



Field Experience: Notes on Participant Observation in Qualitative Research

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ABSTRACT: The paper gives an account of the author’s field experiences with emphasis on participant observation as one of the qualitative data collection technique. This technique has been used in a variety of disciplines as a tool for collecting data about people, processes, and cultures in qualitative inquiry. The qualitative inquiry is adopted because the objective is not to make a generalisation, but to explore the research problem with a view to establishing a detailed meaning of the central phenomenon from the informants’ actions through observations. This observational technique would enlightens the readers about the context in which informants used the meaning that their actions hold in their lives. Being the technical tool, the extended observation while in the field lasted for a whole period of six (6) months precisely from February to August. Thus, being an “insider”, the author got continuously engaged observing activities of interest and daily recording of field notes in various forms so as to present the world of the host population in human contexts.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The main focal point for this study includes the outcome of the fieldwork undertaken during a study on the girl-child street hawking dynamics in Yobe State. From the beginning, a qualitative approach was adopted as part of the process of qualitative inquiry. The justification for the adoption of qualitative approach has to do with the fact that the objective was not to make a generalisation, but to explore the research problem with a view to establishing a detailed meaning of the central phenomenon from the informants’ viewpoints. Consequently, the author (hence researcher) inevitably dives deep and relied on a wide range of sources of data which helped to produce an in-depth, and holistic portrait of the people being studied. In this regard, Krauss (2005) defined qualitative inquiry as one of the range of approaches through the exploration of both behaviours and human experience. Thus, the submissions made by Krauss (2005) show how using a qualitative approach seeks to inquire and explore what others do and say.

In the same vein, the method adopted for the study was ethnography where a considerable period of six months was spent in the field. Thus, in defining the concept of an ethnography, Harris (2001) submits that it

is ‘a written description of a particular culture - the customs, beliefs, and behavior based on information collected through fieldwork’ (Harris, 2001: p. 22). He added that fieldwork is an essential attribute of ethnography and the process enabled the researcher to generate reliable and sufficient data for an extended period of six to twelve months. In another development, Fine (2003) uses the term “peopled ethnography” to describe text that provides an understanding of the setting, that describes theoretical implications through the use of pictures and other images, based on field notes from observations, interviews, and products of the group members. He further puts forward that ethnography is most effective when one observes the group being studied in settings that enable him or her to explore the planned or organized routines of behaviour. Accordingly, the participant observation is a beginning step in ethnographic studies. In this way the researcher not only becomes familiar with the spatial dimensions of the research setting and its socio-cultural dynamics, but also how those dynamics may change at certain times of the day, week or year (Fine, 2003).

II. The Significance of the Fieldwork

While in the field, the goal is to see people’s behaviour on their terms in which the research team

discovers otherwise elusive trends that would inform readers and stakeholders future strategies. Moreover, the participant observation technique has been described as the primary method used by a researcher while doing fieldwork. Accordingly, as Harris (2001) puts it, fieldwork is a form of inquiry that requires a researcher to be immersed personally in the ongoing social activities of any individual or group carrying out the research through a blend of historical, observational, and interview techniques. In this study, therefore, observation technique involved in turn produced a data such as descriptions, resulting in one product: narrative description (Weisner, 1996).

While in the field, Wolcott (2001) suggests that fieldworker(s) ask themselves if they are making good use of the opportunity to learn what it is they want to know. He further advises that fieldworkers ask themselves if what they want to learn makes the best use of the opportunity accessible. As for this paper, the notes on the observation to be provided focused on the street-hawkers who have no access to any of the available systems of education. These key informants, were carefully chosen and provided a comprehensive and in-depth understanding towards girl-child street-hawking instead of education in Yobe State, Nigeria. Nonetheless, after selecting the research sites the research team visited the community leaders and established good rapport with the local participants and the community people. The initial visit effectively facilitated the progress of the fieldwork (Merriam, 2014). The researcher observed and participated in studying the informants' daily activities in varying degrees.

In this case therefore, participant observation was used as one of the techniques for data collection. This particular technique is unique because the informants were approached in their own locations rather than them coming to meet the research team (Yin, 2009). Similarly, Schensul *et al.*, (1999) all agreed and list the following reasons for using participant observation in research:

1. To discover and guide relationships with informants;
2. To assist the researcher get the outlooks for how things are prioritized and organized, what are the cultural parameters and how people interrelate;
3. To show the researcher what the cultural members deem to be important in social interaction, behaviours or manners, and taboos;
4. To help the researcher become known to the cultural members, thereby easing facilitation of the research process; and
5. To provide the researcher with a source of questions to be addressed by the informant

Therefore, it is important to report that participant observation involves active observing, improving memory, writing detailed field notes,

informal interviewing, and perhaps most importantly, exercising some patience. This technique enabled the researcher to learn about the daily routine or activities of the people under consideration in the natural setting through observing those activities. It provides the framework for development of sampling strategies and interview guides. This goes with Kawulich (2005) views that defined participant observation as a method in ethnographic research through learning and exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants within a shared cultural setting. Hence, with the adoption of this method, the researcher relies heavily on up-close, personal experience and possible participation, not just observation in order to show the reality and the specific character of the informants.

Undoubtedly, through observation the researcher grasps, cached, heard, and at the same time comprehends the informants' actions and viewpoints regarding their socio-cultural values. Indeed, meaning has been the essential concern of the author which was an integral part of the whole process. Yet, whatsoever the meanings and importance resulting from the information received during the observation in particular and the whole data collection process in general, there must be never an attempt to influence the informants.

Likewise, it is worth noting to understand that the most important factor in determining what a researcher should observe is the researcher's purpose for conducting the study in the first place (Merriam, 1998). The preceding point of views shows where to begin looking depends on the research question, but where to focus or stop cannot be determined ahead of time. To help any researcher know what to observe, Denzin & Lincoln, (2005); Musante & DeWalt (2002) all suggested that he or she study what is happening and why; sort out the regular from the irregular activities; look for discrepancy to view the event in its entirety from a variety of viewpoints; look for the negative cases or exceptions; and, when behaviours exemplify the theoretical purposes for the observation, seek similar opportunities for observation and plan systematic observations of those events or behaviours. However, such events may change over time, with the season, for example, so persistent observation of activities that one has already observed may be necessary.

III. Notes on the Informants in Consideration

It is worthy of note to reiterate that the participant observation gives a distinctive insight to gain awareness, revealing what people are really doing, instead of what they say. Consequently, this observations differ from the interviews in that it enabled the research team to obtain a first-hand account of the phenomenon of interest rather than relying on someone else's interpretation (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). For

example, specific things observed by the research team included the following:

1. The girls hawking dynamics at home, on the streets, markets, and those along major intersections.
2. What they sell, how they dress, and their behaviours while outside their homes.
3. The parent's role in positioning the girl's role within the family structure.
4. The general roles between both males and females.
5. Decision making within the family, which shows who are involved and who are not, who go to school and who do not.

In giving out the notes on participant observation, it is important to say that the research team observed the behaviour pattern of the girls on the streets, their relationships with customers and their attitudes towards one another. Also observed were the local settlement pattern, house structure, and the parents. Afterwards, the observations specifically took place in the locations believed to have some relevance to the research questions (Musante & DeWalt, 2002; Merriam, 2014). In addition, the researcher has particularly noted how the street hawkers' used mornings, and evenings to carry out the bulk of their hawking activities, leaving afternoons more flexible and therefore with potential for socializing. As such, the research team uses afternoon for reflections notes taken while conducting the observations. The idea behind the choice is to make sense of such data soon after it has been gathered and collected.

IV. Notes on the General Descriptions of the Street Hawkers'

Again, as part of the participant observation, the distinct cultural appearance and identity of the girls in preparation to the major intersections and markets has been detected. In all, the study areas, observation revealed that the girls' cultures of wearing unique dressing, hairdressing, the makeups on their faces, etc. is an art form with practical meanings. This is a sort of body beautifications for the enhancement of their beauty while on the streets at all times (Berthelot, 1991). Routinely, the researcher noticed how an eyeliner and lipstick blackens their lips, and they have a pinch of nose rings. They also have their hair plaited with age-grade hair braids and some mixture of yellow, white and red glue made from a pliable stone that is often spread all over their faces (Usman, 2010, Atkinson, 2003b; de St Croix, 1972). The general descriptions of the street hawkers' appearance in such local dresses and age-grade hair braids indicate that most of them had to do it in order to compete with their peer groups while on the streets.

In the course of the participant observations, the researcher further identified with whom the street hawkers mingle with, which is very essential as it affects their general security. In particular, the

researcher has uncovered the unruly adoption of unmannerly behaviour often displayed by some of the street hawkers. However, it has been observed that such a behaviour is being displayed whenever their chick or shoulders are pressed by male 'customers' and they appeared to be impolite. Thus, the researcher shared the opinion of Usman (2010) who reported that this kind of behaviour is not only very disturbing to their parents, but also disturbing to every other well-meaning community member which they deemed as undesirable to the culture and indeed the religion. Also observed was how such bad conducts generates concern to the religious leaders of their communities during the course of the interviews. So, for some of the parents especially mothers who had previously witnessed such utterances often condemned it and kept reprimanding the girls immediately. Such mothers saw it as a duty to constantly remind their daughters about their "expected moral behaviour and conduct" either in private or in public. Besides, the researcher noticed that some mothers became emotional while they talked about the issues of molestation against their daughters by some unscrupulous customers.

Again, observations at most of the major intersections revealed that there was a tendency for men and other customers to be brazen in opening hostility towards the street hawkers who did not appear in the *Hijab* (the usual attire wore by most Muslim ladies in the Yobe State). It is worth mentioning here that, the researcher only tried to understand the overall setting and ultimately or at least in part helped others gain a better understanding about how the participants involved were seen in that specific situation (Mahdi, 2010). The whole process paved the way for the researcher to involve in interpretive, descriptive, and naturalistic undertakings of the world of the targeted informants (Lincoln & Denzin, 2005). This further buttressed the fact that people were been studied within their natural settings while struggling to make sense of the phenomenon and the meaning they attached to their actions and values (Lillis, 2008).

V. DISCUSSION ON PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION TECHNIQUE

While there is no one way that is best for conducting research using participant observation, the most effective work is done by researcher who viewed the informants as collaborators; to do otherwise, would have turned to waste of time and human resources. As Schensul et al (1999) emphasised, the relationship between the researcher and informants as collaborative researchers who, through building solid relationships, improve the research process and improve the skills of the researcher in conducting the research.

Therefore, conducting any kind of observations involves a variety of activities and considerations for the researcher, which include ethics,

establishing rapport, selecting key informants, the processes for conducting observations, deciding what and when to observe, keeping field notes, and writing up one's findings. By so doing, people's behaviour would be resourcefully studied in everyday contexts, rather than under experimental conditions created by the researcher. Consequently, the technique provided the researcher with an in-depth information mainly generated from the few key informants, as it helped in spending considerable time in the field. In addition, a primary consideration in any research study is to conduct the research in an ethical manner, letting the community know that one's purpose for observing is to document their activities. Fine (2003) advises that for ethical reasons, some of the field notes be made publicly to strengthen that what the researcher is doing in collecting data for research purposes.

VI. CONCLUSION

It is important to sum up that both the fieldwork and observations over a period of time are the cornerstones of ethnographic method in which the researcher has drawn from a broad array of research strategies. In the same way, the researcher uses multiple strategies for recording the data, including audio recording, photography and, especially, copious field notes. The researcher combines data gathered via these techniques with direct observation, to create a kind of person-in-environment representation of the subjects (Longhofer & Suskewicz, 2014).

The observation technique has been useful to the researcher in a variety of ways. It provides the researcher with ways to determine who interacts with whom, to check for nonverbal expression of feelings, grasp how participants communicate with each other, and check for how much time is spent on various hawking activities. Participant observation allows the researcher to check definitions of terms that participants use in interviews, observe events that informants may be unable or unwilling to share when doing so would be impolite, impolitic, or insensitive, and observe situations informants have described in interviews, thereby making them aware of inaccuracies or distortions in the description provided by those informants (Marshall & Rossman, 2014).

Finally, some scholars Musante Dewalt & Dewalt (2002) believed that "the goal for the design of research using participant observation as a technique is to develop a holistic understanding of the phenomena under study that is as objective and accurate as possible given the limitations of the technique. One must also, consider the types of questions guiding the study, when designing a research study and determining whether to use observation as a data collection method. Equally important is that the site under study must be taken into account, what opportunities are available at the site for observation, the representativeness of the participants of

the population in that study area or site, and the strategies to be used to record and analyse the data.

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