

THE "OUTSIDER'S" ROLE IN FIELD STUDY

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This report is interested in adding to the growing body of knowledge about the "outsider's" role that is thrust upon a field researcher in almost all situations. Kluckhohn (1), fifteen years ago, stated that, "the investigator is never able to shake off entirely his role of outsider, and I am in accord with those who maintain that it is not advisable for him to do so. Some exceedingly valuable information comes to the outsider simply because he is one." Later Merton states that, in connection with a study of a planned community, "informants will not hesitate to make certain private views known to a disinterested outside observer - views which would not be expressed were it thought that they would get back to management; the outsider has 'stranger' value (2).

The effectiveness of this strategy was recently demonstrated to the present writer in what seemed to be an almost impossible research situation. The research question concerned what experiences and attitudes discriminated alcoholics who had successfully affiliated with Alcoholics Anonymous from those alcoholics who had been unable to affiliate with A.A.

In an effort to develop meaningful hypotheses as well as data to test them, a difficult twofold rapport problem arose. Many alcoholics who had been unable to affiliate with A.A. were available at the Mendota State Hospital in Madison, Wisconsin. This was near the University of Wisconsin campus and thus accessible to the research. Also nearby was a large A.A. clubhouse with sufficient membership to provide alcoholic subjects who had successfully affiliated with A.A. for a least a year, during which time they had attended meetings at least twice a month (the bulk attended at least once a week). Thus, there was immediately available a population of both affiliates and nonaffiliates. The problem was to become accepted by both those alcoholics who were hospitalized

and those who had successfully arrested their chronic drinking through Alcoholics Anonymous.

Only after repeated failure at both the hospital and the A.A. clubhouse did the research value of being an "outsider" occur to the writer. The first rapport efforts at the hospital were aimed at including "all levels" in the research so that it would be well accepted by everyone involved. Consequently, numerous contacts were developed and maintained with front-office people in the hospital, psychiatrists, and ward personnel. At the same time, incoming alcoholics were contacted on the in-take wards and later, informally, in kitchen, sculleries, and on the grounds. These contacts produced a series of arranged interviews with a sample of alcoholics in which a high resistance to the research by the alcoholics was encountered. The gist of opposition centered around the belief that the writer was a "nut-doctor professor from the University who would find out if you were crazy or not."

At the same time that this resistance was arising, tentative efforts to develop acceptance by the A.A. group were under way. These, too, encountered high resistance, but for other reasons. Previous and recent researchers had left them with the impression that research was "useless" and "unintelligible." They did not know the outcome of the tests and interviews to which they had responded and were in no mood to be "studied" further. The experience calls to mind the statement by Mann (3) to the effect that "human relations mistakes made by researchers with (industrial groups) live long lives. It is not uncommon to hear of accounts of poorly conducted studies years after those studies occurred - and even in some cases - after some of the persons who participated have gone to other jobs." This resistance was coupled with a tendency to equate any social scientist with psychiatry. Psychiatrists were widely disliked among the group and a researcher was readily identified as one. Thus the researcher was often greeted with the half-antagonistic question, are you a psychiatrist? Together, these two attitudes served to stymie acceptance, and the formal request by the researcher for voluntary participation in the study was greeted with only sparse response by the A.A. members.

At this point the research was almost abandoned due to the resistance at both hospital and A.A. clubhouse. However, it was decided to consult the literature on the problem to determine if something might be done. Except for the writers previously mentioned, little of systematic nature was discovered,

and those who did discuss it lamented the absence of a recognition of the problem. Rogler concluded that "such a methodological problem weighs as heavily on researchers as does the creation of a carefully reasoned conceptual framework or thorough familiarity with formal quantitative methods." Merton observed that a "deep silence cloaks many of the concrete problems found in field work," while Sewell was of the opinion that "unfortunately there has been little discussion in the professional journals of the basic field techniques currently being used in the study of social-psychological behavior." Finally, Mann insisted that "the experience of field-workers have not been systematically reported and as a result, a whole area of methodological skills - the human relations skills which go with the social researchers' role - has remained relatively uncodified."

The suggestions in the literature to make use of the outsider role appealed to the writer because of the obvious fact that he had been given such a role by the subjects and made to fill it. Furthermore, the problem of time seemed to rule out any extensive effort to become accepted by shaking off the outsider label. The effort to constructively use the label was aimed at endowing the role with a neutrality and divesting it of the threat which it seemed to contain. This was attempted in three ways: (1) by insisting that it was they who had the information and "expertness," not the researcher; that he was merely the outside media through which their experience and knowledge could be woven together; (2) by studying, as closely as possible, the communication system among both hospitalized, nonaffiliated alcoholics, and active A.A. members. A knowledge of this system would afford an opportunity to disseminate the neutrality of the outsider role. (3) Overt behavior consistent with "outsiderness," i.e., by declaring emphatically that the researcher was not a part of treatment staff of the hospital and by staying away from all contacts with treatment personnel. Upon executing this "about face" there appeared to be a decided change in the degree of response to the outsider role at both the hospital and A.A. clubhouse. The first step in attempting to put it into effect was an assessment of how definitions of situations were transmitted among alcoholics. Basic to this consideration was the in-group nature of the relationship between alcoholics in both situations. At the hospital they separated themselves out from the "mentals" and were exceptionally sensitive about their nonpsychotic rating. A close solidarity developed on the basis of this commonality, facilitating the rapid exchange of any "definition of situation." Numerous informal discussions

with these hospitalized alcoholics indicate further that a highly favorable or highly unfavorable definition of a situation was transmitted among them, rarely a tempered assessment; they formulated a "black or white" reaction and rapidly spread it. Further, there appeared to be some persons in both situations who had a wide variety of contacts and performed the liaison function for the "black or white" assessments. Their wide contacts and outgoing personality traits made for rapid transmission within a tight-knit group. Finally, there was an overlap between the communication system of the hospitalized alcoholics and the active A.A. members. There were a few liaison persons who were active in both. After locating these persons it was possible to instill in the communication system the neutral "outsider" definition of the researcher. By emphasizing with these liaison persons the simple, unvarnished research fact that they were the source of data about alcoholism and affiliation with A.A., that it was they who had experienced it and it was they from whom the researcher had to gain his knowledge, it was possible to give the outsider role a synthesizing definition.

Simultaneously, a studied effort was made to avoid all contacts with the treatment staff of the hospital. It was assumed that much of the resistance in both quarters arose from the identification of the researcher with this staff. These persons were the target for the projected hostility of most alcoholics. At the A.A. group they often served the same scapegoat function. Consequently, the outsider role of the researcher was retained by avoiding, scrupulously, any unnecessary association with the hospital staff. In this manner, the researcher remained an outsider, but a neutral one who was dependent upon the alcoholics for information about a meaningful subject, i.e., A.A. "Inside" implications were avoided, since there were no observations of contacts with "inside" persons except those who had the data.

The degree of acceptance apparently rose rapidly following the inauguration of these measures, since volunteers for exploratory interviews came forward in both hospital and A.A. club. Conceivably this might have happened without such efforts, but the speed of the acceptance after they were made and the high resistance before such rapport efforts were made lead to the conclusion that the rapport effort described had some appreciable effect.

These experiences lead to an appraisal of the outsider role as a general technique to be considered as a possible approach in any field research situation. Certain advantages and disadvantages of the technique are suggested

by the experiences narrated above. First, it seems probable that such a role for the researcher reduces the amount of time necessary to develop acceptance. To abandon the outsider role means that the researcher must attempt to develop "inside" roles that are understandable to the various levels of an organization. This requires more time and effort, since the researcher must seek out, by trial and error means, a role that is compatible with the situation. Furthermore, as is known, any formal organization is honeycombed with face-to-face informal groups and congeniality groupings. "Outsideness" is an advantage, since the researcher can maintain a neutrality relative to these groupings. If, on the other hand, he attempts to abandon his outside role, he unwittingly becomes identified with one of the clique formations and finds it quite difficult to maintain his acceptance with various levels. Second, this "outsideness" seems to stimulate more unhibited response from data-bearers, since the "inside" threat of transmittal to others in the organization is less with an outsider. However, this advantage places an extraordinary burden on the researcher to maintain strict confidence regarding all information imparted. Intense attention to this point is required, since confidants will be prone to test the degree of confidence actually held by the researcher.

Third, the deliberate acceptance of the outsider role operates to reduce the development of too much rapport. As Miller (4) has pointed out, field researchers often develop more rapport than is necessary. As a consequence, the acceptance grows to the point that it hinders the study. He reports that he had developed such a close relationship with union leaders that "some penetrating lines of inquiry had to be dropped....To continue close rapport and to pursue avenues of investigation which appeared antagonistic to the union leaders was impossible." It would seem that the outsider role would tend to reduce this tendency. Even though acceptance of the researcher in this outside role does develop, he is still an outsider, leaving him freer to design his question in whatever direction he desires than if he attempted to minimize his "outsideness."

Finally, the utilization of the "outsider" role allows for a maintenance of objectivity that would become weakened if roles other than this one were attempted. It is a maxim of rapport development that the researcher make certain he is not allowing himself to be labeled as a representative of any group or interest, i.e., that he remain impersonal. It seems that when the outsider role

is given a neutral flavor, it can be a most effective vehicle for securing this objectivity. It is difficult for the researcher to become emotionally involved in the viewpoint of any particular group if he continues to view himself as someone apart from the organization in which his research is taking place.

Despite these possible advantages, specific difficulties arise in the use of the role. Many researchers are overconcerned with their acceptance and find it difficult to remain an outsider. There is a mild compulsion to be "accepted," to feel secure in the data gathering process. Consequently, it is hard for the researcher to think of remaining "outside." Especially in this case if the researcher has been relatively unaware of the acceptance problem, only to be rudely awakened by intense resistance to him. The researcher with this experience is more apt to be oversensitive about acceptance and find it difficult to think of remaining an outsider during the research. If we add to this the fact that initially the outsider role will be interpreted by subjects as a possible threat of some kind, a compound disadvantage arises. It appears necessary to divest the role of this threat definition at the same time replacing it with a neutrality definition. It is probable that this cannot always be done, and, even if it is accomplished, the researcher will not be aware of whether or not he has made the alteration. In short, the threat of an outsider may remain as the definition of the researcher's role, leaving him as stymied as before.

Further, if the outsider role limits the degree of acceptance, as has been observed, The researcher cannot define hypotheses in as sharp a manner as he could if he developed a more intense acceptance. He cannot allow the hypotheses concerning a question to grow from his knowledge of a field situation, since his outside role, regardless of how well developed it may be, hampers him in getting an intimate contact with the phenomenon involved. This may also lead to a suppression of vital data on the part of informants; they may partially respond but hold back attitudes, etc., that might be identified by the researcher if he were not in the outsider role.

Despite the various pros and cons in the situation, it seems possible to conclude that the use of the outsider role as a means of developing acceptance in the research situation is a technique to be considered by the field researcher. He will probably discover that the role is given him by the data-bearers and that it is more effective to turn this role assignment to his advantage than to try to remove it from his research activities.

REFERENCES

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