Worksheet 1.2

Example answer to practice question 2 (Chapter 1)

This model answer is a guide for students in terms of structure and content. It represents above-average work.

2 Evaluate the use of participant observation as a research method in the context of this study. [10 marks]

Participant observation is a method that allows the researcher to gain in-depth information about the participants that could not be gained through any other method. Because the observer gets to know more about the context of the observation and can get to know the participants, rich data can be obtained. This means that the conclusions of the research will have more credibility than results of studies that only observe behaviour in a more superficial way. When the observation is overt, it is possible for participants to change their behaviour, for example guessing the nature of the research and trying to act as they think the researcher expects. This can be less likely if the researcher gets to know the participants in a participant observation like this one. The participants may be acting more naturally here despite the presence of the observer, carrying out their normal activities just as they would if she were any other visitor to their home. These are the main strengths of participant observations.

It is not possible to be sure, however, that participants have not changed their behaviour in such an overt participant observation. For example, one participant offers the observer a cup of tea: perhaps they are behaving in a more organized and careful way than they would if the researcher were not there. The other major difficulty with using a participant observation is that, although the data obtained are rich, the technique can yield a huge amount of data that is then difficult to process and analyse. Although the researcher in this study compared the description of behaviour that the observer recorded with social workers’ reports and concluded that they were similar, this was probably very time-consuming.

Some participant observations are criticized on ethical grounds. This one is overt, with the consent of participants, so there is little to be concerned about. Conclusions made from a covert observation can be better because the participants were less likely to change their behaviour, but participants can be upset if they find out someone they developed a relationship with was actually observing them. Here, it seems that the researcher was willing to sacrifice some credibility in order to be ethical.

Qualitative participant observations are not necessarily transferable to other contexts. In this case, the research might be useful for those who are interested in learning about the behaviour of people who have been released from other institutions and are living in shared housing.

Despite the limitations of participant observation, it seems that it was the most appropriate way to gather the
kind of detailed information required in this particular situation.