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Use of Ethnography and Grounded Theory (GT) in LIS Research: A Study

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ABSTRACT

Among various qualitative research techniques ethnographic and grounded theories (GT) are widely used across all disciplines and subject domains. This paper reviews the benefits and challenges associated with using ethnographic research and GT in libraries and information science research. It also provides both historical and recent examples of its application and use at various libraries and information centre's research. Further this study recommended various possible way of using Ethnographic and GT methods in Library and information Centres research

Key words: Qualitative Research, Ethnography and LIS Research, Grounded theory and LIS Research

1. INTRODUCTION

Common sense and research both involve an attempt to understand various aspects of the world. However research, arguably not only involves common sense, it demands an explicit, systematic and scientific approach to finding solutions to a problem. This process begins with deciding on a research question followed by gathering of relevant information which we call as literature review and to choose a research design which helps us in attempting the research question. Decisions made at this point include considering what kind of data will be collected, how they will be collected, who will be invited to participate and how the data will be analysed.

Grounded theory and Ethnography are two major qualitative theories in research methodology which forms the roots of social sciences. In this article use of ethnographic and grounded theory approaches to undertake qualitative inquiries in the field of Library and Information Science have been studied. Also the epistemological and ontological assumptions underlying these two approaches and their influence on methods has been discussed critically

2. INTRODUCTION TO ETHNOGRAPHY RESEARCH

Ethnography has a background in anthropology. The literary meaning of term Ethnography is “portrait of a people” and it is a methodology for descriptive studies of cultures and peoples. The cultural parameter is that the people under investigation have something in common. Examples of parameters include: Geographic, religious, tribal and shared experiences. The term ethnography is associated with qualitative research, where a researcher committed to investigate and provide a detailed, in-depth description of the problem. Ethnography research is a cross-disciplinary qualitative research methodology evolved out of social science disciplines like Sociology and Anthropology. It’s now become very common and most popular research methods for subjects like Psychology, health sciences. Due to its wide presence in social sciences and ease of use method forced the computer and information science professionals to adopt this method in their various research projects. Interestingly many research scholars argue that an ethnographic approach to social research is no longer purely that of the cultural anthropologist, a more precise definition must be rooted in ethnography's disciplinary home of anthropology (Hoey, 2013). The ethnographer goes beyond reporting events and details of experience. He/she made a genuine attempt to learn more about problem and try to contribute in solving the problem.

3. MEANING AND DEFINITIONS

Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines Ethnography as “the study and systematic recording of human cultures”

Oxford dictionary describe Ethnography as “The scientific description of peoples and cultures with their customs, habits, and mutual differences.”

The Free Dictionary defines Ethnography as “The observation of and interaction with persons or a group being studied in the group's own environment, often for long periods of time.” When we carefully review and analyse the above definitions it becomes obvious that these definitions clearly indicates and emphasize the importance of human culture and customs in Ethnography.” So we can conclude that ethnographic research always focus and investigate the culture of mankind in society through an in-depth study of its members which involves the systematic collection, description, and analysis of data for development of theories of cultural behaviour.

4. DATA COLLECTION METHODS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

There are three models to collect data in ethnography and below chart explains these three methods.



Picture.1. Data collection methods in Ethnography

5. STEPS OF CONDUCTING ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

There are some general activities needs to done before getting started with ethnographic research. First, one needs to identify the research question. Second, step would be assessing how much the researcher knows about the subject area. Third step is to meet with possible information providers or source of information facilitators, who give access to facility where we plan to conduct research. Lastly but not least the researcher need to assess his/her own commitment towards research and making a proper plan (Sangasubana, 2011).

Mainly there are ten steps in conducting Ethnographic research and those steps have been presented in Fig.2.

1. GROUNDED THEORY (GT)

Grounded Theory (GT) is an inductive methodology. Generally many social science researchers regard it is a qualitative method. This methodology originated with Glaser and Strauss in their book the discovery of grounded theory (1967). However, like all things, grounded theory, over the years has developed different ideologies or versions, for lack of a better term. Even the original founders Strauss and Glaser have progressed to a different view of grounded theory (Gibbs, 2010). The main feature is the development of new theory through the collection and analysis of data about a phenomenon. It goes beyond phenomenology because the explanations that emerge are genuinely new knowledge and are used to develop new theories about a phenomenon. In health care settings, the new theories can be applied enabling us to approach existing problems in a new way. For example, our approaches to health promotion or the provision of care. GT very useful when current theories about a phenomenon are either **inadequate** or **nonexistent** (Creswell, 2008).



Figure 2. Steps of conducting ethnographic research

2. METHODS

The basic idea of the GT approach is to read a textual database and "discover" or label variables (called categories, concepts and properties) and their interrelationships. The data do not have to be literally textual -- they could be observations of behaviour, such as interactions and events in a restaurant. Often they are in the form of field notes, which are like diary entries.

2.1 Types of Grounded Theory (GT)

Substantive - explains only a particular aspect of social life

Formal - describes social issues at a higher level of abstraction (higher level of explanation)

Data Collection Methods of GT: Data collection in GT involves five major steps **and** steps are presented in below figure.

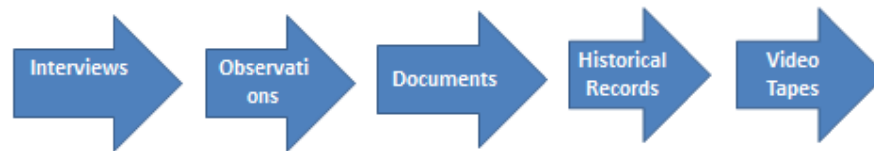


Figure 3. Data collection Method in GT

7.2 Criticism of GT

Critiques of Grounded Theory have focused on its status as theory (what is produced really 'theory?'), on the notion of 'ground' (why is an idea of 'grounding' one's findings important in qualitative inquiry—what are they 'grounded' in?) and on the claim to use and develop inductive knowledge. Thomas, G. and James suggest that it is impossible to free oneself of preconceptions in the collection and analysis of data in the way that Glaser and Strauss say is necessary.

Case study 1: Use of Ethnography in Library Science Research

Research in Library and Information Science (LIS) often includes the use of several types of information and of information technology tools in facilitating user's information needs. As such, it is basically concerned with problem-solving in social Science domains like user studies and how technology can be used in facilitating user demands like research in information retrieval in general. Although most information research is concerned with some kind of problem-solving, its nature is not purely technical as many have perceived; rather, it requires analyses of the interrelationship among users, technology, and society. In other words, information research is social in nature and it asks for the search for affordances which bring forth, for example, user needs and use of technology to meet their needs. The widely and commonly used quantitative methods, however, are not sufficient for comprehensive analyses of cultural and social phenomena or affordances because quantitative methods are teleological in nature. The search for affordances demands for a critical and conceptual space in research, on the one hand, and empirical approaches in which the understanding of the cultural and the social are central concerns, on the other. Critical ethnography is a critical and empirical research methodology that encompasses these two criteria (Benoit, 2001).

Khoo, M., Rozaklis, L., & Hall, C. (2012). Conducted a survey and published a paper in *Library & Information Science Research journal*. Their survey identified a total of 81 studies. Five main types of ethnographic research methods were identified:

Observation

Interviews

Fieldwork

Focus groups, and

Cultural probes.

The survey based study showed that use of ethnographic methods in libraries research has been increased recently. Further this study identified an emerging trend of studies associated with library planning that uses rapid ethnographic methods to investigate libraries and their users as part of planning processes. The survey supports comparison across ethnographic studies, settings, and methods; enables the growth of ethnographic methods as a research method in libraries; and provides material for library and information science curriculum development in this area.

7.3 Possible application of Ethnography in Library and information Science

For many years' library and information centres are using ethnographic methods to investigate bibliography trends, use and impact of library services, use of library reading space etc. But in recent time lot of attention is paid towards the kind of research methods adopted by library and information centres as a result the awareness is increased.

- a) Information Behaviour/User studies: Ethnography would be useful research tool in library and information science particularly where human-human interactions and human-computer interaction takes place. It facilitates and provides a framework for the analyses of the interactive dynamics of information systems and their users, on the one hand and the conceptualization of social system on another hand.
- b) Human Computer interaction (HCI): Library science research topics like Information representation, seeking, and retrieval often involves an understanding of human-computer interactions. This requires a good knowledge of how human beings interpret and interact with each other and how meanings are created. Ethnographic framework makes it possible to study such things.
- c) Social Informatics: Ethnography's theoretical and methodological framework will also facilitate the analyses of social informatics.
- d) Scholarly communication: Epistemology playing key role in studying Scholarly communication with the help of culture study.

7.4 Use of Grounded Theory in Library and Information Science (LIS) Research

Research methodology is the mother of any research project because credibility of research study is determined by adopted methodology with research context. LIS is interdisciplinary subject borrows and adopts verity of different research methods form several social sciences. But Grounded Theory (GT) is one the highly sought research method, which is

originally traced in nursing research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and later adopted by social sciences subjects LIS, Sociology, Business management and anthropology. Allan, 2003) advocates that GT method is a powerful way to collect and analyse data and draw meaningful conclusions. Literature review reveals that using GT methodology in LIS research dated back to early 1980s. Several influential works in the LIS used GT. LIS researcher in Sheffield was among the first research group who adopted GT in their studies (Selden, 2005).

Soto (1992) reported that Ellis (1987) was the first researcher who used GT methodology in LIS domain. Mansourian (2006) concludes that Ellis (1987) was the first researcher, who used GT in information seeking behaviour studies and later it's been followed up by many further research including Ellis (1993), Beaulieu (2003). Several Ph.D. studies used GT. For example Pace (2003) employed GT to explore a psychological phenomenon called "flow" in web users. Pace (2003) developed a theory which demonstrates the role of a number of contextual elements in the interactions between end users and the web including curiosity and time urgency (Mansourian, 2006). GT is also used in studying online learning trends among LIS professionals. But literature review clearly indicates that GT is used mainly in qualitative and user-orientated studies in LIS field.

GT is reliable and credible methodology if we know how to execute it our studies. But it is time consuming procedure hence is advisable to use in long-term research projects where constant interaction between researcher and dataset takes place. So GT should be adopted in LIS PhD research and it is not suitable for short term projects like dissertations and library short surveys like use of library space, resources etc.

7.5 Philosophical Assumptions of Ethnography and Grounded Theory

Ontology is an explicit specification of a conceptualization. The term is borrowed from philosophy, where Ontology is a systematic account of Existence. Short answer: Ontology is a specification of a conceptualization. The study of epistemology focuses on our means for acquiring knowledge and how we can differentiate between truth and falsehood. Ethnography and GT both have epistemological and ontological principles. Ontological assumptions in ethnography seek to understand the relationship between culture and behaviour; with culture referring to the beliefs, values, and attitudes of a specific group of people. Ontological assumptions in GT stress on the truth and realities.

7.6 Ontological Assumptions in Ethnography and GT

Ethnographer's ontological belief can be seen in their study of people culture. To study people culture, customs and norms one has to spend lot of time with a particular social group. It may require them stay with that social group or community to win their trust and then get all information in detail. In this way ethnographic researcher ontological belief has been established.

Ontological assumptions of GT researcher can be seen at its research site where the study takes place.

7.7 Epistemological Assumptions in Ethnography and GT

Ethnography researchers use more realistic phenomenon to understand the sample data. Since their study focus on people culture, belief and norms it is important for them to use realistic phenomenon. GT researchers have epistemological assumptions in data collection

about human interactions. Most grounded theorists believe they are theorizing about how the world is rather than how respondents see it.

3. CONCLUSION

It is difficult to understand the differences between the various qualitative research designs. The differences are quite subtle and are mainly concerned with the original research question, the people or situations being studied and the way the data is analysed, interpreted and presented. Similarly every research question or problems are unique hence researcher need to be very careful in adopting suitable methodology. Because all methods are not suitable for all problems. Hence it's difficult to advocate or rate any one research method as a best method. Choosing suitable research methodology is a sole responsibility of the researcher.

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