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Q6(c)

What are the ethical issues that a researcher faces in making use of participant observation as a method of collecting data? Explain

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- What are the ethical issues that a researcher faces in making use of participant observation as a method of collecting data? Explain
- Keep the explanation within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Participant observation gathers data from inside a group role.

Ethical issues are consent, covert identity, privacy, harm, and **gatekeeper** power.

Humphreys and the depth of Whyte's notes show how publication can injure.

Role conflict and exit create further duties.

Overtness and protection of identifiers are the minimum response, not a full solution.

Introduction

Participant observation collects data by taking a role in the group under study. The method yields Goffman-like detail of everyday life. It also places the researcher inside relationships of trust, so ethical issues are not an appendix. They are part of the method.

Body

Consent and disclosure

- **Covert observation** withholds the research identity. It can reduce performance for the observer, and it violates **informed consent**.
- Whyte in Cornerville was known as a visitor, yet the depth of secrets still raised questions of what may be published.
- Formal written consent is hard in a street or a factory where membership shifts by the hour.

Harm, privacy, and power

- Field notes can identify informants when places and nicknames are thin disguises.
- The researcher may see illegal work, violence, or party funds and then face a duty to protect or to report.
- Laud Humphreys's tearoom study showed how tracing men from a public place into their homes destroyed privacy.
- Hierarchy in the group can make a **gatekeeper's** yes stand in for the consent of juniors, women, or Dalit workers.

Role conflict and exit

- Taking a role creates obligations. Leaving can feel like betrayal.
- The observer may be asked to take sides in a faction. Neutrality is then an ethical and a methodological problem.
- Feminist method requires that the researcher's location be stated, which conflicts with a fantasy of the invisible guest.

How to handle the issues

- Prefer overt roles where safety allows. Minimise covert work to public settings with no named persons.
- Separate identifiers from notes. Delay publication that could cost jobs or prosecutions unless there is a clear public-interest rule.
- Institutional ethics review is a floor, not a substitute for judgement in the field.

Flow diagram

Participant observation -> Trust and access
Trust and access -> Consent privacy harm
Gatekeepers -> Consent privacy harm
Covert role -> Consent privacy harm
Consent privacy harm -> Field judgement and review

Conclusion

Participant observation faces ethical issues of consent, privacy, harm, **gatekeeper** power, and role conflict. The method's strength, closeness, is the source of the risk. Overtness, disguise of identities, and a stated standpoint reduce the harm. They do not make the method innocent.

Facts & figures

Informed consent

The rule that people should know they are studied and for what purpose, within safety limits.

Covert observation

Withholding research identity, which gains naturalness and loses consent.

Humphreys tearoom study

A classic breach of privacy by following men from a public sexual setting into their homes.

Street Corner Society

Whyte's long participation that raised lasting questions about secrets and publication.

Gatekeeper

A person whose permission opens a field and may silence less powerful members.

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