

Observations in Qualitative Inquiry: When What You See Is Not What You See

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Observation in qualitative research “is one of the oldest and most fundamental research methods approaches. This approach involves collecting data using one’s senses, especially looking and listening in a systematic and meaningful way” (McKechnie, 2008, p. 573). Similarly, Adler and Adler (1994) characterized observations as the “fundamental base of all research methods” in the social and behavioral sciences (p. 389). Observations of social settings, specifically educational landscapes, however, are often not what they appear to be. This claim is argued here from an ethnographic perspective. An ethnographic inquiry was conducted over a few years in disadvantaged schools in South Africa. Conducting ethnographic fieldwork in educational settings, with which we were unfamiliar, provided observational lessons, not discussed in traditional qualitative research methods textbooks. Such textbooks (e.g., Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002; LeCompte, Preissle, & Tesch, 1993; Madden, 2010; Spradley, 1980; Wolcott, 2003, 2005, 2009), wherein observation as a data collection strategy is discussed, address, for example, types of observations, when and how to use observations, advantages and limitations, and how to construct observation guides, amongst other topics relating to observations. Such textbooks are indeed useful but do not tell the complete story about observations in the field.

An Interrupted Moment

This self-narrative tells a brief story of my (i.e., the lead author’s) ethnographic journey of a critical moment during my approximate 6-year engagement in a specific school in a rural setting in South Africa. After approximately four months into my fieldwork of nonparticipant observations (i.e., serving as a *peripheral member researcher*, wherein I strived to develop an insider’s [i.e., emic] perspective without participating in the setting that I was studying; Adler & Adler, 1987), one of the teachers quietly told me that “what you see is not what you see.” This startled me, and I was unsure how to respond to these powerful and disturbing words. Also, on that day, the teacher had followed me to my car, and as I was about to leave the school, I suspected that something unusual was occurring. As often might be the case in a pivotal moment during data collection, my recording device was switched off and what the teacher had shared with me at that moment were data of a

sensitive nature that I was not able to write about in detail. What surprised me more, were her detailed accounts of what *actually* happened in that school. McKechnie (2008, p. 75) refers to this as “guilty knowledge,” which may present “ethical dilemmas of whether or not this behaviour should be reported” to an authority. I also realized that I would have never seen or learned about this guilty knowledge had it not been for her. Needless to add, that for approximately four months, I visited the schools approximately twice per week, at different times, where I observed the staff room, the school gate, classrooms, the playground, and school assemblies, and I made copious field notes on a regular basis and never suspected anything suspicious. I decided at the beginning of my fieldwork to postpone guided conversations or interviews until I felt comfortable to ask teachers and the school principal questions about their school. I decided to defer collecting interview data because I was unfamiliar with rural and disadvantaged educational landscapes, given my private German education, which I enjoyed since my parents immigrated to South Africa with the intent of returning to Germany, which never happened.

Initial Observations

In the words of Wolcott (2008, p. 231), making the *familiar strange and the strange familiar*, I moved softly into this educational space. My first impressions were apparent to many rural school settings of learner late coming, overcrowded classrooms, noisy playgrounds, and teachers teaching. I had many questions, for example, why was the staff room not used, why was the school principal’s office so incredibly neat, why were the school terrain and the classrooms not cleaned by learners, why did the teacher write endless notes on the chalkboard, and why did learners not pay attention? These were some of the initial wonderings and research puzzles of my ethnographic inquiry into teacher identity and the role of the educational landscape and its context. I also observed the area surrounding the schools, the squatter camps, the local clinic, and the hospice.

A Turning Point During Observations

Initially, I was optimistic about this school because it appeared functional despite the challenging context, and it appeared that



the school principal, the teachers, and learners did their best to perform well. The turning point came after that critical conversation I had at my car with the teacher on that specific day. On that day, her trust in me was proven, and from that day the rapport was established, evidenced in her telling me about incidents of misconduct, abuse, colluding teachers, and corruptness. I considered this to be way beyond of what one would consider as being a functional pedagogical environment. From that day forward, she entrusted me with many more secrets, which I did not write about, fearing for her safety, had I done so. I saw the school with new eyes and was saddened by what I then saw. The level of wakefulness as I resumed my research changed me as a researcher. I experienced helplessness because I was unable to respond to the unacceptable behavior of the school principal. I had ethical questions and wondered where did my research responsibility toward my research participant begin and where did it end. Thankfully, I was able to report the matter to an authority, and the law took its course. I also wrote an ethnography focusing on teacher identity in the context of rural education (Fritz & Smit, 2008; Smit, 2013; Smit, Fritz, & Mabalane, 2010).

Lessons From This Journey

Qualitative researchers extol the virtues of observations regarding rich descriptions of research phenomena, reinforced with interviews. Observations require prolonged engagement and persistent observations in the field (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), together with the ability of the researcher (i.e., investigation validity; Kvale, 1995), which is often filtered by the bias and the lens through what is familiar or known. My prolonged engagement and persistent observations in the field allowed for “the discovery of unanticipated phenomena” (McKechnie, 2008 p. 575), with the help of a research participant. This discovery changed me, and I realized that whoever listens matters. I listened that day to the teacher as she opened “my eyes” for which I will be ever thankful. As qualitative researchers, we should be open to the lessons from our research participants and privilege their voices as we conduct our scholarly work (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2013). According to Werner and Schoepfle (1987), there are three observational procedures for *seeing*, as follows: (a) *descriptive observation*, involving the observation of everything, wherein the researcher assumes a novice attitude by assuming no knowledge and taking nothing for granted; (b) *focused observation*, wherein certain entities are deemed irrelevant and thus can be ignored, and the researcher typically concentrates on well-defined, observable entities; and (c) *selective observation*, wherein the researcher concentrates on a specific form of general entities. Of these three observational procedures, it was only by making descriptive observations that created heightened awareness in the field. Guba and Lincoln (1989) coined the phrase *ontological authenticity* to represent the criteria for assessing a raised level of awareness among the research

participants. However, in this case, it was I, as the qualitative researcher, who experienced a raised level of awareness (i.e., ontological authenticity), to act on my increased understanding that emerged (i.e., *tactical authenticity*; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This editorial is in honor of Teacher X who showed me the way of extending observations beyond the obvious of what we may consider, of “being there” (Wolcott, 2005, p. 88).

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