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FIELDWORK IN A FACTORY

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To

Chairman (Research)
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Technical Report

Title of the report ....FIELDWORK IN A FACTORY.................

Name of the Author ...........N.R. Sheth..............................

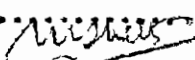Under which area do you like to be classified? ..Organizational Behaviour

ABSTRACT (within 250 words) .

.........In this paper, the author discusses his experiences of.....
..field work in a factory for collecting data for sociological.......
..research. As the main methodological approach in this study......
..was social anthropological, i.e.based on participation observation,
..the author reflects on the symbiotic relationship between the.....
..field worker and his field of study. The paper describes the human
..aspect of such research and analyses how the personality of a.....
..researcher influences a final outcome of the research.

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Date ..14 August 1974   Signature of the Author

FIELDWORK IN A FACTORY

N.R. Sheth

I studied a medium-sized engineering factory on the outskirts
of a large town in western India. The fieldwork on this research was
done between July 1956 and July 1958 although the total time I spent
on actual data collection was about a year. I have narrated my major
experiences as a fieldworker in the book based on the research.[1]   I
take this opportunity to reflect as candidly as I can on how, in my
judgement, the outcome of the research was influenced by the nature of
the field selected for study as well as by the academic and personal
qualities of the researcher. I believe I can be less subjective now
than in 1966 (when I prepared the final draft of the book) while examin-
ing the strengths and weaknesses of my fieldwork in the context of the
field and the method chosen for the purpose.

In early 1956 my teacher Professor Srinivas suggested that it
might be academically worthwhile for me to make a sociological study of
a factory by the method of participant-observation commonly used by
social anthropologists. I immediately welcomed this suggestion,
especially because it amounted to getting involved in a field of
sociological study which at that time was almost totally unexplored in
our country. I must confess I was also happy about the prospect of
undertaking a social anthropological research project without having to
go through the inconvenience of living in a rural or tribal community.
Who wants to forgo the opportunity to eat the cake and have it?

At that time, not many intensive studies in industrial sociology
were available in the library at my disposal. I developed acquaintance
with some basic concepts by access to reports on the famous Hawthorne
studies as well as the writings of Homans, Gouldner, Warner and Low
etc. I also heard of the anthropologically oriented fieldwork in a
British factory undertaken by Tom Lupton. At the same time, my under-
standing of social anthropological research pointed to the conclusion
that it was unnecessary for me to be bogged down with concepts and
theories before developing insights into the social realities of the
community one wished to study. The sociological training I had re-
ceived led me to the assumption that my major task was to explore the
interaction between the patterns of relations determined by the modern

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[1] N R Sheth, The Social Framework of an Indian Factory, Manchester
University Press, Manchester and Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1968.

mass production system and the network of social relations obtaining in the traditional Indian society. In the context of Weber's dichotomy of traditional and rational social orders, I thought I would be able to indicate how the Indian factoryman's loyalty towards his social institutions outside the factory affected his role as factoryman. The Indian sociologists' current preoccupation with the Hinduism-joint family-caste-village community nexus of our society clearly guided my perspective on the study I wished to undertake.

On the other hand I was conscious of the fact that a factory is a significantly different type of community from other communities conventionally studied by social anthropologists. People work in the factory during fixed hours when the terms of their employment require them to devote their time and energy mainly to the processes related to work. Hence a sociologist can at best cover only a segment of his people's social life, unless of course the majority of these people occupy a compact territory such as a housing colony. In terms of my image of a social anthropological study as an attempt to understand the entire gamut of social relations within the community chosen for fieldwork, the eventuality of partial coverage of the factorymen's social life lent me a sense of inadequacy as a researcher. In retrospect, such sense of inadequacy appears totally uncalled for and unhealthy for the objective of research. However, I recall that I was unable to get rid of this feeling of inadequacy throughout the period of my research. Perhaps this is an aspect of the fieldworker's personality rather than of the nature of the field he covers.

Quite early during the initial planning for research, I learnt from my teacher about a new trend among western scholars in sociological studies of formal organizations, namely participation by the scholar in the activities of the organization as a regular employee. For some time, I considered the obvious merit of understanding a work-situation through full participation. I still believe that this is the best technique to study a small work-group. However, I realized in time that I aimed not at studying the structure of a work group but at understanding the totality of social relations in a factory. Hence involvement with one section of the factory would create handicaps in approaching other sections. Moreover, anyone working in the factory would be quickly identified with the level of organizational hierarchy at which he worked. Accordingly, he would find it very difficult to gain acceptability from people at levels other than his own. For these reasons, I gave up the thought of participation in the formal work process and decided to collect data through observation and verbal communication.

In the beginning, I wished to select for my research a factory which could be regarded as representative of the industrial organisations in the town where I had decided to work. One aspect of this urge to discover a representative factory was that I hoped to study the social background of a cross-section of industrial workers in the area. Towards this end, I collected some basic socio-economic data on the industrial establishments in the town where I had decided to conduct the study. However, I soon realized that it would be impossible to find a representative organization in view of the technological heterogeneity of industry operating in the area. More importantly, it took me little time to realize that I had not much scope to select a factory for study as most employers were apathetic to any request for a sociological study of their organization.

Meanwhile, the managing director of an engineering factory permitted me to study that factory. He was a personal friend of my teacher. He had many and varied contacts with the academic world. He knew a great deal about social research and its relevance to society. Also, due to my teacher's intimate friendship with him he had a virtual guarantee that I would not cause any trouble in the administration of the factory. I wonder if I could have achieved my objective of research in the absence of the combination of these personal factors. I understand it is still rare in most societies to gain uninhibited access to formal organisations in the absence of personal contacts between the researcher and the concerned management. Many executives or businessmen are cynical about social research. They are suspicious about the advisability of intrusion in their organizations by outsiders. Most of them consider social research as a waste of time as the researcher does not promise any tangible gains for the organization. As it happened, however, the factory I studied used sophisticated technology, had progressive management and was free from chronic labour problems. In this sense, it was a typical modern factory.

I had visualized the need to communicate the purpose of my research separately to the management and the workers. Regarding management, the managing director first introduced me to the workshop superintendent who was chief executive for administrative matters. The workshop superintendent in turn introduced me to other executives in charge of workshops and departments. They assured me of whatever help and cooperation I needed in my work.

Communication with workers was understandably less easy. A trade union of engineering workers in the town commanded the following of nearly seventy per cent of the workers of the factory and there was no rival union among these workers. Hence I thought the best way to approach the workers was to contact their local union representatives. As most of these representatives were also members of the works committee, I requested the management to convene a special meeting of these members. None except one member turned/for the meeting. This was a great disappointment, but the response was not quite unexpected as the union representatives could not have guessed the importance of the meeting. I also prepared a brief memorandum on the research in both English and the local language and circulated it among officers and workers, but this was of little help in gaining acceptance from the people. I found that there was no substitute for face-to-face discussion on the subject. Although people might read written communication, they looked for personal assurance from the researcher that the research would not affect them adversely.

At the beginning of the fieldwork, it was essential for me to understand the elementary aspects of the organization, including the division of the production process, the company's development and economic condition, the nature of hierarchy related to the job-structure etc. This was done through perusal of company records, occasional visits to the various parts of the factory and informal discussions with people at different levels.

Then, I decided to spend some time (ranging from a few days to several weeks) in each department of the factory. I treated this as a substitute for actual participant observation. I observed people at work, participated in their interaction during work, learnt some of their mannerisms and nuances and noticed the extensions of their social world in the factory beyond the immediate work situation. This observation provided to me some rare insights into the way people behaved with each other in a work group, the beliefs and attitudes they held about themselves as well as others, the informal work-norms they developed and the way in which they responded to the norms set by technicians and administrators. In some cases, I became a part of the work-groups' rituals and jokes. This was all very useful and important for the research, but I am sure I could have achieved much greater depth into the nature of work-groups in the factory if I had developed a wider perspective on the study I had undertaken. For instance, if I had cared to collect data on the output of a work group during the time I spent with it, I could have gained deeper understanding of the signi-

ficance of informal work-norms obtaining among the members. At the time
of fieldwork, I was perhaps obsessed with the urge to cover all sections
of the factory and consequently threw away an excellent opportunity for
a more intensive study. I think I had developed a truncated image of
the hazards involved in studying a factory from the social anthropologist's
point of view. Sometimes if you believe a task to be hazardous, you
experience hazards mentally even when they do not exist. This seems to
have happened to me as a fieldworker. Perhaps such a response is a
function of one's basic personality structure.

This part of the research also turned out to be the most painful.
There were various problems relating to authority and communication. I
had assumed that the permission I received from the topmost members of
management __implied__ that officers in charge of various departments would
not object to my visits to any part of the factory. Consequently I failed
to recognize the need to meet each officer for specific permission to
visit his department. This led me into serious troubles on two
occasions: the heads of the departments rebuked me publicly in loud
voice for talking to workers while at work. In a factory situation, it
is hazardous to assume or neglect the authority of sectional heads. This
is not only because the executives are "bureaucratic", often the nature
of tasks they have to perform implies the need to maintain secrecy and
therefore involves suspicion of outsiders. For instance, in one case
I learnt after being "fired" by a department head that he was extremely
concerned about the possibility of espionage by the factory's competitors
on certain technological processes. Long after I had established rapport
with workers in that department I was told by one of them that their
department head repeatedly warned them not to divulge any trade secrets
to me!

Another difficulty in participant-observation on the shop floor
was the constant noise of machines. The people in the factory probably
get used to the level of noise they encounter and adjust their vocal
chords to make one another audible. Apparently my vocal chords did not
lack the necessary elasticity, but the habitual softness of speech stood
in my way. I had to struggle hard to raise my voice to an appropriate
level for sake of my research.

As I began moving about in the workshops, I located the formal
union leaders as well as some senior workers in each section. Eventually,
some of these leaders and I got enterested in one another and they began
to understand the nature of work I was doing. Some of them showed consi-
derable interest in my personal and academic life. When they realized
that I was as much willing to be interviewed by them as I was anxious
to interview them, they virtually began to function as my chief source

of data on the historical aspects of social relations in the factory
and current events in various parts of the factory. In fact, I depended
heavily on two or three workers for such information. For some time,
when I went to the factory, either I would seek them out and gather the
current gossip (or their nostalgic narration of historical events) or I
would find them approaching me of their own accord. These contacts proved
to be of utmost importance for the main part of my research.

However, many workers and officers still did not quite understand
why I was spending time on the shop floor without doing any concrete
work they could comprehend. For these people, I did not fit into the
normal factory pattern of everyone around being part of the organization.
Such people were apparently suspicious of me. On the other hand, they
saw me sharing the unnerving heat, noise and dust of the workshops. This
participation in the "wretchedness" of their work situation helped me a
great deal in building confidence and trust among the workers. Occasionally,
my worker-friends invited me to their homes and some of them visited my
home.   I believe   what helped me most in establishing viable acceptability
among workers was my decision to be open and free in normal social behaviour
with the workers without trying too much to identify socially and
culturally with them. In my understanding, factory workers in an urban
setting would like to see and regard a "middle-class" university-going
man as such rather than as one who can dramatize his socio-cultural
equality with them.

Inspite of these positive aspects of my interaction with workers,
some of them never cared to respond to my requests for meetings and dis-
cussions. On some faces I could always notice signs of disapproval or
sneer at my presence around them. This happened to a much greater degree
among officers than among workers. One senior officer, for instance,
dismissed my request for a meeting by declaring to a colleague in my
presence that I was a student of psychology wanting to waste the time of
company officers during holidays in my university. Another told me
bluntly that I had no business to intrude into his and his colleagues'
affairs by asking questions of a personal nature. These experiences,
along with the initial mistakes I made by seemingly overriding the
authority of some department heads (as mentioned earlier) made me over-
cautious and hesitant in approaching those officers with whom I had not
already built a rapport. I must admit that such experiences reinforced
my habitual shyness and withheld from me some extremely important segments
of sociological data. I am reasonably certain that with a little effort
and initiative on my part I would have obtained valuable information
on the structure of authority and power relations in the factory as well

as the operational aspects of the organizational rules. I fully agree with a critic of my book on this study that my neglect of the political relationships in the factory is a serious weakness of my research. A fieldworker's personal weaknesses and strengths provide a major influence on the depth and quality of his research.

Weaknesses and strengths: The quality which is a weakness in one sense could prove to be a strength in another. The shyness which prevented me from acquiring some important data also helped me to earn absolute confidence of most of the officers and workers with whom I formed adequate contact. On many occasions people saw me walking from the office of a senior officer to a group of workers lazing about in the canteen or outside a workshop entrance. Some officers and workers asked embarrassing questions to test whether I would pass on sensitive information from one part of the organization to another. In such situations my shyness served as a valuable asset.

At the end of my exercise in participant-observation in the various departments, I realized that while I had developed sufficient understanding of the social structure and culture of the factory, I did not have adequate data on the social background of the employees and their behaviour and attitudes as members of the factory as well as the world outside. Hence I decided to interview a sample of the work-force. I did not want to follow much statistical rigour in choosing the sample. I had by then acquired sufficient information on the people to be able to select for my interview a cross-section of the   population in terms of their formal work-roles, and the socio-cultural categories represented in the factory. The interviews were partly structured, as I wanted some basic information on the respondents' socio-economic background and industrial experience. Apart from this information, I decided to have what was uppermost in an employee's mind regarding his work and the related social environment, although I took care to see that I collected enough information on his attitude to the job and coworkers as well as his involvement in the factory culture.

This approach proved very rewarding. The interviews provided the dimension of interdependence between the factory and the wider society in influencing the employee's behaviour and attitudes relating to their work. My contact and acquaintance with the workers on the shop-floor facilitated the process of interviewing to a great extent. The initial barrier common in such interviews existed only in a few cases where the employees had stored apathy or   hostility to me or my work. Some interviews proved an exercise in futility, as the employees interviewed

were almost completely uncommunicative. During the interviews, my
willingness to answer freely and questions raised by the respondent
was of great help in reinforcing the trust I had won from the majority
of employees.

On completing the interviews, I found that there were certain
loose ends in my understanding of the history and the current organi-
zation of the factory. Hence I spent a few days again meeting my key
informants and reading documentary information available in the factory.
If I did not have the opportunity to indulge in this second bout of
unstructured data-collection, there would have been many more serious
gaps in my data and analysis than I now find in the report.

When I began to analyse the data I had collected, they led me
towards two somewhat disparate streams of sociological theory and
literature. On the one hand, I could relate my information to the
theories of formal organizations, on which a vast amount of socio-
logical literature was available. Secondly, it was possible for me to
analyse my data in the context of the current sociological thinking
on the social implications of industrialization of a society such as
ours and the way in which technology and society conditioned each other
in an industrial situation. Some readers of my book have asked me how
and why I developed a bi-focal theoretical perspective. This happened
mainly because I allowed the data to take their own course and then
looked for relevant theoretical frameworks. It was truly a post-factum
excursion into theory. In one sense, this approach was rewarding, as
I believe I could contribute to two distinct aspects of industrial
sociology through one study at a time when there was hardly any material
available in the field. In another sense, however, the attempt at
exploration of the new field remained at the most elementary level. It
appears to me that the amount of effort I spent on the fieldwork would
have yielded greater sociological dividend if I had approached the field
on a broader theoretical foundation. For instance, if I had made a
more intensive study of available sociological literature on the nature
of industrial organization and the cultural context of modern technology,
I would have perhaps been induced to collect the data on relationships
within the factory in a more systematic manner and with a greater urge
for relevant quantification of information. This might have enabled
me to provide greater validity to the observations and conclusions drawn
in the report. During a seminar on my research while I was still
analysing the data, a colleague had warned me against falling a victim
to the fallacy of apt illustration. In retrospect, I only hope I was
able to keep away from this deadly fallacy. Exploratory studies, of

course, cannot be expected to be perfect. But even exploratory studies can be substantially enriched by adequate theoretical insights, as Gouldner[1] has so competently demonstrated.

To add up the present reflections, I have always been glad for the first attempt at fieldwork I made during 1956-58. With all its limitations, the experience was academically very rewarding. What is more important, the fieldwork provided to me excellent opportunity for personal and academic socialization. In the first place, it helped me to understand the peculiar ethos of an industrial organization. It also drew me close to some vital human experiences resulting from the fact of being a factory worker. When a worker, brooding over his association with the factory, told me in a deeply sentimental tone that he had almost melted himself with the steel and iron in the factory for two decades, he had in fact allowed me a rare insight into his inner world of experience as an employee. I also became aware of the cluster of jokes, gossip and scandal built around the specific tools, machines and outlay in the factory. In my judgement, such insights provided to me some amount of emotional maturity in understanding and handling my own roles and relationships in work-situations and elsewhere. The fieldwork helped me to learn some valuable lessons in understanding other people, listening to them and dealing with them. As I have mentioned earlier, I occasionally faced intricate problems of responding to people's curiosities and demands without losing the researcher's neutrality. In such situations, one learns devices of coping with the apparent role conflict between researcher and human being. The academic and human aspects of a researcher are only conceptually separable. In real life, they are interlocked and lend depth to each other. This is a special feature of the social scientist's socialization.[2]

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[1] Alvin W Gouldner, Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy, The Free Press, Glencoe, Ill. 1954.

[2] I am grateful to Professor M N Srinivas for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper.