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Methods and Approaches for the Study of Theology and Religious Studies

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Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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Reading

Judith Bell, *Doing Your Research Project*
(Buckingham: Open University Press, 5th
edition, 2010).

Part 1: What is ethnographic Research?

- “the study of people in naturally occurring settings or ‘fields’ by methods of data collection which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally.” (Brewer 2006: 6, quoted from Bell 2010: 14)

Ethnographical methods is...

- “Participant observation, interview, mapping and charting, interaction analysis, study of historical records and current public documents, the use of demographic data, etc. But ethnography centers on the participant observation of a society or culture through a complete cycle of events that regularly occur as that society interacts with its environment.” (Lutz 1986: 108, quoted from Bell 2010: 14-15)

What is participant observation?

- This method has been developed mainly by anthropologists and is often described as 'ethnography'
- It entails in-depth and intimate experience of a chosen group of people and their way of life
- Ethnography started out as a method for studying cultures other than one's own
- Today it is common practice to write ethnographic accounts of one's own culture

Critique against the method

- “The accounts that typically emerge from participant observations echo the criticism of qualitative data ... Being described as subjective, biased, impressionistic, idiosyncratic and lacking in the precise quantifiable measures that are the hallmark of survey research and experimentation. While it is probably true that nothing can give better insight into the life of a gang of juvenile delinquents than going to live with them for an extended period of time, critics of participant observation will point to the dangers of ‘going native’ as a result of playing a role within such a group.” (Cohen et al. 2000: 313-314, quoted from Bell 2005: 194)

Main features of participant observation as a research method

- In-depth study of small groups
- Personalised, reliant on face-to-face interaction
- High level of subjectivity
 - Non-repeatable
 - Unpredictable
- No pre-conceived theory

Steps in participant observation

- Choosing the 'field'/ site or group
- Negotiating 'gate-keepers'
- Preparing for fieldwork
- Entering the field
- Experiencing the field as participant and observer (attempting to become an insider while still retaining the outsider's perspective)
- Recording one's observations
- Exiting the field
- Writing-up

Research methods that complement participant observation

- Interviews
- Collection of relevant documents
- Analysing media representations
- Photography, filming

Key elements in participant observation

- Impression management in the field or group – the need to ‘blend in’
- Self conscious awareness of how one’s presence in the group may change the relations within the group or alter the way in which the group presents itself
- The importance of regular and frequent note-taking

Three important steps

1. Approach gate keeper and get permission for participant observation
2. Keeping records
 - Observation schedules in form of a checklist, diary, chart, time or critical incidents log
 - But: Impossible to record everything
3. Afterwards analyse your observations

Research aims in participant observation

- Often the research aim / question / focus emerges only in the course of, or after, a period of immersion in the field
- This leads to the development of 'grounded theory' where fieldwork leads to the shaping of the study's analytical focus or framework

The researcher's responsibilities

- Researchers have a duty of care towards
 - Themselves and their host institutions/ funding bodies
 - Wider society
 - Human participants in their research
- Any research that involves human subjects is responsible to the subjects and to the wider society for ensuring that certain human rights are protected.

Assessing participant observation as a research method

- Limitations

- Not conducive to the formulation of generalised conclusions?
 - » (The merits of comparative analysis)
- Overly subjective?
 - » (The merits of reflexivity and context-sensitivity)

- Strengths

- Provides rich, in-depth and personalised research
- Allows flexibility
- Enables the researcher to provide an empathetic and sensitive account of the lives of those being studied

Part 2: Interviews

- Different types of Interviews:
 - Structured or semi-structured interview
 - List of items you want to discuss with some prompts to remind you about particular issues you want to cover
 - Unstructured or focused interview
 - Conversations around a topic with no checklist but a framework by selecting topics

Other types: Group interviews and Focus groups

- “Groups have to be carefully balanced in relation to the age, sex and ethnic status of respondents: for example, if young people, women, or people in ethnic minority groups are in disproportionately fewer numbers in the group they may feel socially constrained and not contribute freely to the discussion. It may sometimes be necessary to have single sex groups in similar age ranges in order for the atmosphere to be permissive and relaxed.” (Hayes 2000: 395, quoted from Bell 2010: 166)

What could be potential questions?

- **Important:** no leading, presumptive or offensive questions
- Start with establishing a relationship between you and the interviewee
- Prepare questions carefully but allow variations

Interview context

- Venue of interviews (office, street, church)
- Invisible responses (tone of voice, facial expression, hesitations and so on)
- Selection of interviewee
- Recording / note taking

Be careful

- “interviewers are human beings and not machines, and their manner may have an effect on respondents” (Selktiez et al. (1962: 583, quoted from Bell 2005: 169)
- -> Ninian Smart’s methodological agnosticism

Further Reading

- Day, Abby. 'Researching belief without asking religious questions'. *Fieldwork in Religion*, 4 no 1 (2009), pp. 86-104.