

Participant observation versus participatory research: **Voices from the field**

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Abstract

The recent tendency within urban studies and the development discourse is to privilege participatory research over participant observation when working with street children and street living youths. The article addresses the difference in approach and outcome of choosing one or the other method of research. It also touches on the dilemma of following donor driven agendas and how this can influence the analysis and interpretation of data to fit in with funding agencies' objectives and its consequences by giving field derived experiences and examples.

The recent tendency within Urban Studies and the development discourse is to privilege participatory research over participant observation when working with street children and street living youths. After looking at my lectures notes and writings on the subject, I was stuck by the many issues that overlap with what is covered by participatory research. Both methods cover a welter of approaches and applications on a broad range of subjects and argue that conducting observation involves a variety of activities and considerations for the researcher. These 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. In defence of participant observation, the most crucial strategy emphasized by participatory research was initially devised, refined and employed by anthropologists beginning with Malinowski's 1914 trip to the Trobriand Islands. Namely, using a bottom up approach with a focus on locally defined priorities, perspectives and knowledge. Where participatory research may differ from participant observation is its emphasis "on knowledge for action", whereas anthropologists generally tend to (at least initially) go for "knowledge for knowledge's sake". This is backed up by the conviction that what is important will eventually emerge by delving deep into the subjective qualities that govern people's behaviour.

My aim is neither to add to an already well-documented critic of conventional practice, nor to extol the merits of participant observation. There are hundreds if not thousands of handbooks covering the "how to" and "what not to" aspects of field research. Some give practical suggestions about gaining entry and establishing

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rapport. However, there is scant information about the shock, the pitfalls and excitement of that first encounter giving the context of the experience between street children and the researcher. This is a process that could go wrong or right, difficult to predict in advance and with the capacity to affect outcome.

Participant observation is more or less defined as “research that involves the social interaction between the researcher and informant in the milieu of the latter, during which data are systematically and unobtrusively collected” (Taylor and Bogdam 1984). I would like to problematize the word “unobtrusively” and the notion of “participation” when working with street children, since “participation” is a misnomer unless you can disguise yourself as a street child and/or participate in similar activities “unobtrusively”. Like many people carrying out research on street children at the time I entered the field, I arranged to interview children attending an NGO feeding and play centre. Their target group was “one child per family” from among female-headed households, all under ten years old. I asked the children if they did not mind answering my questions. Most readily volunteered. I found a corner where I could carry on my task “unobtrusively”. Pre-field meticulously prepared questionnaire at the ready, I fired questions at my first victim...

When I finished, the boy told me: “You forgot to ask me about my father”. I answered: “I am new at this and I am not working for them, (meaning the NGO). I am learning how to do it”. He replied: “It is easy, I will teach you. Ask me if I have a father.” I put down my pen and questionnaire and asked him: “Do you have a father?” He answered: “No”. I said: “But everyone has a father”. He answered: “Yes, but sometimes if you say that you have a father, they do not include you in their program”. I insisted: “Is that so, but do you have a father?” The boy answered: “I have already given you the answer you need for your job”. I asked the others to teach me and we had fun.

This was the first indication to me that the children had become the expert themselves and that they knew more about what they were doing than I did and that some were as much in control of the situation as the adults in charge. I also observed that a guard employed by the NGO was frisking the children as they left the centre. He later told me that the children stole toys or food and that he had been told to make sure to catch the culprits. Later in the year, I met one of the kids who had been barred from the feeding centre. He told me that he stole food and a marble to give to his brother because he felt sorry for him not having been selected.

I stopped working with children being helped by NGOs because it became obvious to me that there was no way that I was going to find out what I had initially thought was important to their lives, i.e.: child abuse and neglect, their secret lore and language, their sub-culture and so on. In short, the need to use of a bottom up approach in order to find out crucial local perceptions. I went to the street and stopped asking direct questions. Since I did not give anyone money, I was accosted by children, beggars, street traders and got nowhere. I had got no further in my quest by the end of the third week but I persevered. One day I saw a child running to warn

the others that there were NGO enumerators looking for orphans and they were paying with a coupon for tea and bread in local tea houses. Within minutes all the children had become orphans. After the enumerators had left I saw some children trading the coupons among themselves for cash, paying previous debts and even re-selling the coupons to the tea houses for half their values. A further confirmation that the children were in charge of the situation (even in the street) as well as being part and parcel of the informal street economy with some kind of reciprocity going on between them and a credit system with shop owners, who for all practical reasons were treating them as adult customers. I also realised that familiarity can breed “invisibility” or at least blending with the landscape, since neither the children nor the teashop workers and owners took any notice of my presence. I had not wasted my time. I began loitering with intent.

Shortly after this, as I was standing on a street corner waiting for some children I knew to appear, a little boy asked me to give him money. I told him that I had none. He proceeded to tell me what he was going to do to me, something that at his age he was hardly capable of achieving even if I let him. I told him: “Have you no shame? I am old enough to be your mother!” He retorted: “But you are not my mother!” I said: “What if I was a friend or neighbour of your mother?” He said: “I do not talk to them like that”. I persisted: “What if I was?” He said firmly: “But you are not!”

I suddenly realised that he was telling me what is proper, ideal or expected behaviour for a child in normal circumstances and he was dealing with me in the street as a stranger. I was asking a hypothetical question and pressurising him to speculate. A first indication that the children were not a sub-culture and have a different moral compass on how to behave properly than non-street kids. After all, that moral compass is key to understanding local perceptions (Heinonen 2011). I became fully aware that that difference between the street children and I was that I was in the street voluntarily, as a life choice and they were obliged to enter street life due to reduced circumstances.

For the past thirty years, the emphasis in research and practice has been to “listen to the children” and to “let them speak”. Here was proof that they were speaking to me and I was not listening or rather not hearing what they meant to say. As for ethical considerations, it would be a fallacy to state that I was constantly mindful of the need and desirability of sticking to all the injunctions. It is difficult to make complex moral decisions in the rush of events. I desperately wanted them to continue talking to me. I usually reacted impulsively. I did not pay them. I did not ask intrusive questions. I was very sensitive to their body language. In fact most of the time I felt that I was at their mercy. Every time I thought that I had captured the essence of who they were, they changed the script or the scenario. Street children were also school kids, some were sole breadwinners, others practically heads of households with various and varying family compositions and there was a very

gendered aspect of home and street life. There was love, familial love, parental love and violence too, especially among themselves.

Much is made about the agency of street children, their resilience, their intelligence, and their plight to the point of turning them either into exotic colourful street urchins or the “wretched of the earth”. This impedes us addressing the underlying reason for their presence in the street in the first place and the fact that they are “children” no matter how resilient and old for their age they act. In reality street children rather than being free from “wider” cultural constraints or the adult organized social world are obliged to strategize within its boundaries for their survival. They beg from adults, they sell things to adults, they constantly have to deal with non-familiar adults in the street... but they are still children. My contention is that street children and youth gangs are not a counter culture or a sub-culture. They are part of the society they live in, albeit its less appealing aspect.

The three short examples I have given indicate the agency of children. However, I could easily interpret the same data not as agency but as deviancy for lying and manipulating the situation, cheating, stealing or even being abusive to an adult. Depending on what message I wanted to project or to what use I wish to put my findings, I could depict them as clever, colourful street urchins, the wretched of the earth, ASBO kids or helpless children in urgent need of assistance. Conversely, I could place the emphasis on where these incidents occurred and delve into the adult constructed, managed, controlled settings and why and how the children are obliged to lie, cheat, steal, manipulate the situation or even behave rudely. That first encounter and impression could have dictated where the emphasis of my research would have been, even though it was not agenda driven. Many researchers end up by restricting their research to NGO centres and agendas or changing the emphasis due to funding, time pressure and career or family commitment.

We continue researching about street children, their behaviour, their life style, the plight of living in the street and explain away the root causes for their presence in the street by recycling the same plethora of injustices facing them, violence against them, poverty, marginalisation and so on. Generally speaking, most research on street children is donor agenda driven that (more recently) must accommodate the bottom up approach and include the crucial and elusive local perceptions and knowledge and identify local needs. The tendency is to give prominence to their plight, rather than the underlying causes for their poverty because as I have already pointed out most research is agenda or funding driven and local needs must fit in with the remit set out by funding agencies and the category of children they wish to help.

If we wish to do something about the plight of street children and continued presence in the street, perhaps we ought to devote research and resources in equal measures to understanding the adult organized social, economic, political world and the “wider” cultural scenarios within which *streetism* occurs. Funding providers

emphasise the need for NGOs and researchers to approximate their proposal writing to the interest of donor agencies that have to evaluate the merits of proposals submitted to them for funding. Even though it has to be performed within the remit of the possible, the evaluation of proposals is an extremely subjective exercise. As I have tried to demonstrate with the three examples (which by the way I had judiciously selected to illustrate my point) I could have rearranged my data to fit in with specific funders objectives. Street children and their families are poor and disadvantaged. The children need everything that we need, food, shelter, citizen's rights, education, health care provision, protection from harm and violence and more. This makes identifying local needs another misnomer. A longer term, non-agenda driven, holistic approach to research may help donors and NGO's to identify what *they* can realistically and sustainably fund. By sustainable I mean long-term assistance, that is, until the same children reach adulthood and not just the lifetime of the project.

References

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