

UNDERSTANDING CHOICE, MERITS AND DEMERITS OF LABOUR RESEARCH STRATEGY

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An attempt is made in this paper to make sense of the choice of research strategy and the associated methods of collecting information on the part of a researcher, especially in relation to labour relations research in the automobile industry. In the process the paper discusses the merits and demerits of the different research methods used by the researchers with the ambivalent conclusion that conducting research without organic links with respondents as victims of power and control (e.g. workers) purely for the sake of knowledge and personal gains may not be ethically justifiable.

1. Introduction

"Research is the process of going up alleys to see if they are blind", according to Marston Bates, an American zoologist. Typically a researcher goes up the alleys in the available literature to see what can be seen and what cannot be seen in her chosen area of investigation, and supplements this by her own empirical work to see what could be seen and unseen on her own, and evaluate how the latter relates to the former.

Since the researcher's findings are derived from the choice and execution of her research strategy based on the critical examination of the methods with which available literature was generated, in this paper we first review the methods the researchers have used to fathom the changing world of work under the new production model called lean production which is said to have got well diffused in the global automobile industry. This is followed by a brief review of industrial labour research methods in the Indian context. In the process, we highlight why different research methods are used as also the pluses and minuses of these methods. We exclude from our discussion here those researchers who believe that what matters is theory production and that theory should not bother about evidence or that theory should be done for mathematical elegance and not to understand the real world.

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2. Researching Automobile Lean Production and Labour

Inductive research strategy which studies specificities for arriving at analytical generalization, not generalizations of statistical inference and significance, is a most effective way of doing labour relations research (Strauss, 1989; Patton, 1990). Qualitative methods have an especially comfortable home in the ethnographic and field study traditions of anthropology and sociology that emerged in the 19th century (Rudestam and Newton, 1992; Nath and Patnaik, 2007; Yin, 1989; Silverman, 1993; Stake, 1995).

In a context where there are few accounts detailing workers' experiences at the factory floor level in terms of resistance, accommodation and adaptation, a few researchers have documented the labour process in lean factories through pure ethnography, i.e. 100 per cent participant observation. For example, Graham (1995) wrote on the basis of her work experience for about six months within a Japanese transplant in the US, viz., Subaru-Isuzu that made trucks and cars. Both management and workers of this assembly plant were unaware that they were under observation by the author who made her way into the factory through the arduous and long drawn workers selection and training process and kept covert records of her experience and those of her co-workers. The book as the analysis of these records was drawn from informal discussions with 46 female and 104 male co-workers (including 6 male managers and 4 Japanese trainers) throughout the factory, from day-to-day participant observation of co-workers and worker-management interactions and from the documents distributed by the factory. It may be noted that when the author joined the factory to work in the Trim and Final department, she did not appear to be an outsider at the factory as she was not a novice to the rigours of factory life. She had earlier worked as a factory worker, cook, waitress, service worker and union organizer before becoming an Assistant Professor of Labour Studies at the Indiana University. This and the fact that many of her co-workers in the factory had some higher education meant that there were few cultural barriers for her to overcome. However, the past experience of blue collar work, as the author says, did not prepare her for working on a modern assembly line which was both physically demanding and emotionally draining. Delbridge (1995) did what Graham (1995) did but for a month only as an overt participant observer.

Juravich (1985) is another brilliant example of cent per cent ethnography, which exposes the incoherence in management even as workers create sense out of chaos, and critiques the non-Japanese managerial styles in the US, through participant observation

(ethnography) by working as a mechanic in a non-union American subcontracting firm. He points out the ethnographic participative observation as the best way of understanding labour process and worker perceptions; the world of shopfloor workers is so different from the pettybourgeois (middle class) professional world that it is difficult to understand without firsthand experience of the "thickness" of the everyday factory life. Genuine reporting, from below, such as by Tim Costello, the unusual combination of worker and intellectual and the founder of *Global Labour Strategies*—towards globalization from below—is rather rare, though.

Sometimes a single-site case study approach based on non-ethnographic, mainly interviews with workers can also get more or less the same results as pure ethnography can generate. A good example in this regard is Fucini and Fucini (1990) who did two years research at a Mazda assembly plant in the US. They did over 150 in-depth interviews with workers and managers, union representatives, local government officials as also residents. While the management of this factory sanctioned their project initially, it withdrew completely midway through the research of these authors. The authors kept the names of the workers secret as the employee handbook forbade the workers to talk to the press or outsiders without the company approval. Luck in getting access is very important to generate a good quality study such as Humphrey (1982) says thus about his Brazilian experience: "...the best way to find out more about auto workers would be to go to the plants and examine the situation there. Good fortune enabled me to gain access to two assembly plants owned by one of the major auto companies, and I spent some months interviewing production workers and management in them" which facilitated documentation of management strategies and working conditions.

Many researchers do qualitative cum quantitative study of one or two or three or four or five factories either snap-shot way or longitudinal way. Examples are Elger and Smith (1998), Bratton (1991), Roper *et al.* (1997), and Oliver and Davis (1990), Bonazzi (1994), and Black and Ackers (1994) to mention a few, which are based on interviews with workers and/or management. For example, Chalmers' (1989) classic study of labour conditions among subcontractors under lean production in Japan, was based on 5 case studies of medium and small firms in conjunction with (a) discussions with key representatives of employer organizations, government agencies, unions, union federations, academics, political parties, etc.; (b) plant visits; (c) personal interviews; and (d) unstructured interviews and discussions. Some researchers gather information through telephonic interviews (e.g. Stobbe, 1999). Garrahan and Stewart (1992) studied

Nissan workers this way: "Out of preference for conducting in-depth interviews away from the demands and possible interruptions of manufacturing work, we visited 19 Nissan workers at their homes. Since the interviews with each worker typically lasted two hours, we are grateful to them for their time and hospitality, and patience. In acknowledging their assistance, mention must also be made of the respect for confidentiality and the decision we made to refer to them by pseudonyms."

Some researchers use tape recorders to record interviews and place little reliance on the use of field notes. And some researchers use multiple instruments to gather information through a survey within a single case study. For example, for their study of workplace transformation and employee well-being in a very large American manufacturing organisation, Anderson-Connolly *et al.* (2002) did this: "Data were collected in three forms. First, in-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted with a randomly selected sample of about 90 employees, representing all job categories and management levels. A key purpose of these interviews and focus groups was to gain a sense of the range of workplace changes employees and managers had experienced and to assess the nature of their reactions to the lay-offs and to the restructuring programme. Second, a variety of data, including number of sick ours used, were collected directly from company records. Finally, a questionnaire was mailed in early 1997 to 3700 randomly selected and currently employed workers who had worked for the division for at least two years. Of these, 2279 valid questionnaires were returned, representing a 62 per cent return rate. Respondents were each paid US \$20 for participating. For the second wave, questionnaires were mailed in late 1999 to the 1965 first wave employees who were still employed at the division. Of these, 1244 returned surveys giving a return rate of 63 per cent. Analysis was conducted on those respondents with no missing values."

In order to capture the changing or evolving labour relations over time, especially the attitudes of workers to lean production, longitudinal case studies based on surveys of workers are considered more effective than snap-shot case studies (Kitay and Callus, 1998). The best example in this connection is the study by Rinehart *et al.* (1997). Their study was about the CAMI car plant in Ingersoll, Ontario, Canada, a joint venture of General Motors and Suzuki during the period 1989-96. The researchers gathered data from a variety of sources. The key data source, which enriched and enlivened their research was information obtained from panel surveys collected over four periods six months apart.

Survey methods also have been used to track working conditions under lean production. Lewchuk and Robertson (1996; 1997) made a statistical generalization through a survey of 5,635 Canadian auto workers in assembly plants and 1670 auto workers in the components sector. Workers were asked questions about their workload, health and safety conditions, empowerment and relations with management. In order to test the hypothesis that Japanese industrial and labour practices could be easily implanted in non-Japanese environments, Florida and Kenney (1991) and Kenney and Florida (1993) identified the universe of Japanese transplant assemblers and suppliers and administered a mail-out survey instrument to the establishments/enterprises. They proved the hypothesis with a response rate of 37 per cent. The survey was supplemented by site visits and personal interviews with executives, present and former shopfloor workers, engineers, trade union officials, state and local government officials as an additional check against respondent bias.

A major problem with lean production related labour relations research concerns the confusion regarding causation—the so-called identification problem, the problem of identifying dependent and independent variables. In this regard, there is the research strategy of 'deductive approach' of doing large or small survey of plants within a country or across countries and testing hypotheses regarding the relationship between variables using factor analysis, regression analysis, etc. (see Conti and Gill, 1998; Macduffie, 1995; Gittleman *et al.*, 1998; Lincoln and Kalleberg, 1985 and 1986; Osterman, 1994, Hakim, 1990). Obviously quantitative research of this type is based on measuring so many variables like competitive strategy, worker satisfaction, quality of employment, changing mix of core and peripheral workforce, HRM, workplace democracy, flexibility of work organization, skills, etc. Obtaining consensus in measuring is not easy and one can taste the intricacy of the problems in this regard from Nayyar (1993), Arthur (1992), Koshiro (1983), Conti and Gill (1998), Fitz-enz (1984), Smith (1995), Marsh (1992), Osterman (1994), Spenner (1983) and Gallie (1996). The success of research here depends on the data obtained from the plants according to the way the variables are measured. A problem with this research is that it is distant from the workers' perceptions and feelings.

There is some debate as to whether a case study or survey is appropriate for doing labour relations research. A case study, unlike a survey, is considered most suited for answering the following questions: Why do some firms change more effectively than others? Why is change possible in some cases, and not in others? What determines the

pace of change? (Humphrey *et al.*, 1998). A case study refers to the investigation of a single case or a relatively small number of naturally occurring (rather than researcher created) cases whereas a survey is defined as the simultaneous selection for study of a relatively larger number of naturally occurring cases. However, there is really no clear cut notion of "how relatively small" the multiple case study could be vis-a-vis the survey. Further, as Hammersley (1992) argues, the distinction between case study and survey is actually a matter of degree, and "it involves a trade-off between the likely generalizability of the information obtained on the one hand, and the detail and accuracy of data about particular cases on the other. And the position along this dimension depends on our goals and the resources available to us." A criticism against the survey is that answers people give to questions may not be true but this may equally arise in the case study. It can be argued that all quantitative data is qualitative, and how "good" the field data actually collected are and the interpretation of data are governed by fieldworker-respondent relationships. There is no such thing as unbiased observation. Every act of observation we make is a function of what we have seen or otherwise experienced in the past (Phillips and Pugh, 1994). A well-accepted potential weakness of case study is that its findings may be exceptional or unrepresentative of the universe of cases. This weakness can, however, be moderated by selecting cases in such a way as to cover some of the main dimensions of the heterogeneity in the population of cases.

All said and done, the choice of research strategy is, in the final analysis, a function of the research questions posed. For example, if one is interested in changing employee attitudes, longitudinal surveys are most appropriate where as if one is interested in gaining deep insights into the processes that generate conflict and cooperation, then intense observation of the relations between management and employees in one workplace will be most appropriate. In doing research with auto components firms, for example, neither a single case nor a survey may be appropriate for a single researcher who then will have to select at least 20 firms to say something worthwhile. Thus, Posthuma (1991) focused on 21 Brazilian exporting auto components firms and conducted interviews only with the management; production workers were not interviewed. She was humble enough to recognize the limitation thus: "the results presented here reflect the perspective of managers and technical personnel, and not those of workers, and thereby provides a possible source of bias in the results presented in this thesis."

3. Labour Research Methods in India

In the Indian context, in general, Breman (1999a) has lamented with regard to research on industrial labour in the formal sector as follows: "Much of the work on Indian industry has been based on survey data, questionnaires and formal interviews....there was seldom much personal contact with the workforce....no researcher has ever actually worked in a factory. What is also lacking is documentation that originates from the workers themselves—diaries, biographies and even oral histories...Nor has research usually focused on the workplace, often no doubt as a consequence of management suspicion combined with some skepticism about its tangible benefits to the company."

As regards research on industrial labour in the informal sector, Breman (1999b) has further extended this lamentation thus: "The contents of leading professional journals, such as *The Indian Journal of Industrial Relations* and *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, show that their one-sided interest (in formal sector employment) did not change until recently....This neglect was due both to lack of knowledge regarding the lower levels of urban economy and to lack of affinity with methods of research that could increase that knowledge....The landscape of informal sector employment has been charted mostly by anthropologists doing qualitative rather than quantitative research...I believe...estimates of the magnitude of formal sector employment to be exaggerated. The trend is clear: a decreasing percentage of industrial workers lead a formal sector existence....In my judgement, today, it is no more than 10 to 15 per cent. The remainder can be divided roughly into two categories: first, those who are unprotected, regular workers in small-scale workshops, under constant threat of dismissal (approximately 60 per cent of workers) and, second, casual workers and nomadic labour (approximately 25-30 per cent of the total).it therefore seems obvious that future research into industrial labour relations should focus on this populous middle category of labour."

In light of the above, the survey study by Basant et al. (1999) on 57 auto-components firms and just 25 workers therein is barely illuminating on what is happening in the world of work in Indian automobile industry and is rather very much disturbing as well in that they had subcontracted data collection work to an institution called Green Eminent Research Centre (ICRG); as Ivory Tower academics, they say: "The arduous task of collecting data from small scale firms, spread over four regions of our country, was ably managed by ICRG, Ahmedabad." Professors such as these, who are busy as bees with multiple research projects on hand, also subcontract manual part of research

work to management consultants such as AT Kearney. That these things are happening as academic entrepreneurial ventures should not be a surprise in as much as now some innovative restaurant owners are speaking about home delivering customized homemade meals—subcontracted out soul food from the heart, on a platter, at one's door step, so to say!

The study by Humphrey et al. (1998) is a path-breaking single case study on lean production at Crompton Greaves (not an automobile company) and its first-tier suppliers in India. These scholars were given royal welcome by the CEO of this organization who was once a student of them in the University of Sussex. They could do an exceptionally rigorous study as they could get unlimited access to the top management of the Crompton Greaves company and to the managers of its first-line suppliers. But theirs was completely a managerial perspective as they did not care to interview the union and the workers; had they done so, they would have got a different story. These scholars were silent about the little cooperation obtained from workers and their unions for the restructuring done in this company where human resource development (HRD) was limited to only the managerial staff as revealed by a manager of this company itself (Personal communication from industrial sociologist Prof. E.A. Ramaswamy). Thus, they have proved themselves again to be apologists for JIT/TQM as a top-down systemic rationalization drive. These scholars have also been privileged to get welcome treatment from the Automotive Component Manufacturers Association officials who otherwise are very cold to local researchers. The colonial mentality or subservience to the “white man” is not yet dead among the employers and their bureaucrats who know in their heart of hearts that they are after all subaltern in relation to the global lead firms orchestrating the local industrial conditions. This is, of course, least surprising, as, for example, native history researchers know well how the foreigners are looting the Indian archival information by bribing the government employees.

Survey method was used and research assistants were deployed for primary collection of data and information from enterprises, employees and trade unionists in different industries by Sharma and Sasikumar (1997) in their somewhat revealing study of bad “impact of structural adjustment on labour” in the district of Ghaziabad. Some new trend setting labour research in India, which uses survey method for hypothesis testing is by Deshpande *et al.* (2004) and Ota (2005). The former is about labour flexibility and is an imitation of the research methodology propounded by Standing (Undated) concerning the ILO initiative on Enterprise Labour Market Flexibility Survey, and the

latter is an imitation of Osterman (1994) about workplace transformation in terms of flexibility, innovative HR practices, etc. To our mind, a most useful research based on fieldwork about women workers in electronics, plastics and other industries in Delhi and Mumbai in neoliberal times has been done by feminist activists and academics such as Gandhi and Shah (undated); Shah *et al.* (1999); Chhachhi (1998; 2004), and Gandhi (2007). Sociological and anthropological research work of this type that Breman would approve, is more revealing about worker experiences than the hypothesis testing type larger survey based approach.

4. Conclusion

Every research strategy has its own advantages and disadvantages. While each researcher justifies her work depending on the research questions she pursues and on the conveniences and inconveniences of doing her research, she may fail to collect multiple voices or biased not to collect them in order to unravel the complex realities. All the same, an overall understanding from multiple angles is made possible only when we review all available inductive as well as deductive research done to gain static and dynamic perspectives about industry and labour in general as well as in particular contexts.

As regards whether a researcher or a group of researchers should have organic link with the respondents of the researched world, and use the information collected from them only for their personal gains, it is a matter of ethical dilemmas. Conducting research, especially impersonally, and purely for the pursuit of knowledge and fame through publications and money making without having any responsibility towards the predicaments of the respondents may not be ethically justifiable. It may be argued that the responsibility of a researcher is just to unearth some reality and nothing else, but there is a counterview too. In the words of Susan George of the Transnational Institute, "The job of the responsible social scientist is first to uncover these forces [of wealth, power and control], to write about them clearly, without jargon... and finally..to take an advocacy position in favour of the disadvantaged, the underdogs, the victims of injustice" like the workers in the world of work. Thus researchers/intellectuals have a choice: to be an entrepreneurial intellectual for private benefit or to be an 'organic intellectual' a la Antonio Gramsci for social benefit. A good example of the research representing the latter choice is that of the PUDR members (see PUDR, 2013). There is of course no gainsaying the fact that there are indeed researchers sandwiched between these two types (e.g. Bose, 2012).

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