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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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Today

- Participant Observation
- Consideration of Ethics

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

New developments in participant observation (p-o)

- Multi-sited p-o
- P-o in sites of flux (eg a pilgrimage centre) where the population changes all the time
- P-o in complex and large-scale environments as opposed to that among simple, small-scale and bounded groups
- P-o amongst populations on the move
- P-o at particular moments in time (eg the study of critical events)
- P-o over time – comparing the same field at two different periods in its history

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.

Ethical issues in participant observation

- Trying to ensure reciprocity in fieldwork
- Respecting requests for anonymity, confidentiality
- Seeking and securing informed consent

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

Task

- Try to describe your observation of one event you attended recently
- How can you analyse what you have seen?

Part 2: Ethical Implications

- Humane treatment of participants
- Respect for participant's privacy during the study
- Informed consent
- Risk assessment
- Risk minimisation
- Confidentiality of findings of participant's replies
- Maintenance of participant's anonymity
- Participant feedback

Research ethics

- These are usually defined in relation to the following:
 - Avoiding harm to participants
 - Securing informed consent
 - Avoiding invasion of privacy
 - Respecting requests for confidentiality
 - Avoiding deception

Harm to participants

- If there is a likelihood that participants will be harmed by research then this would be regarded as unacceptable
 - Researchers need to assess risks entailed in research
 - If potential risks are identified, they need to put measures in place that minimise these

Informed consent

- It is expected that all research participants will be informed as to the nature of the research and that they will be given the opportunity to decline or withdraw from participation at any point.
- Covert research strategies contravene this principle and there is a significant debate around this area.

Information to be provided to participants include:

- Information about the aims and methods of the project
- Information about the purpose of the project
- Information about what the researcher plans to do with the results of the research and whether they will be made available to the participant
- Information about secure data storage
- Researcher's contact information

Informed consent

- In the case of people regarded as unable to give informed consent (e.g. children, people with mental health disability, the seriously ill etc.), consent from a proxy (eg parents, doctors) is required.

Invasion of privacy

- This is linked to the notion of informed consent; the researcher must respect the participant's privacy at all times and not be intrusive in any respect.

Confidentiality

- Information regarding individuals must be treated in confidence and their identities kept out of the public domain.
- All documentation and data should be kept within a secure environment and kept only for the duration of the research project.
- The publication of research material should always be conducted with respect for the confidentiality of research participants.
- If necessary, continued permission should be obtained.

Deception

- Researchers should be honest in their dealings with participants and deception should be avoided. (This is disputed by researchers who wish to conduct covert projects or test attitudes that could not be tested if the nature of the study was known.)

From the Ethics Guidelines of TRIS

- “The School of Theology, Religious Studies and Islamic Studies (TRIS) accepts all human beings as equal. The TRIS actively opposes discrimination of any form. TRIS is concerned with the study of religions, religiosity and religious phenomena. The work carried out within TRIS (either by students or staff) must adhere to the Code of Ethics outlined below, and must protect the rights and interests of the participant. Particular emphasis is placed on minimising the risks to participants, ensuring that participants give informed consent and respecting participants’ privacy. Researchers have a professional and moral responsibility to adhere to ethical principles and procedures as well as the code of conduct appropriate to their respective discipline.”

Task

- Now go back to the discussion earlier and reflect on the ethical consideration of your proposed research.

Ethical guidelines issued by academic organisations

- British Sociological Association –
<http://www.britsoc.co.uk/media/27107/StatementofEthicalPractice.pdf>
- Association of Social Anthropologists –
<http://www.theasa.org/ethics.shtml>