure to extant literature, perhaps, the most relevant here is CHARMAZ's (2006) suggestion that theoretical sensitivity increases via the study of life from multiple perspectives. Not only does this relate to the various perspectives that participants' accounts offer, but that which the researcher observes too. In the end, it is the researcher who observes participants, their conditions, their actions, and does so with theoretical intent. It is the researchers who decide what is important and generates their own data as they immerse themselves in the field (CORBIN & STRAUSS, 2008). [23]

Ethnographic observational practices are not only useful for novice researchers and those unfamiliar with the substantive area. More experienced researchers may also benefit, as there exists an increased risk that professionals or veterans in their field hold stronger or longer-held beliefs about their participants and research settings. The act of observation requires slowing down, taking in the details of an environment and what is happening within it, as well as testing our assumptions about it (CHARMAZ, 2006). It is from a conscious attempt to take a different view of the familiar that fresh insights can be gained. To the degree possible, conducting ethnographic observations requires researchers to experience the worlds of their participants, to step into the shoes of those being studied (DENZIN, 1996; WOLCOTT, 2008). Attempting to understand the data from the perspective of participants respects their point of view and can enhance the researchers' comprehension of participants' meanings. Follow-up questions and additional lines of inquiry will benefit from this improved understanding. Additionally, any variation or inconsistencies that present within or between participant accounts will become more obvious and can be flagged for further analysis (CORBIN & STRAUSS, 2008). [24]

Grappling with the data and an ever-increasing set of codes and categories can be a trying time during intermediate coding (BIRKS & MILLS, 2011). It is in this phase that researchers are at the greatest risk of including unwarranted concepts by drawing upon extant theory and frameworks. Conscious or not, the safety of a ready-made theoretical structure to explain a mass of data is a temptation that must be avoided. Developing theoretical sensitivity will help keep the coding process grounded. Observing participants and their environments can offer insights when attempting to locate or develop some connective strand between data and categories. Constant comparison of codes, categories, and concepts with observed events and places, allows the researcher to see if interview transcript analysis accords with what has been observed in the field. This ensures that any burgeoning theory maintains a connection to the contexts that gave rise to it. As a result, "attending to ethnographic methods can prevent grounded theory studies from dissolving into quick and dirty qualitative research" (CHARMAZ & MITCHELL, 2001, p.160). Despite multiple rounds of iterative abstraction, the researchers' ability to tie their theory back to observed instances of these concepts at work will improve the quality of the final grounded theory. [25]

Theoretical sensitivity is something that continually develops through prolonged engagement with and theorizing about the substantive area of inquiry (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967). It should be noted that the personal abilities of the researchers and their temperament also play a role in analytical competence (ibid.). However, committing to undertake ethnographic observations as part of grounded theory research is a way of improving these abilities, while learning to become more observant. As has been described in this article, the act of observing can inform a grounded theory study from the very beginning. Periods of ethnographic observation will help grounded theorists closely relate their developing theory to the everyday realities of a given situation (ibid.), allowing them to "go deeper into their studied phenomena to understand experience as their subjects live it, not simply talk about it" (CHARMAZ & MITCHELL, 2001, p.161). Cultivating theoretical sensitivity in this way results in a greater sympathy towards participants' lived experience and, as a result, can help ensure the development of meaningful theories. [26]

While it is important to enter research with an open mind, this is not the same as being a blank slate (CLARKE, 2005; GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967). As opposed to knowing nothing at all—and the obvious impossibility of this—a grounded theorist should approach research with the intention of creating theory, not applying predetermined ideas (GLASER & HOLTON, 2004). Despite this, researchers' training, education, and experience will color what those researchers see in the field. Their history informs what they collect as data, construct through analysis, and create as theory (CORBIN & STRAUSS, 2008). Background assumptions and even the choice to use grounded theory methods will shape research questions, while professional and academic interests will introduce conceptual emphases (CHARMAZ, 2006). For this reason, reflexive practices are incredibly important within grounded theory research and are discussed below in relation to note taking. [27]

## 8. A Note on Notes

Note taking, in the form of memoing, is an essential grounded theory method. Memos contain the researchers' progressive thoughts about their data, codes, and developing theoretical ideas (BIRKS, CHAPMAN & FRANCIS, 2008; CORBIN & STRAUSS, 2008). As grounded theorists, these early ideas and musings act as both a gateway back in time, to previous concepts and lines of inquiry, as well as a diary of predetermined ideas and biases. This is incredibly useful for reflexive actions during the research process, and reflection on the data as the theory develops. Ethnographic observation brings with it its own set of writing practices that fit nicely with grounded theory memos, providing data for analysis and to support reflexive practices. [28]

In ethnography, observations are accompanied by the taking of scratch notes. These are contemporaneous writings that concern what is seen and heard while conducting observations (EMERSON, FRETZ & SHAW, 2001). Scratch notes provide context and rich descriptions of the materiality of physical locations, the individuals observed there, and any activities or interactions observed there. Such notes are direct, empirical observations and are non-judgmental in their descriptions (COFFEY, 2018). However, the entirety of any given scene cannot be witnessed and documented; instead, researchers will direct their attention to the most salient or attention-grabbing incidents (CORBIN & STRAUSS, 2008; MADDEN, 2017). As such, neither the researchers' observations, nor their associated notes, represent a definitive account of all that has happened in a given place and time. Nonetheless, these immediate, often shorthand notes act as a springboard for more theoretical memos and heighten theoretical sensitivity. [29]

In anthropology, analytical field notes build upon initial scratch notes. Analytical field notes expand on direct observations and represent the researcher's early attempts at analyzing for deeper meaning. Often written shortly after observations have been conducted, analytical field notes might include the research's initial impressions, interpretations, inferences, and early theoretical constructions (EMERSON et al., 2001; O'REILLY, 2009). As such, analytical field notes can directly inform grounded theory memoing, as thoughts concerning what has been observed in the field merge with the theoretical connotations of codes and categories, fueling the process of abstraction (BRYANT & CHARMAZ, 2012). Finally, overlaying memos with field notes can connect theoretical concepts with direct illustrations of these concepts in practice (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967). [30]

Writing can also improve memory recall. Although the act of writing does not necessarily increase the total volume of data recollected by individuals, writing can increase the amount of salient information recalled by their author (BUI, MYERSON & HALE, 2013; MUELLER & OPPENHEIMER, 2014). This results from the need to sort and synthesize data when deciding what to write down. In this way, scratch notes can transport the researcher back in time, to recall spaces and salient events (EMERSON et al., 2001), without the need to physically return to the location or rely on memory alone. Past details and events can be

compared to current accounts and observations. The theoretical ramifications of these comparisons across time can be explored in analytical notes and theoretical memos, informing successive phases of the research process. [31]

In grounded theory research and ethnographic observations, the researcher is an active agent in data generation. What a researcher "sees," either during analysis or observations, is affected by one's perspectives and biases. Completely avoiding this is both unnecessary and implausible (BIRKS et al., 2019; VARPIO, AJJAWI, MONROUXE, O'BRIEN & REES, 2017). Instead, reflexive practices should be undertaken, to account for the influence these biases may have on the research. Scratch notes will contain only that which the researcher deemed sufficiently important to record. These notes are a re-construction of events, written from the perspective of their author and in that author's voice (EMERSON et al., 2001). Reflecting on observed situations—what captured researchers' attention and why—can help them think more critically about their own perspective, assumptions, and preferences, with their written notes representing an audit trail by way of a timeline of ideas. The examination of these ideas, with the potential biases and pre-existing preferences or assumptions contained within them, is an important reflexive practice. As such, analytical field notes and memos enable researchers, as well as their audience, to better track and understand the journey from data generation to the development of a grounded theory. [32]

## 9. Conclusion

While observational data have been used within grounded theory studies from its inception, interview data are still the most widely used. Conducting ethnographic observations enables a deeper engagement with the field of study and with participants. These experiences and the data generated from them provide several benefits to the development of any grounded theory study. Such data can inform early interview questions, improve the accuracy and appropriateness of early codes, and ensure that theoretical analysis remains grounded in the contexts of its genesis. Conducting ethnographic observations familiarizes researchers with the world of their participants, while observing interactions allows for the exploration of underlying social process. This provides for greater insight into the day-to-day interactions, settings, and structures that bear upon participants' lives, activities, and relationships. In so doing, grounded theorists also heighten their theoretical sensitivity, aiding in the identification of processes, improving their comprehension of participants' accounts, and their ability to conceptualize theoretical codes and categories. Finally, the associated act of note taking can improve a researcher's recall of salient events, form the basis for theoretical analysis, and exist as an audit trail for reflexive practices. We argue for the greater use of this more participatory form of observation in grounded theory research, in recognition of the myriad benefits it provides, to the researcher, the research process, the accurate portrayal of participants' accounts and, ultimately, the quality of final theory. [33]

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