**Title: The ethical challenges of being on the field: Narrative of a field researcher in an old age home**

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**Abstract**

One of the biggest components of the disciplines, sociology and social anthropology is fieldwork. Despite, the significance of fieldwork as a method, there is limited scholarship on the myriad experiences of the fieldworker. Drawing from the personal field experiences of the author, this commentary emphasizes on the need to document field narratives of the researchers. In particular, the commentary sheds light on the ethics of doing fieldwork as well. Specifically, this commentary, against the backdrop of the author’s encounters in an old age home, analyzes the importance of main themes such as subjective-objective, passionate detachment, rapport building, critical reflexivity and insider-outsider perspective while conducting fieldwork.

**Manuscript**

Fieldwork is an integral method for any form of study undertaken by sociologists and social anthropologists. Both are required to spend substantial amount of their time in the field to understand any form of community. Fieldwork as a method gained popularity after Bronislaw Malinowski conducted intensive fieldwork among the Trobriand Islanders (Malinowski, 1922). In India, M.N.Srinivas, A.M.Shah and E.A.Ramaswamy, in their seminal book titled: “The Fieldworker and the field”, (1979), have extensively elaborated on the significance of fieldwork for both Sociology and Social Anthropology. In particular, Srinivas et al (1979) suggest that fieldwork as a methodological tool has the ability to provide an intimate knowledge of the various social and cultural institutions and relationships present in all societies. Additionally, Shah and Ramaswamy (2002), argue that fieldwork as a method will remain relevant, irrespective of development and progression of societies. All students of Sociology and Social Anthropology have to be on the field for completing their Masters, M. Phil or PhD dissertations.

Despite the emphasis on the field in both these disciplines, there is very limited scholarship on the experiences of the fieldworker. In particular, the discipline of Sociology has very little documentation of field narratives and focuses more on the data. Against this backdrop, this paper highlights the detailed account of the author while conducting interviews in an old age home. Specifically, this paper analyzes the various factors that need to be considered before conducting interviews in an institutional set up. For instance, this paper discusses how interactions with the authorities, the background of the author and the nature of the research played a role in gaining access to the old age home residents. Finally, this paper sheds light on the two main ethical dilemmas of every sociological field researcher in India: the “insider-outsider perspective” and the “subjective-objective” approach. The former (insider-outsider perspective) highlights the extent to which the researcher has been able to absorb the culture of the society/community being studied. On the other hand the latter (subjective-objective approach) indicates the balance the researcher needs to maintain to avoid personal biases and remain neutral towards the participants.

**Who are you? Justifying the role of a researcher**

Collecting data in institutional settings have their own set of challenges. Several studies have noted that any form of institution such as educational organizations, hospitals, asylums or prisons requires permissions from multiple authorities to get access to the desired respondents (Minocha, 1979; Mercer, 2007; Apa et al, 2012; Block, 2012). Having read the literature on old age homes in India, I was aware of the various approvals I would need even to enter into an old age home setting. I went with the required letters, justifying my work, my institutional affiliation and with copies of my consent form and questionnaire. Although my paper work was approved by the assistant of the caretaker, nonetheless, I was informed that the caretaker would interview me before I could do the interviews.

My interview with the caretaker began with a series of personal questions: How old am I? Where am I from? What is my caste and religion? Am I married? Since I was married the next question was: How did my husband and in-laws give me permission to be here all alone? Why have I not changed my surname after marriage? Am I a vegetarian or non-vegetarian? I believe most of my answers did not satisfy the caretaker. Particularly, the fact that I was married and had not been living with my husband even though the reason was that I had been pursuing my higher studies in a different city. Additionally, though I was married I was not ‘dressed’ like one. I had not applied vermillion during my interview and the caretaker did not appreciate that. After the personal queries, the caretaker finally started asking questions related to my work. He was worried I might be a journalist disguised as a researcher and write a negative report about this particular old age home. In particular, his larger concern was that I would record my interviews. He interviewed me in detail about my work and also went through my questionnaire. He was also concerned that as a young researcher, I might not fully understand the problems being encountered by my older respondents. Finally, I got his consent to administer my study in the old age home. Despite, my elaborate session with the caretaker, I believe, I got permission to do the interviews solely because I was a Hindu Brahmin. Post the interview, I was given a list of instructions to follow while doing data collection in the old age home. I was asked to dress ‘traditionally’, communicate in Hindi, to conduct the interviews between 9am to 1pm and not to offer any form of food items to the older respondents.

**Doing the interviews**

My research examined the lived experiences of growing old in old age homes in urban India. Additionally I was also interrogating questions around filial obligations and expectations from adult children to understand the shift from the family to an institutional setting. The interview instrument was a semi-structured questionnaire with both open and close ended questions. I intended to conduct in-depth narrative style interviews and the questions focused on adjustment issues, everyday routine and interactions, relationships with adult children, network ties and gender roles in different old age homes in urban India. A closer look at my research, suggests that the respondents would need to share quite an amount of personal information with me. Specifically, the respondents would have to trust me to share their private lives with me. Though I was aware of the complex nature of my research, nonetheless, I planned to remain neutral and not get involved with my respondents.

As I got permission to do the interviews, I was personally elated and excited that finally I would be able to start my data collection. It was only after I began explaining my research to the older respondents that I realized that my own identity cannot be removed the field. The old age home had both male and female residents and I got an opportunity to interview both. Similar to the caretaker, the respondents were also intrigued about my background. They were surprised to know that I was married and yet was living apart from my husband even though the reason was that both of us were pursuing our PhDs from different institutions. They were also very keen to know about how I had met my husband and eventually got married, as my husband is a non-Brahmin and also because his family had originally migrated from Bangladesh. They were particularly curious to know if we had faced any family resistance for our marriage. In fact, we spent a considerable amount of time discussing my marital life and my decision to pursue my higher studies post marriage. During the course of the interviews they gave me multiple suggestions to complete my studies quickly and go back to my husband. Most of the female respondents also advised me to have children before I turned thirty. Despite, their suggestions, I felt that since I had revealed intricate details of my private life, it helped me connect easily with my respondents.

The other significant learning I had while doing the interviews was when most of my respondents asked me what I was going to do with their data. Was I going to give it to the Government or publish it somewhere? These questions made me realize that after I finished my study and left this old age home, I would not be in touch with any of my respondents. I was not sure, if I would again get permission to simply meet them. As a field researcher, I realized that while we as researchers continue looking for new forms of data in different kinds of fields, however, we always leave a part of ourselves in each particular field. Though we as researchers enter the field to collect data, it is crucial for us to understand that our respondents view us very differently. From the perspective of respondents, the researcher is a person trying to obtain intimate details from their everyday lives. Specifically, we need to comprehend that our respondents will be sharing their personal narratives with us in a very short span of time. Hence, it is important for researchers to view their respondents more as humans and not merely as sources of information.

**The insider-outsider perspective**

Scholarship on the insider-outsider perspective could be divided into sets. The first set of studies have mostly commented on the abstruseness associated with the method of fieldwork (Simmel, 1921; Naples, 1996; Sheriff, 2001). In particular, these studies have indicated that the being an insider or an outsider is an ever changing identity in the field and thus neither of these positions can be static. For instance, on one hand the fieldworker has the advantage of being a stranger and as a result participants may confide their intimate details to the researcher. On the other hand, it is impossible to prevent the intersections between the researcher’s identity and those being researched. Hence, as suggested by these studies, the process of doing fieldwork is ambiguous and the researcher has to constantly navigate his/her position depending upon the everyday interactions and relationships with the community being studied (Simmel, 1921; Naples, 1996; Sheriff, 2001). Acknowledging the uncertain nature of doing fieldwork another set of studies have emphasized on the need to build rapport with the participants (Kusow, 2003; Sultana, 2007; Calvey, 2008). Specifically, these studies have indicated that the researcher needs to develop a certain amount of rapport with the participants to receive authentic information. Though the researcher will be positioned with regard to his/her class, gender, ethnicity, nonetheless, it is the task of the researcher to cultivate relations in such a manner so as to gain the trust of the community (Kusow, 2003; Sultana, 2007; Calvey, 2008). Summarizing both sets of studies, it may be suggested that the researcher requires to maintain a balance between being an outsider as well as an insider.

Given my limited number of permit days in the old age home, rapport building for me was going to be difficult. As I began my interviews I was not sure, as to how much the participants would share their personal details, given the nature of the study. I was specifically worried about my questions regarding intergenerational conflict. Once I began my interviews, I realized that being a stranger helped and that the respondents were eager to discuss their conflicts with their children, their life in the old age home and how they dealt with the inevitability of death, with an outsider. One of the respondents also gave me an entire tour of the old age home and showed me the library and the temple as well. In fact, some of the respondents also indicated their wish to possess a mobile phone which would enable them to call their grandchildren directly. Hence, despite my limited time to win the trust of my respondents, I believe, I got access to their private lives because I acted more as a therapist. My role as a therapist took over my role as a researcher and my respondents started looking forward to my visits. In addition to being a patient listener, I also shared several of my own personal information and took their advice. I believe that this also helped in earning the confidence of my respondents. For example, a couple of respondents also gave me suggestions to maintain my health, to avoid becoming weak and dependent like them. Another common suggestion which I received from all my respondents was to relocate with my husband after I finish my higher studies. In fact, most of my respondents mentioned that it is the duty of the wife to live with her husband and look after him. As I did not contest their advice and assured them that I will do as directed, I believe that helped me establish a bond with my respondents.

Though my participants made me feel like an insider and narrated a substantial amount of their personal issues, nonetheless, as I wrote down my field experience, I still felt like an outsider. Most of my respondents had shared details of their strained relations with their adult children and that they were unhappy in these old age homes. After the interviews my respondents believed that sharing their woes with me, might help them transform their situation. However, as a researcher I knew that it was difficult to change their everyday lives. In particular, even if I had shared their concerns with the caretakers, I was not sure if concrete action would be taken. To maintain the ethics of the research, I guarded their interviews and always kept them anonymous even while publishing the data. However, post my fieldwork I never went back to visit them again. I still remember each one of my participants and our interactions. Still, once the work was done, I did not go back to enquire about their health or their well-being. Maybe the elaborate permission process and the tedious paperwork, prevented me from going back to my respondents, and as a result, I consider myself to be an outsider to my field - the old age home. Additionally, several of the participants had also expressed their grievance with regard to the caretaker, the old age home in general and the politics involving other inmates. During the course of my interviews I realized that they were expecting me to complain on behalf of them and help them improve their daily situation. However, I did not report any of their issues and left the old age home silently after my interviews were over. Hence, with regard to ethical dilemmas, I think, I have personally failed my own respondents.

Emotional involvement of the field researcher has received very limited attention among academic scholars (Srinivas, 1979; Naples, 1996). However, the truth is that as ethnographers or qualitative researchers, we do tend to get involved and attached to our field respondents. Hence, it is very difficult to practice “passionate detachment” (Weber, 1978; Haraway, 1988) in this context. As students of sociology and anthropology we are trained to restrain our feelings from interfering during fieldwork. Though as researchers we are taught to perceive our respondents only as data, however, ethically, it is difficult to remove the human factor from the process of fieldwork. Despite numerous attempts to remain unattached, during the interviews, I felt I was being unethical by not connecting emotionally with my respondents. Looking back at my own experience, I have to admit that I was moved by each of the narratives and I had also empathized with each of my respondent. Thus, drawing from my own field encounters, I can suggest that the researcher does get enmeshed in the lives of the respondents and the field also becomes a part of the fieldworker’s identity.

**To be Subjective or Objective in the field**

Researcher’s bias is one of the biggest challenges faced by every anthropologist and sociologist on the field. As field researchers we are trained to adopt critical reflexivity and objectivity. Several qualitative studies have highlighted that the researcher has to be self-reflexive and objective in order to avoid any form of bias influencing the process of data collection (Jeanfreau and Jack, 2010; Walker, 2012; Potter et al, 2013). When I had begun my fieldwork, I had thought that I was going to be completely detached and objective. However, over the course of my fieldwork, I realized that it is impossible to isolate oneself from one’s field.

Srinivas et al (1979) in their essays have indicated how subjectivities are bound to penetrate during fieldwork. One cannot leave behind one’s caste, gender, marital status or age while interacting with human respondents in the field (Srinivas et al, 1979). In particular, Srinivas et al (1979) argue that fieldwork is a subjective experience and therefore the anthropologist or the sociologist should write about their personal experience in detail. Corroborating Srinivas et al’s (1979) views on fieldwork, I gathered that my own background played a huge role in my interactions with my respondents. No matter how hard I tried as a researcher, it is impossible to remove one’s own self from the field. Against this backdrop it may be suggested that while it is important to critically appraise the data, on the other hand it is also imperative to take account of one’s subjectivities.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Cogitations around my experience on the field began, when I organized a symposium titled: “Women in the Field”, under the aegis of Centre for Women’s Studies and Manipal Centre for Humanities, Manipal. As one of the speakers in the symposium, when I talked about my fieldwork experience, I also critically evaluated it. Today, as I look back on my fieldwork during my PhD, I feel incomplete. I feel I could have done much more if I had allowed myself to get more involved with my respondents and had engaged myself more into the field and my respondents. Though I cannot change my past experiences, I hope to delve deeper for my future field endeavors.

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