

#40DayChallenge Day 12

Outline and explain TWO ethical limitations of using covert observations in sociological research (10)

One ethical limitation of using covert observations in sociological research is deception. The purpose of covert observations, whether participant or non-participant, is for the researchers motives to be unknown and in some instances the fact that research is being conducted also being hidden from those being researched. This breaches one of the ethical guidelines that researchers should not deceive their participants, and in doing so the researcher faces breaching the trust of those being researched and the information they may provide to them in confidence. An example of this comes from Laud Humphries research *Tearoom Trade* where Humphries pretended to be a 'watch queen' for males frequenting public toilets to have sex with other men. In deceiving his participants by not informing them of his role as a researcher, Humphries violated their trust and confidence. Furthermore, Humphries approached the males later in their homes, pretending to be a health advisor and asked the men questions about their personal lives. However, it can be argued that the deception was necessary in order to achieve his findings, as at that time, many men would be unlikely to come forward and discuss their experiences of tearooms.

A second ethical limitation of covert observations is protection from harm. Covert observations are often conducted on social issues that involve criminal behaviour as other methods, such as interviews, would be unlikely to discover the depth of information that an observation and seeing things first hand would. However, establishing and maintaining cover with participants engaging in illegal activity places the researcher in harm. An example of this was James Patrick's *Glasgow Gang Observed*, where Patrick had to establish and maintain cover with the gang. If he was found out, the consequences for himself would be dangerous. This research also highlighted another form of protection and that was for others involved in the research. Patrick observed many fights and was approached himself to attack a member of a rival gang with an axe. The physical harm to the other person and the psychological harm to Patrick would have been seen to breach ethical guidelines and the law. Therefore, covert observations, due to the nature of the topics being investigated can often lead to placing the researcher and those being studied in harm.