Understanding Orang Asli Participation in Sport: Some Methodological Issues

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Social science disciplines like anthropology, sociology, political sciences, economics, education and so on often work with vulnerable groups in an attempt to understand their live experiences. Qualitative methodology and ethnography in particular helps a researcher to identify the behavior that contradicts beliefs, opinions and emotions from the participant perspectives. In the West, the use of ethnography to study sport and vulnerable group is significant considering the rich amount of information potentially obtained during fieldwork. This paper aims to elucidate some methodological issues related to the study of sport particularly among Orang Asli (aborigine) athletes. To obtain relevant data, in-depth interview, focus group interview (FGI) and participant-observation were conducted among ten Orang Asli athletes from the Jakun tribe in Pekan, Pahang. These athletes whose age are between 14 and 17 years old have participated in various sports like track and field and cross country running. The findings discovered that vignettes are useful to help participants express themselves and disclose their experiences in sports. Vignettes have been utilized efficiently in all FGI sessions as interaction stimulants between participants and researchers. Interestingly, the low-context communication between the researchers and Orang Asli athletes at the beginning of most interviews have transformed into a high-context communication. It is also suggested that researchers role as a teacher, coach and sportsman have helped them in managing the relationships in the field. In conclusion, employing qualitative methodology to study vulnerable group requires careful selection of methods and consideration of the approach needed.

Keywords: Ethnography, Orang Asli Jakun, Vulnerable group, Qualitative, Sports

1. Introduction

Qualitative methodology has been widely employed in the field of social sciences particularly in anthropology, sociology and psychology (Hartley and Muhit 2003). It has unique characteristics and can be seen through its application and understanding. As suggested by Neuman (2006, p.157):

> Qualitative research uses a language of cases and context, examines social process
> and cases in their social context and looks at interpretations or the creation of meaning
> in a specific setting.

Based on the above understanding, the researchers identified several characteristics in qualitative research namely language and context of cases, social process and context, and interpretations of meaning in research settings. Similarly, Neuman's idea is supported by Lincoln et al. (Cited in Malterud 2001) who stated that researchers used qualitative research to explore 'the meaning of social phenomenon as experienced by individual themselves' (p. 483) in their context. The nature of qualitative research is exploratory, explanatory and descriptive. Hence, the use of qualitative research design is amicably substantial particularly in understanding the cultural and social phenomenon. Furthermore, Bogdan and Biklen (2007) have indicated five attributes of qualitative research namely: naturalistic, descriptive (data), concern with process, inductive and meaning. It is worthy to note that researchers who engage in qualitative studies are enthralled with action and context especially through observation with people in their natural settings. In addition, qualitative methods help researchers to understand meanings and experiences from the participants' (emic) point of view. Indeed, this approach considers several units of analyses such as impression, words, sentences, photos and symbols of a specific group or culture.

On the other hand, qualitative methods allow a researcher to be flexible while initiating and collecting

data. Thus, the expected proposition is not anticipated, rather it allows research participants to express their feelings and opinions about the research issue. Qualitative methods therefore help researchers to understand how people see things and make sense of their experience which cannot be provided by quantitative methods (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2017).

1.1 Strength of qualitative approach

Qualitative approach is flexible and fluid than quantitative methods (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2017). As suggested by Glaser and Strauss (Cited in Bryman 1984), it is flexible and fluid because "it emphasizes discovering novel or unanticipated findings and the possibility of altering research plans in response to such serendipitous occurrence" (p. 78). Nevertheless, quantitative research experts frequently argue that qualitative approach is less value and less scientific in approach.

In addition, the strength of qualitative approach can also been discerned via its exclusivity. According to Hartley and Muhit (2003), there are three qualities of qualitative approach. Firstly, it is exclusive when the topic is hardly explored. Thus, the use of qualitative methodology will be appropriate. Secondly, it is exclusive when the target participants are vulnerable. Thirdly, it is employed when the policy information required by authority.

Furthermore, qualitative approach is suitable for handling sensitive topics such as deviant behaviour, chronic diseases, sexual orientation and health which requires vigilant methodology (Wilson and Neville, 2009; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). In the case of menopausal research conducted by Nurazzura (2009), she established contact and rapport, and spent more time to convince the potential participants particularly the urban women to participate in her study. Hence, the use of qualitative methods is deemed appropriate.

1.2 Approaching vulnerable group of *Orang Asli* Jakun

Research on vulnerable groups is substantial in the area of medical and health, deviant behaviour, and minority ethnic groups. According to Moore and Miller, cited in Liamputtong (2006, p. 2):

> they are people who lack the ability to make personal life choices, to make personal decisions, to maintain independence and to self-determine.

This research recruited ten *Orang Asli* Jakun via the purposive sampling. According to Neuman (2012, p.149), purposive sampling is "a valuable kind of sampling for special situation". The use of this sampling technique is common in an exploratory research. There are three situations where purposive sampling is used. Firstly, it is used in selecting unique cases. Secondly, it is used to select members who are difficult to reach. Thirdly, it is used to identify particular types of cases for in-depth investigation. The sampling of this study fits into the first identified area as it involves recruiting students from the ethnic group of *Orang Asli*. These students are between the ages of 13 to 16 years. They are involved in the track and field events (athletics) and volleyball and thus represent their schools in various school meets.

Table 1: Background of research participants (n = 10)

Age(s)	16	5
	14	2
	13	3
Sex	Female	8
	Male	2
Form(s)	4	5
	2	2
	1	3

Event(s)	Track	7
	Field	2
	Track and Field	1
Years of Experience in sport	5 years	1
	4 years	4
	3 years	2
	2 years	3

As indicated in Table 1, the participants for this study are the *Orang Asli* from the Jakun tribe who live in *Kampung Permatang Keledang*. Most of them stay at the dormitories of *Sekolah Kebangsaan Permatang Keledang*. Those who reside in dormitories are from the nearby aboriginal villages in *Runchang* as well as *Tasik Cini*. Since this research involved vulnerable group, focus group interviews (FGIs), in-depth interview and participant observation were employed to gather relevant data.

2. Findings

2.1 Vignettes as a tool to stimulate conversation

Generally, *Orang Asli* is known for their introvert character (Brown and Fraehlich, 2011). They are sensitive and shy compared to other groups. This makes communication a challenging one for the researchers. To make conversation more interesting, the researchers have used vignettes.a technique used in structured and depth interviews as well as focus groups, providing sketches of fictional (or fictionalized) scenarios" (Jenkins, 2002, p.2). The use of vignettes is substantial because they act as stimulus for the discussion. The researchers have utilized vignettes to a greater effect and found it useful. Sometimes, when the participants found it difficult to understand certain issues and examples, the researcher presented a vignette: (Jenkins, 2002, p.2). The use of vignettes is substantial because they act as stimulus for the discussion. The researchers have utilized vignettes to a greater effect and found it useful. Sometimes, when the participants found it difficult to understand certain issues and examples, the researcher presented a vignette:

> Rizal Pela was so naïve when he was caught by the disciplinary teacher for smoking. He indeed has started smoking recently when his friends encouraged him to do so and found it enjoyable. The punishment by the school authority is so surprising. He only has been issued with a warning letter and suspension from school for one week compared to his friends who received harsher penalties such as corporal punishment. This is due to his calibre reputation as a National Sprinter where he represents Malaysia in many International inter-school events.

The researchers found that the above vignette has triggered the research participants to respond to the issues related to sport participation, social status and social mobility in schools among minority students. Thus, vignette in this study serves as a medium to visualize complex situation by giving similar example to the issues asked.

2.2 Communication barrier

From the researchers' observation, *Orang Asli* students experienced a communication change from low-context communication to high-context communication. It occurred in both, verbal and non-verbal forms (Nishimura, Nevgi and Tella, 2008). According to Hall, cited by Lailawati (2005, p.61) noted that:

> high context communication or message is one in which most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the

message. A low-context communication is just the opposite, that is, the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code.

The researchers discovered that *Orang Asli* participants are *moving* from high-context to low-context communication; that is, they use both forms to some extent. While they are being more explicit, they continue to use some techniques which also allow them to avoid being *entirely* explicit. For instance, some participants shared their sporting experiences and expect the researchers to be able to pick up the cues. In other words, they provided part of the information and the researchers were expected to fill in the rest. For instance Julita, 16, said:

> In the case of my cousin in *kampung* (village), when he committed disciplinary problems and <u>naughty stuff</u>, his teachers have never complaint. The naughty stuff that should not be tolerated. His achievement in sports really matter. If he gone missing for a naughty stuff, he will just disappear.

In the case of <u>naughty stuff</u>, the researchers found it difficult to understand because the details of the story are not provided by the participants. The researchers also found this form of communication a challenging experience because they have not experienced disciplinary problems and were not previously aware of the problems. However, the in-depth interviews conducted earlier with school managers and the reading the researchers have done on the topic had given them the necessary information. For instance, students who actively participate in sport frequently received special treatments from teachers.

2.3 Establishing rapport in the field

Getting access to the field is very crucial. The multiple roles of the researchers – as teachers and coaches have expedited the access to the information and thus making data collection process less bureaucratic. Since the research participants are secondary school students, it is relatively easy for the researchers to build the rapport. Students look up to the researchers as we presented ourselves as teachers and coaches. The participants gradually open up and start to cooperate with the researchers. Aside from that, the researchers received a great help from the key informants. The key informants assisted the researchers to set up meetings with research participants for FGIs as well as during participant observation in the field.

As qualitative researchers, they have played the role as moderators in every FGI sessions. Therefore, they have equipped themselves with a good interpersonal skill during the conversation. However, a huge challenge encountered the researchers. The *Orang Asli* participants are easily distracted and many times the interviews have to be stopped. They are able to stay focus between 9-10 minutes only. To overcome the problem, the researchers have utilized simple and short Malay language during the interview sessions:

Researcher   : *Keluarga ada masuk sukan tak?* (Did your family members play sports?)

Participant 1   : *Mak wakil sekolah.. main bola jaring…* (Mom represented school… she played netball…)

Researcher   : *Pernah tengok mak main?* (Have you seen your mom play?)

Participant 1   : *Pernah. Masa kecil…* (Yes… During childhood)

Participant 2   : *Mak, ayah tak main… kakak ada…wakil negeri* (Mother and father did not play… My sister yes… represented the state)

Researching *Orang Asli* Jakun through qualitative method is a new perspective to the body of knowledge. Although qualitative approach is not new in studying sport in the West, very limited research in the context of Malaysian sport employed this approach. The tradition of quantitative approach still dominates. The study of sport heavily depends on the numerical data. Over the years, data obtained from qualitative approach have been appreciated by the Western academics. This is evident in their research where they encourage the use of qualitative approach. The researchers found that the use of vignettes is efficient in the case of sports research. It serves as a tool to help them in understanding the topic discussed. Vignettes have stimulated discussion and as a result, they received sufficient data for the FGIs sessions. However, the researchers are uncertain whether the use of vignettes is possible for other vulnerable groups. In addition, it is evident that the nature of low to high-communication context was due to the *Orang Asli* circumstances, upbringing and socialization process.

3. Conclusion

In a nutshell, qualitative approach is useful to study vulnerable group. It helps the researchers to explore more issues about many things. The findings of this study have considerable potential to bring an impact in the formulation of policy and benefit various stakeholders. At the ministerial level, the use of qualitative methods will reduce the gap between governmental agencies and people, especially those from vulnerable groups. Furthermore, it helps those in the academia to generate a better mechanism in collecting meaningful data for their qualitative research. Most of all, it contributes to a development of epistemology especially in the area of anthropology, sociology and research methodology.

4. Acknowledgements

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