

Understanding of participant observation

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Abstract

This essay discusses participant observation as a method of collecting anthropological data from the tube. This method allows researchers to gather information through observation and interviewing of individuals who are taking the tube as a means of transportation. Strengths of this method include directly observing how people interact in the tube and writing down this observation for future interpretation. This method allows observers to use their five senses to interpret data collected from the tube. Limitation of this method includes possible subjectivity of interpretation of data.

Introduction

This essay will discuss participant observation as a method of collecting anthropological data from commuters in the tube. The discussion part of this essay will explore the strengths and limitations of this method.

Discussion

Participant observation is an ethnographic method of qualitative studies that allows researchers to observe the sample population in their natural setting (Murchison, 2010). This allows researchers to observe and describe situations using the different senses of the body (Murchison, 2010). Hence, it is said that participant observation is a written photograph of what is happening in the field (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011). Polit et al. (2013) explains that a detailed description of an event or people's experiences allow observers to analyse situations exhaustively. In terms of my study, I chose participant observation since I felt it would help me gather relevant data on

what is happening in the London Underground. While this type of observation allows for more in-depth observation of events and people's actions (Murchison, 2010), participant observation has also some limitations. First, there is a need to immerse one's self in the world inhabited by participant. This is accomplished by taking the tube as a mode of transportation to experience what others are experiencing when taking this transportation. Part of participant observation is to interview people regarding their experiences. This might be a challenge since participants might not be willing to be interviewed while in the tube. It should be noted that there are many commuters in the tube who do not know each other. This might be a challenge when collecting data since participants might be wary of answering questions from a researcher (Hek et al., 2011). Polit et al. (2013) reiterate that participants might not act naturally since they are aware that the researcher is observing them. This presents some bias in the data since behaviour of the participants might not be reflective of their actual behaviour. Meanwhile, reflexivity in data would allow researchers to interpret data according to the perceptions of the participants.

Researchers might also bring a degree of bias and subjectivity when they collect data and information from the participants (Murchison, 2010). The researcher's own perceptions, feelings and knowledge might be used to interpret actions, conversations and expressions manifested by people riding in the tube. There is the risk that interpretation of data becomes highly subjective. However, this could be avoided if the researcher allows participants to confirm findings and inform the researcher whether interpretation of the interviews is accurate. Hek et al. (2011) emphasise that

subjectivity could be prevented by objectively interpreting data. This is done through adopting a nonjudgmental attitude, being open and genuinely interested in what participants are saying (Oermann, 2010). This would lead to data that are more reliable since researchers allow participants to verify the findings. In my experience, I adopted a nonjudgmental attitude to help me empathise with what the participants are saying to me. Placing myself in their situation helped me better understand what they are expressing to me during my collection of data. Parahoo (2006) states that it is important to define phenomena and experiences according to the participant's perceptions.

Reflection

I felt that I am part of the community of commuters in the tube since I regularly use this as a mode of transportation. I felt that this is an advantage to me since in-depth analysis of the behaviour of the commuters involves immersing one's self in the actual environment. Hence, my previous experiences commuting in the tube could help me understand what other people might be experiencing while commuting in the tube. I also realised that different people ride the tube and their diverse background could add to the complexity of analysing the cultural behaviour of commuters in the tube. However, I also realised that the ethnographic method would yield valuable information on the general behaviour of commuters in the tube. Finally, ethnographic method was appropriate for my research question since this helped me form an objective and detailed description of what is happening in the tube.

Conclusion

Participant observation is an effective tool in collecting anthropological data since this allows researchers to immerse in natural settings. This helps researchers collect more reliable data as participants are observed in actual settings.

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