Synthesising Qualitative Research Methods (Observation and Participation) to Provide Deeper Understandings of Substance Use: A Commentary

Stephen Parkin*

Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences, University of Oxford, UK

*Corresponding author: Stephen Parkin, Qualitative Researcher (Ethnography), Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences, University of Oxford, UK, Tel: 07837 778 223, E-mail: stephen.parkin@phc.ox.ac.uk

Received date: April 20, 2017; Accepted date: May 11, 2017; Published date: May 18, 2017

Copyright: © 2017 Parkin S. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Introduction

A central tenet of qualitative research is to gain an understanding of the social worlds of others and to unpack the concomitant lived-experiences of a particular phenomenon in order to develop an appreciation of the way in which people negotiate relational aspects of daily life [1]. Accordingly, for this reason, qualitative research has been frequently used as a way of informing and developing social policy and/or issues relating to health improvement [2]. The field of substance use and drug dependency typically intersects these fields of policy and health improvement. As such, there now exists a wealth of policy-focused, substance-use related literature that may be traced back to the Chicago School of urban sociology [3].

Indeed, qualitative research within the contemporary field of drugs and alcohol is now an established method and is employed with regularity on a truly global scale [4]. Such research, for example, typically seeks to identify strengths and weaknesses of existing drug policies; provide a critique of current drug policy or seek to inform harm reduction approaches to a particular drug-related health issue. Perhaps one of the most understated triumphs of qualitative research in modern times has been the various successes in informing the war against HIV/AIDS in which many innovative researchers have identified the social relationships and related situations that amplify opportunities for viral infection [5-7].

Qualitative research contains a vast array of methods within its toolkit. Amongst these are various forms of interview techniques (structured, semi-structured, unstructured, focus groups), visual methods (photography and video), ethnography and various forms of observation. However, perhaps one of the unsanctioning tools within the qualitative researcher's kitbag is that of observant participation. Whilst this may be a term easily confused with the more widespread participant observation, it is equally important to emphasise that the two methods are literally (social) worlds apart in terms of their design and delivery. More accurately, the data made available from each approach are correspondingly oppositional as a result of the methodological orientation attached to each method.

In order to explain this difference, one may regard the two methods from the disciplinary standpoint of anthropology. Pike for example presents an awareness of ‘etic’ and ‘emic’ perspectives of social behaviour [8]. That is, an etic perspective typically prioritises the viewpoint from the outside of a particular social phenomenon, in which the researcher attempts to interpret agency from an external, detached position. In contrast, an emic view of the same situation will require a researcher to adopt a perspective from the inside that would interpret this worldview from this internal cultural position. Observational methods can therefore provide opportunities to obtain emic and etic perspectives, depending on the positional stance of the researcher involved. For example, Wacquant’s renowned ethnographic study of an urban boxing gym provided opportunities for him to be emotionally and physically engaged with the pugilistic fraternity, through participant observation methods [9]. However, as Wacquant also states, this work also involved ‘push(ing) the logic of participant observation to the point where it becomes inverted and turns into observant participation’ [10]. In this regard, Wacquant became immersed within a ‘learning by doing’ process in which he was able to observe and experience his pugilist colleagues, but also observe and experience his corporeal ‘self’ (and relationships with others) within the same ethnographic project. Whereas some may choose to regard this as a feature of ‘going native’, Wacquant describes this as ‘going native armed’ (ibid) in which his academic and epistemic reflexivity facilitated deeper cultural understandings of living in the ghetto.

Accordingly, as noted by Tedlock, the distinction between participant observation and observant participation is one that establishes a ‘representational transformation’ [11]. More accurately, this transformation is one that sees the former’s focus upon the reflexive self (or the centring of the other) in an ethnographic text become re-presented by an ethnographic narrative that focuses upon the corporeal and emotional relationship of the Self with the other in the latter. Wacquant further illustrates these distinctions to elaborate how participant observation within the boxing gym may have demonstrated Bourdieu’s habitus theory as a topic of inquiry; but it was his observant participation within the gym that revealed habitus as a tool of inquiry, (in which the embodiment of craft and emotion interconnected with the lived experience outside of the gym in the wider world of the ghetto) [12]. In terms of a research method, this distinction may be simplified further, as participant observation essentially involves ‘the acquisition of a new role in an unfamiliar setting for a given person, (whereas) observant participation prioritises existing roles in order to conduct research within familiar/unfamiliar settings’ [13]. However, it is the reflexive prominence of transformational representation (and the self’s physical and emotional connection to the other) that underpins the ethnographic craft of observant participation.

To illustrate this latter distinction, one may consider the role of each method in attempting to understand the injecting practices of a cohort of street-involved people. In such circumstances, participant observation may involve the researcher adopting some form of social role within this cohort and become participant in particular drug-related activity. However, such a radical approach to understanding injecting drug use would be unlikely to receive ethical approval (or even research funding) within UK universities! As an alternative, the researcher may adopt participant observation roles within the services and facilities frequented by/or people who inject drugs and obtain a qualitative view of injecting episodes from this equally privileged

J Addict Res Ther, an open access journal
ISSN:2155-6105
Volume 8 • Issue 3 • 1000327
DOI: 10.4172/2155-6105.1000327

Commentary OMICS International

Journal of Addiction Research & Therapy

Synthesising Qualitative Research Methods (Observation and Participation) to Provide Deeper Understandings of Substance Use: A Commentary

Stephen Parkin

Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences, University of Oxford, UK

*Corresponding author: Stephen Parkin, Qualitative Researcher (Ethnography), Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences, University of Oxford, UK, Tel: 07837 778 223, E-mail: stephen.parkin@phc.ox.ac.uk

Received date: April 20, 2017; Accepted date: May 11, 2017; Published date: May 18, 2017

Copyright: © 2017 Parkin S. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Introduction

A central tenet of qualitative research is to gain an understanding of the social worlds of others and to unpack the concomitant lived-experiences of a particular phenomenon in order to develop an appreciation of the way in which people negotiate relational aspects of daily life [1]. Accordingly, for this reason, qualitative research has been frequently used as a way of informing and developing social policy and/or issues relating to health improvement [2]. The field of substance use and drug dependency typically intersects these fields of policy and health improvement. As such, there now exists a wealth of policy-focused, substance-use related literature that may be traced back to the Chicago School of urban sociology [3].

Indeed, qualitative research within the contemporary field of drugs and alcohol is now an established method and is employed with regularity on a truly global scale [4]. Such research, for example, typically seeks to identify strengths and weaknesses of existing drug policies; provide a critique of current drug policy or seek to inform harm reduction approaches to a particular drug-related health issue. Perhaps one of the most understated triumphs of qualitative research in modern times has been the various successes in informing the war against HIV/AIDS in which many innovative researchers have identified the social relationships and related situations that amplify opportunities for viral infection [5-7].

Qualitative research contains a vast array of methods within its toolkit. Amongst these are various forms of interview techniques (structured, semi-structured, unstructured, focus groups), visual methods (photography and video), ethnography and various forms of observation. However, perhaps one of the unsanctioning tools within the qualitative researcher's kitbag is that of observant participation. Whilst this may be a term easily confused with the more widespread participant observation, it is equally important to emphasise that the two methods are literally (social) worlds apart in terms of their design and delivery. More accurately, the data made available from each approach are correspondingly oppositional as a result of the methodological orientation attached to each method.

In order to explain this difference, one may regard the two methods from the disciplinary standpoint of anthropology. Pike for example presents an awareness of ‘etic’ and ‘emic’ perspectives of social behaviour [8]. That is, an etic perspective typically prioritises the viewpoint from the outside of a particular social phenomenon, in which the researcher attempts to interpret agency from an external, detached position. In contrast, an emic view of the same situation will require a researcher to adopt a perspective from the inside that would interpret this worldview from this internal cultural position. Observational methods can therefore provide opportunities to obtain emic and etic perspectives, depending on the positional stance of the researcher involved. For example, Wacquant’s renowned ethnographic study of an urban boxing gym provided opportunities for him to be emotionally and physically engaged with the pugilistic fraternity, through participant observation methods [9]. However, as Wacquant also states, this work also involved ‘push(ing) the logic of participant observation to the point where it becomes inverted and turns into observant participation’ [10]. In this regard, Wacquant became immersed within a ‘learning by doing’ process in which he was able to observe and experience his pugilist colleagues, but also observe and experience his corporeal ‘self’ (and relationships with others) within the same ethnographic project. Whereas some may choose to regard this as a feature of ‘going native’, Wacquant describes this as ‘going native armed’ (ibid) in which his academic and epistemic reflexivity facilitated deeper cultural understandings of living in the ghetto.

Accordingly, as noted by Tedlock, the distinction between participant observation and observant participation is one that establishes a ‘representational transformation’ [11]. More accurately, this transformation is one that sees the former’s focus upon the reflexive self (or the centring of the other) in an ethnographic text become re-presented by an ethnographic narrative that focuses upon the corporeal and emotional relationship of the Self with the other in the latter. Wacquant further illustrates these distinctions to elaborate how participant observation within the boxing gym may have demonstrated Bourdieu’s habitus theory as a topic of inquiry; but it was his observant participation within the gym that revealed habitus as a tool of inquiry, (in which the embodiment of craft and emotion interconnected with the lived experience outside of the gym in the wider world of the ghetto) [12]. In terms of a research method, this distinction may be simplified further, as participant observation essentially involves ‘the acquisition of a new role in an unfamiliar setting for a given person, (whereas) observant participation prioritises existing roles in order to conduct research within familiar/unfamiliar settings’ [13]. However, it is the reflexive prominence of transformational representation (and the self’s physical and emotional connection to the other) that underpins the ethnographic craft of observant participation.

To illustrate this latter distinction, one may consider the role of each method in attempting to understand the injecting practices of a cohort of street-involved people. In such circumstances, participant observation may involve the researcher adopting some form of social role within this cohort and become participant in particular drug-related activity. However, such a radical approach to understanding injecting drug use would be unlikely to receive ethical approval (or even research funding) within UK universities! As an alternative, the researcher may adopt participant observation roles within the services and facilities frequented by/or people who inject drugs and obtain a qualitative view of injecting episodes from this equally privileged
position. For example, one may become attached to an outreach service that provides sustenance to those that are rootless. In this regard, the participant observer may become privy to street-based injecting environments via this organisational technique of learning by doing/feeling/sensing); as habitus becomes the attachment to the sensory and material world by observant engagement with the environment and an emotional connection with places shape and mould the injecting environments and be given a commentary on how such places shape and mould the craft of injecting within [14]. In the latter case, the researcher's view may be subject to a process of representational transformation due to the way in which knowledge is created by physical co-presence, sensory perceptions, corporeal engagement with the environment and an emotional connection with Others in ‘injecting places’. To paraphrase Wacquant, this physical attachment to the sensory and material world by observant participation provides opportunities for the researcher to become more familiar with the street-based injecting habitus (which involves the technique of learning by doing/feeling/sensing); as habitus becomes a tool, as well as a topic, of a more corporeal-connected ethnographic inquiry.

Indeed, the value and worth of this dual perspective became evident in the author's own ethnographic work in street-based injecting use during 2006-2012. As noted elsewhere [15], multiple understandings of injecting episodes (including social significance, relational value and assorted spatial harms/hazards) emerged from the range of qualitative methods employed. However, a synthesis of participant observation (with drug-service personnel) and observant participation (with people who inject drugs) contributed greatly towards a combined understanding of drug-related issues that was perhaps greater than the sum of findings obtained from a series of qualitative researches that may prioritise a single method of inquiry [13]. That is to say, an understanding of the craft of a street-based injecting habitus was made possible through the interrogation of emic/etic perspectives, through representational transformations as well as the shaping of an ethnographic monologue of the ‘Other’ that complemented the ethnographic dialogue between/with self and other.

Cumulatively these varying epistemological and ontological perspectives sought to explicate the character and process of the ethnographic encounter whilst simultaneously highlight the topic and tool of a particular form of habitus [14].

Accordingly, those currently working in the field of dependence at applied levels (whether research-related or within treatment/rehabilitation settings) may wish to consider a similar synthesis of qualitative research methods in attempts to understand particular phenomenon. Indeed, with a more applied attention upon observant participation one would anticipate an alternative paradigm to emerge in which established understandings of particular social realities are further complemented, enriched and developed from less traditional perspectives.

References
1. Ormston R, Spencer L, Barnard M, Snape D (2014) The foundations of qualitative research. In Ritchie J, Lewis J, McNaughton Nicholls C and Ormston R (eds) Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers. Sage publications, London, pp: 1-25.
2. Dyson S, Brown B (2006) Social theory and applied health research. Maidenhead, Open university press.
3. Hutchison R (2010) The Chicago school of urban sociology. In Hutchison, R. (ed). Encyclopedia of Urban Studies. Sage publications, London.
4. European monitoring centre for drugs and drug addiction (2000) Understanding and responding to drug use: The role of qualitative research. EMCDDA scientific monograph series, No.4. EMCDDA, Lisbon.
5. Grund JPC, Friedman SR, Stern LS, Jose B, Neaigus A, et al. (1996) Syringe-mediated drug sharing among injecting drug users: Patterns, social context and implications for transmission of blood-borne pathogens. Soc Sci Med 42: 691-703.
6. McKeeganey N, Barnard M (1992) AIDS, drugs and sexual risk: Lives in the balance. Open University press, Milton Keynes.
7. Robertson JR, Bucknall ABV, Welsby PD (1986) Epidemic of AIDS related virus (HTLV-III/LAV) infection among intravenous drug abusers. Br Med J 292: 527-529.
8. Pike KL (1967) Language in relation to a unified theory of the structure of human behavior. Mouton, The Hague.
9. Wacquant L (2000) Body and soul: Notebooks of an apprentice boxer. Oxford University Press, New York.
10. Wacquant L (2011) Habitus as topic and tool: Reflections on becoming a prizefighter. Qual Res Psychol 8: 81-92.
11. Tedlock B (1991) From participant observation to the observation of participation: The emergence of narrative ethnography. J Anthropol Res 47: 69-94.
12. Bourdieu P (1980) The logic of practice, Polity press, Cambridge.
13. Parkin S (2017) Observant participation with people who inject drugs in street-based settings: Reflections on a method used during applied ethnographic research. Addiction Research and Theory 25: 39-47.
14. Parkin S (2014) An applied visual sociology: Picturing harm reduction. Ashgate Publications Ltd., Farnham, p: 302.
15. Parkin S (2013) Habitus and drug using environments: Health, place and lived experience. Ashgate publications Ltd., Farnham, p: 279.