

Debating the burka in  
france: the anti  
politics of islamic  
revival essay sample



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In order to critically explore and assess the strengths; limitations and problems associated with the methods employed within Z. Parveens study conducted in Les Minguettes in 2011, we must first not only outline these key active research methods, yet also provide an overview of the significant notions and findings from within the paper. Parvez seeks to obtain a qualitative understanding of Islamic movements in France by conducting an ethnographic study spanning over ten months in the “overwhelmingly working-class” (Parvez, 2011, p. 294) suburb of Venissieux just outside the second largest metropolitan city; Lyon. She undertakes the majority of this research in two mosques and her subjects to a large extent are women whom mainly belong to the Salafist branch of Islam.

The principal motive from within the paper is the argument that following marginalization from an intrusive state, a culture in which these women do not engage in a form of politics yet into a form of antipolitics has been born. She argues that through their practice, teachings and wearing of the Burka they look to expand their private sphere as opposed to crying out for justice and equality, turning to each other for moral support while placing greater emphasis on their “spiritual state and serenity over material life” (Parvez, 2011, p. 308). The units of analysis for the study would be individuals, as researchers tend to explain and describe social groups by outlining and aggregating the behaviour of individuals as opposed to studying the organisation as a whole.

Parvez undertakes the use of theoretical and snowball sampling, typical of a qualitative researcher striving for richness as opposed to transferability within their research. The greatest strength of snowball sampling would be

<https://assignbuster.com/debating-the-burka-in-france-the-anti-politics-of-islamic-revival-essay-sample/>

the validity of the data, and due to the fact there is no limit on the number of respondents; one can continue to snowball until she feels theoretical saturation has been reached, and enough data for in-depth analysis has been obtained. However, positivist sociologists would argue that this sampling method is not representative of all Muslims and therefore the inferences the researcher following her findings can easily lead to the ecological fallacy effect “ qualitative findings tend to be oriented to the contextual uniqueness and significance of the aspect of the social world being studied.” (Bryman, 2008, p. 378). Even though theoretical sampling may indeed be very useful in order to open up a topic for further exploration and provide a clearer insight into a smaller group of individuals problems do indeed arise when positivist sociologists question the objectivity, transferability and generalizability of the sampling method.

The fundamental research method employed in this ethnographic study is participant research, in the form of Participant-as-Observers: whereby people are aware of the researchers presence and purpose, and the researcher is involved in routine group situation. The aim of Participant observation is to allow the researcher to see things through the eyes of their participants “ Entering into the field as a participant researcher, I intended to take the perspectives of female gamblers, to see the world through their eyes, to feel what they feel, and to experience what they experience”. (Li, 2008, p. 103). The researcher triangulates participant observation: complementing it with the use of semi structured interviews. Epistemological interpretivist sociologists such as Max Weber as opposed to more positivist sociologists such as Durkheim would indeed prefer the methods in question as they look

to understand the meanings behind social actions rather than quantify and replicate.

The most central research method of participant observation employed within the study does indeed have several strengths. The fact that the research takes place in the natural setting is vital for sociologists whom undertake an epistemological perspective upon research “ knowledge or evidence of the social world can be generated by observing, or participating in, or experiencing ‘ natural’ or ‘ real-life’ settings” (Mason, 2002, p. 85). Research that is conducted in natural surroundings arguably provides the most rich, valid and in depth data especially in the context of vulnerable group as opposed to the use of other research methods as not all participants would have the ability to divulge information articulately or in a way in which it is intended. Additionally, this type of research therefore allows the subjects to feel at ease allowing the researcher to obtain a true reflection of their behavior and interactions. This point is reiterated in Li’s study (2008) where she takes gambling women in the US under the microscope “ It has long been acknowledged that, when studying non-mainstream groups in society such as the marginalized and the stigmatized, researchers must tailor their data collection methods to both the sensitivity of the research topic and the vulnerability of research subjects” (Li, 2008, p. 101).

This notion of a normal setting coupled alongside the fact Parvez spends 10 months working in the field is indeed more likely to provide a multi-dimensional deep understanding in contrast quantitative methods such as questionnaire’s which are often very superficial, highlighting the suitability of <https://assignbuster.com/debating-the-burka-in-france-the-anti-politics-of-islamic-revival-essay-sample/>

the chosen method in the context of this study. Another advantage of participant observation is the opportunity the researcher has to build a rapport with participants in order to gain a true understanding of social actions. Creating a basis of trust often results in research subjects becoming more likely to open up and as a consequence providing a more detailed insight into their behaviour “ Participant observation has the greatest potential to uncover contextualized, honest data, otherwise inaccessible, it ontologically and epistemologically underpins human quests for understanding multiple realities of life in context” (Li, 2008, p. 105). The fact that the researcher is Muslim and can “ participate in prayer, mosque activities, fasting during Ramadan and reading Arabic” (Parvez, 2011, p. 295) provides her with a foundation from which this rapport can be built.

This is highlighted through her interactions with Student Amina. Following their meetings in the mosque Amina becomes comfortable in conveying very personal information “ I’m depressed. I don’t have a job, I’m alone so I sit around the house all day and chain-smoke” (Parvez, 2011, p. 301) . The fact that Amina is willing to smoke in front of Parvez, within a community in which smoking is extremely frowned upon as well as relay information that she is soon going to have to survive on “ state assistance of 450 euros a month” (Parvez, 2011, p. 301) underlines the extent to which this method can build rapport. This allows the researcher to formulate rich, detailed data, which can provide a true insight into behaviour’s and interactions making it effective in the study of a marginalized group while conforming to the main goal of validity interpretivist sociologists strive for. However, a criticism of this argument would be the notion that all individuals are actors and only

allow others what they want them to see creating a front stage/backstage effect and consequently Amina could be tactfully relaying this information in order for sympathy from the researcher and possibly financial pity knowing she is from a more affluent middle-class background.

On the other hand, the method does also arguably hold many limitations. First and foremost is the practicality of this type of research, which can indeed be lengthy, expensive and distressful for the researcher “ You are likely to find the process more challenging and exhausting than conducting interviews because settings, situations and interaction can be notoriously messy and complicated” (Mason, 2002, p. 87). These limitations are evident within the study whereby the researcher must travel to France for a ten-month period in which she spends her time in a setting, which is completely alien. Other practical issues of language and expense may also have existed yet are not mentioned within the paper.

Furthermore, participant observation can also be said to be limited on the grounds of reliability and representativeness; the two key goals, which positivist sociologists endeavour towards. Positivist sociologists would argue that any method of observation including the one used by Parvez is impossible to replicate and is in essence simply the opinion of one researcher and therefore for this reason the data, which is obtained, is subjective and very limited. This coupled alongside the intricate nature of participant observation meaning it is was only possible to study a small group of individuals whom were all similarly from “ North African immigrant families” (Parvez, 2011, p. 294) as well as holding a Salafist view of Islam make the findings unrepresentative. Positivist sociologists would therefore, <https://assignbuster.com/debating-the-burka-in-france-the-anti-politics-of-islamic-revival-essay-sample/>

on these grounds argue that this method is limited in its suitability as not only can it not be replicated it is unjust to make inferences in regards to a wider spectrum of people using this data as it is not very representative.

Parvez also triangulates the method of participant observation by using semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to plan a core group of questions from which they seek answers from participants yet can still ask unscripted follow up questions and if successful this method can indeed combine structure with flexibility while providing rich valid data “ Semi structured interviews combine the flexibility of the unstructured, open-ended interview with the directionality and agenda of the survey instrument to produce focused, qualitative, textual data at the factor level.” (LeCompte, 1999, p. 149). However, in the study Parvez was not able to record the data from the semi-structured interviews due the wishes of her respondents typical of overt, ethical research.

There are also many problems associated with attempting to conduct an ethnographic study “ Where settings are obviously ‘ private’ in some way, you will need to negotiate access with the relevant gatekeepers but again, as with public settings” (Mason, 2002, p. 91) as experienced by Parvez in the study. She states that she initially faced “ mistrust and numerous barriers to entry” (Parvez, 2011, p. 294) due to extreme cautiousness in relation to outsiders from her participants as well as “ being American and a researcher” (Parvez, 2011, p. 294). Although, she does eventually break down the barriers and manage to gain access to the mosques following a “ painful, arduous process, thanks to years of police surveillance and security efforts”

Parvez, 2011, p. 295) she by no means gains access to all the subjects whom  
<https://assignbuster.com/debating-the-burka-in-france-the-anti-politics-of-islamic-revival-essay-sample/>

she would have liked to study. Furthermore, it can also be argued researchers experience a wide range of dangers while conducting ethnographic research especially within a hostile setting “ Fieldworkers have encountered illness, injury, or death in the course of fieldwork due to natural and criminal causes” (Herman, 1995, p. 146).

In the context of the study there is indeed evidence to support these notions as not only is the fieldwork conducted in the neighborhood of Les-Minguettes, the neighborhood where the nations “ first visible lower-class riots erupted” (Parvez, 2011, p. 294), the area is “ overwhelmingly working class” (Parvez, 2011, p. 294) with high numbers of unemployment and a history of criminal activity. She states the region is “ known for its hostility to outsiders, researchers, and journalists, who on occasion had stones thrown at them” (Parvez, 2011, p. 296) . The uninviting setting alongside the fact the researcher is indeed a middle-class American researcher whom is openly “ wandering around the housing projects” (Parvez, 2011, p. 294) could have been a recipe for disaster.

Not only due to the resentment towards outsiders and Americans yet also resentment in terms of social mobilization in an area in which only two structures remain “ the drug dealers and the mosques” (Parvez, 2011, p. 297). These dangers alongside the example in which a café owner “ proceeded to yell at me for several minutes” (Parvez, 2011, p. 294) as well as an instance whereby she covertly records a mosque sermon not only underline the problem of safety in terms of using participant observation in a hostile setting, Yet also bring to the surface ethical problems in what is acceptable and unacceptable in the name of obtaining valid research. In <https://assignbuster.com/debating-the-burka-in-france-the-anti-politics-of-islamic-revival-essay-sample/>



conclusion, the question of whether they are indeed suitable or not all depends on the theoretical perspective from which you are inclined towards, and whether it is validity or alternatively reliability or representativeness or even still a mixture of both at the top of your priority list.

### Bibliography

Bryman, A (2008). *Social Research Methods*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press . 378. Herman, J, N (1995). *A Symbolic Interactionist Approach* . London: General Hall Inc. 146. LeCompte, D, M (1999). *Essential Ethnographic Methods: Observations, Interviews, and Questionnaires: Observations, Interviews, and Questionnaires (Ethnographer's Toolkit , Vol 2)*. 2nd ed. Colorado: Rowman Altamira. 149. Li, J. (2008). Ethical Challenges in Participant Observation. a Reflection on Ethnographic Fieldwork, *The Qualitative Report*. 13 (1), 101-105. Mason, J. (2002) *Qualitative Researching* Sage, London, Chapter 5. Parvez, F, Z. (2011). *Debating the Burqa in France. the Antipolitics of Islamic Revival*. 1 (1), 208-309.