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ABSTRACT

The authors discuss the difficulties in adapting American methods of field work to the cultural conditions in pre-industrial societies, in this case a pilot study on family planning in a Middle Eastern Moslem country. It is demonstrated that if the researcher is native and has kinship ties in a traditional community, he can use these assets: (1) to expedite the hiring of relatively qualified field workers, (2) to bypass intervention from local officials and gain their support, and (3) to bridge gaps between the project director and field workers by making the research a clan project. Certain drawbacks are discussed. Acknowledging the increasing number of social scientists from underdeveloped areas who are being trained in empirical research methodology, the authors feel their work might contribute to an understanding of problems associated with doing research in underdeveloped areas and their possible solutions. (TL)

FAMILY PLANNING RESEARCH IN A DEVELOPING AREA

A DIFFERENT APPROACH*

by

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The problems associated with doing empirical research in underdeveloped areas have been of interest to sociologists for more than two decades. Being primarily interested in quantitative data many sociologists have found the case study method and the clinical approach inappropriate for their purposes. The major advantage of the methods, according to some anthropologists, is that data collecting techniques developed mostly in America are often inapplicable in underdeveloped areas.[1] For example, it is not so easy to draw a random sample from a population of a widely scattered nomadic tribe, or interview the inarticulate, suspicious members of such a sample. Rather than accepting the advice of their anthropologist brethren, many American sociologists have concentrated their effort, with various degrees of success, on adapting their "culture-bound" methods to the circumstances different from North America.[2] The objective of this paper is to report on some of the problems encountered in our research project--a pilot study on knowledge, attitude, and practice of family planning in a Middle Eastern Moslem country.

In the summer of 1965, 128 women were interviewed in a small traditional city of about 45,000 population; 29 of these were "middle class" and 99 were "lower class" women. In the summer of 1967, 135 women were interviewed in the same city; 70 of these were "lower class" from the city and 65 were peasants from nearby rural areas. Additional interviews and questionnaires were conducted in the capital city, but in this paper we are concerned only with the field work in the traditional city in 1965.

Before we discuss the specific aspects it is appropriate to

indicate the general strategy which was employed during the field work. We decided on a city which was the birthplace of one of the authors and his parents. Questions of convenience and familiarity with the area were not the only considerations in this choice. As is true in many pre-industrial, traditional communities, in this city also, the kinship bonds are very strong. Our objective was to take maximum advantage of this factor for research purposes. As the following report indicates, the research project benefitted from this consideration in a number of ways. Kinship ties also led to certain difficulties noted below.

Hiring and Training of the Interviewers

A normal procedure on these occasions is that hiring the field staff begins with putting an advertisement in the local papers. Instead, the first author who was in charge of the field work put his clan connections to use. Thus native female schoolteachers with high school education, who were members of the clan, were taken into consideration. Out of 11 eligible girls, 3 were selected. Intellectual ability, integrity, and sociability were the major criteria. During informal contacts with male and female elders of the clan, the qualifications of these girls were discussed. Being a cousin, it was very easy to interview these girls individually. Such contacts for an outsider might have been more difficult in a religious city with a strong emphasis on segregation by sex.

Although the contacts between the project director and his female relatives were smooth, continuation and regularity of such contacts would have aroused suspicion. Because such contacts for the purpose of

training and work were inevitable, a male cousin was hired along with the three female interviewers. He went through training as the others but did not engage in any interviewing. His job during the field work consisted of keeping track of the interview schedules, helping to conduct our regular meetings during field work, and providing valuable information about the possible reaction of the male population in the community with respect to various aspects of the research.

The training lasted for two weeks. Elementary principles of demography (with an emphasis on fertility), scientific research methods, and interviewing techniques were discussed (including interviewing practice with role playing). The instruction was primarily verbal because of lack of printed materials in the native language.

"Pretesting" the Interview Schedule

Budgetary considerations and the nature of the study precluded field pretesting. For instance, any pretesting could have aroused rumors, or made the subsequent field work a public issue. The English questionnaire was translated into his mother tongue by the project director. The interviewers were from the local community and had knowledge of local attitudes, background, superstitions, and possible language barriers. In the course of training the interview schedule was modified in the light of their suggestions. The wording of each item was again scrutinized during the interviewing practice. The value of this procedure became apparent during the field work. There were few problems.[3]

It may be argued that the interviewers did not belong to the "lower class" and thus were not aware of the "lower class" subculture.

While this may have been true to a certain extent, there were evidences that they were not ignorant about the "lower class" way of life. First as teachers of elementary public schools our interviewers had been in contact with "lower class" children and their parents. Second, many "lower class" persons are hired as servants by the other classes. Often women from the former category are hired as maids and nurses. Sometimes the attachment between the nurse and the baby may continue for years.[4]

There was also the problem of local dialect. Although the local language is not basically different from standard national language, some differences in pronouncing certain words and abbreviating phrases exist. It was not easy to incorporate these special characteristics into the wording of the interview schedule because the alphabet in the national language is not phonetic. Thus for a person familiar with reading the national language the unusual combination of letters cannot be comprehended easily. In other words, the local dialect as written would not have been intelligible to local interviewers. It was decided to use the standard language in the final version of the interview schedule. This made it possible for the interviewer to glance at the schedule and read and understand the questions. The use of the local dialect at the time of the interviewing was left to the interviewer. This translation of standard language into the local pronunciation and expression, of course, introduces errors, because it is not possible to guarantee standardization between different interviewers and from one interview to another. The only solution to this problem was to practice this translation during the training sessions and thus produce more standardization.[5]

"Technical" Problems

In order to prepare the final version of the interview schedule after pretesting, we ran into certain problems with respect to typing and mimeographing. Very few people in the city could type. Resources did not allow the project director to go to a bigger city to obtain the necessary technical assistance. Again, the clan machinery went into motion to solve these problems. In a few days a friend was found who could type, and another friend arranged for the typist to have access to a government-owned typewriter. A member of the clan who was a high school teacher discovered an obsolete mimeographing machine stored in a school office and found a friend somewhat familiar with it. The two of them and the project director spent one whole day--a national holiday--turning out about 160 copies of the interview schedule.

Entry

In research projects of this kind one is sometimes advised to avoid government officials, whose involvement in research might create problems because of the uncertainty of their reputation and motives as perceived by the population.[6]

However, in underdeveloped areas, contacts with the officials are necessary because the assumption that private research carried out by bona fide scholars is entitled to respect and co-operation from the general public, including public officials, may be open to serious challenge.[7] Neither the public nor the officials are used to this role. A researcher who embarks on such an endeavour without the support, or at least permission, of the government might be suspect.

But obtaining permission and co-operation of officials is a tedious

and time-consuming job. For instance, the correspondence between different levels of the hierarchy may take months with unknown results. After all these efforts, if one is fortunate enough to obtain permission, one may end up with government directives as to question wording or how the research should be conducted. For instance, an official might be ordered to accompany the interviewer (to see that he does not ask improper questions, or to protect the latter); or the community members might be alerted in advance so that they can put their best foot forward.[8]

Although some experienced research workers in non-Western societies recommend not becoming involved with government officials, they insist on the necessity of contacting the community leaders.[9] The co-operation of the latter is no doubt helpful in launching a research project. However, the nature of the study could be such that the community leaders may be opposed to it. Or the local leaders might not endorse an unusual activity (such as canvassing the community members) without explicit permission from the government.

In the present project it was decided to utilize clan connections rather than contacts with either of the above groups. Fortunately, clan members were widely spread in the social structure of the community and in some instances strategically located. For instance, both the head of the "Red Cross" clinic[10] where we contacted our subjects, and one of the three doctors there, were members of the clan. Clan members were employees of several government departments. As reported already, several local teachers were clan members. These people also had close friends whose assistance benefitted the project. Often these people did

not understand much about research. But they trusted the project director and had faith in his good intentions.

With respect to contacting the individual respondents, limited budget and the entry problems noted suggested an approach other than door-to-door interviewing. We were interested in samples of "lower class" women from a small traditional city of various age groups. A good chance for contacting women with these characteristics was through the "Red Cross" clinic where these women came for medical or child-care services.

With the co-operation of the "Red Cross" authorities the interviews were sandwiched between the regular interviews for medical and recordkeeping purposes. Many of the questions in the interview were similar to medical questions. Once the interviewee started talking it was not difficult to ask other types of questions. In this way our interviewing gained legitimacy by being attached to the medical practice, an established and trusted institution.

There were few refusals--only two very old women. The interviewers also ran into four women who did not trust us. On these occasions the respondent often reversed the interviewing procedure by asking the interviewer to answer the questions first before the respondent gave an answer of her own. However, the interviewers were instructed to refrain from answering non-factual and attitudinal items in such a situation.

Before we close this section, it should be indicated that at first our interviewers were reluctant to work in the "Red Cross" clinic. This was because, according to local culture, it is a taboo for women

from respectable families to frequent or work in any office--government or non-government (segregated girls' schools are exceptions). Office work is exclusively men's domain and the strict pattern of sex segregation makes an office a danger zone for women. But there were two factors which helped us to persuade our female interviewers to work in the "Red Cross" clinic. First, the director of the "Red Cross" and one of the doctors were clan members. Both of these men met with our interviewers and reassured them. Second, in a meeting, two elder members of the clan discussed the question with these girls and their husbands, and persuaded them that everything would be all right.

Drawbacks and Unresolved Problems

We have attempted to show that it was very difficult for our research project to progress in a traditional and religious community without the involvement of an informal group-type relationship. However, this is not a unique situation. Other researchers in non-Western societies stress the fact that such an approach at one stage or another, is indispensable.[11] In other words, it is frequently found that one has to bypass the established way of doing things (either folkways or bureaucratic structure) "informally" in order to be able to conduct research. We believe that if this seems to be a general pattern, such an involvement of the primary group-type of relationship, in an area which is considered exclusively the domain of the secondary group-type relationship, must be studied more systematically. The problems and implications of such an amalgam have to be made more explicit. Such questions are beyond the scope of this paper. Our intention in this section is to discuss some of the drawbacks that such a blend produced

for us, and the means we employed to handle them. No attempt is made here to engage in a systematic discussion of this issue.

We first became aware of the clash between the characteristics of the primary and secondary group-type of relationships in the process of selecting our interviewers. As discussed above, all of them were female relatives of the project director. While enquiring about their qualifications, he found that some elders of the clan insisted on his preferring somebody with less qualifications over a more qualified person for the sheer reason that the former needed the money more. In such a situation, the director had to reject these requests and explain the problem to those concerned as best he could.

During the training the project director also found that his class sessions, which were held in his residence, were occasionally invaded by unexpected social calls. Since turning the visitors away from the door with the excuse that "I am busy now and cannot visit with you" is considered a very rude gesture in the local culture, there was no choice but to lead the unwanted guest to his class meeting. However, after an exchange of greetings, the project director continued with his discussion and deliberately did not direct any interaction toward the guest. After drinking his tea, the guest felt more and more self-conscious and in a few minutes would decide to go. At the door the project director would explain that he was busy at the moment and would be delighted if the guest could come back at another designated time.

The clash between the primary group and secondary group expectations was also present between the project director and the interviewers. For instance, although before they were hired the interviewers were told

that they would be paid for the time they would spend for the training and field work, when the first pay-day came some of them refused to accept money. They said that they were not working for money. In the course of the ensuing discussion the project director explained that in North America even children of the family are often paid for the household chores they perform. The interviewers responded that they were not Americans and did not want to act like them. It took two days of intense discussion before the project director could convince them (with the help of a leader of the clan) to accept the money because it came from a university and not their cousin's pocket.

Another problem which could be subtle in nature also comes to mind. Since the interviewers were relatives of the project director and probably eager to please him, they could be suspected of distorting the interviews in the direction "expected" by him. However, in the course of the training and during the field work, the interviewers were repeatedly told that we were interested in the events as they were reported by the respondents. In addition, the nature of the survey was such that the interviewers could not easily discern any direction for the expectations of their project director cousin. There was no discussion of any hypothesis or anticipated result.

Finally, as was indicated in the introduction, 29 "middle class" women were also interviewed in 1965. Since it was very difficult to contact jealously-protected "middle class" women in the traditional city, an alternative was to contact those women who belonged to the clan. However, it was later discovered that since the interviewer and the interviewees knew each other so well, the latter occasionally felt

ill-at-ease in discussing certain matters with the former during the interview. An indirect enquiry after the completion of the field work showed that this situation could arise only when the two parties belonged to the same age group. Those women who were younger or older than the interviewer seldom felt any hesitation in being frank with the interviewer.

We also ran into problems which were not the result of the clash between the primary and secondary types of relationships, and could not be resolved through our strategy of the particularistic approach. For instance, the interviewers were instructed to take notice of any information which the interviewees volunteered about local methods of preventing conception or abortion. During the field work it turned out that the reports on these subjects were mostly nil. Upon enquiry by the project director, it was revealed that "modesty" and "politeness" prevented our female interviewers from reporting on different native methods of preventing conception, or abortion. An open-discussion session in the presence of all the interviewers did not produce any result except frequent blushes and laughter. The suggestion that each interviewer write an anonymous report and mail it to the project director also proved unacceptable. It was very clear that the communication gap was due to differences in the sexual identities of the two parties, and "blood" relationship could do nothing to bridge the gap. It seems that in research projects where women are contacted the presence of female field workers and supervisors at various levels would be desirable.

Conclusion

In this paper an attempt has been made to demonstrate that if the researcher is a native and has kinship ties in a traditional, pre-industrial community he can use these assets to promote his research efforts, at least in small-scale studies. Generally, speaking of the present case, the clan ties were used to expedite the process of hiring relatively qualified field workers; to bypass possible intervention by the local officials and even turn the government machinery to our favour; and finally to bridge possible gaps between the project director and the field workers by making the research project a clan project with all the assistance and the moral support necessary for such an endeavour. However, this approach produced certain drawbacks--mostly clashes between the primary group and the secondary group characteristics.

It may be argued that the uniqueness of the approach presented in this paper would prevent it from being useful in future research. However, three factors must be considered. First, many of the problems occur in other research contexts. Second, the problems and solutions discussed, regardless of their applicability elsewhere, would sensitize the interested reader to the atmosphere surrounding research in pre-industrial societies. The discussion, we hope, contributes to an understanding of some of the problems associated with doing research in underdeveloped areas and their possible solutions. Third, it seems that the number of social scientists from underdeveloped areas who are either trained in North America or become familiar with empirical research methodology is on the increase. If so, this paper would serve as a reminder to them of the resources yet untapped for possible assistance

in adapting and adjusting American methods to the field work in pre-industrial societies.

FOOTNOTES

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[1]E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Social Anthropology, Cohen and West Ltd., London, 1960, p. 77; and Lloyd and Susanne H. Rudolph, "Surveys in Asia: Field Experience in Madras State," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 22, 1958, p. 244.

[2]For instance, see the special issue of International Social Science Journal, Vol. XV, No. 1 (1963); on opinion surveys in developing countries; Richard N. Adams and Jack J. Preiss, Human Organization Research, The Dorsey Press, Homewood, Ill., 1960, Chapters 28 and 30; and Kurt W. Back and J. Mayone Stycos, The Survey Under Unusual Conditions: The Jamaica Human Fertility Investigation, Monograph No. 1, The Society for Applied Anthropology, Cornell University, New York, 1959; among others.

[3]This practice is not new. For instance, see Frederick W. Frey, "Surveying Peasant Attitudes in Turkey," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 27, 1963, p. 351.

[4]Two of our interviewers had "wet nurses" and both of them felt very close to them.

[5]For a similar approach to this problem see Daniel Lerner, "Interviewing Frenchmen," American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 62, 1956, pp. 187-194; and William Schwab, "An Experiment in Methodology in a West

African Urban Community," in Richard N. Adams and Jack J. Preiss, op. cit., pp. 408-421.

[6]Kurt W. Back, et al., op. cit., pp. 4, 6-7; and Michel Hoffman, "Research on Opinions and Attitudes in West Africa," International Social Science Journal, op. cit., p. 66.

[7]Lloyd and Susanne H. Rudolph, op. cit., p. 242.

[8]Frederick W. Frey, op. cit., p. 338.

[9]Elmo C. Wilson, "Problems of Survey Research in Modernizing Areas," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 22, 1958, p. 233.

[10]Because of the association of the cross with Christianity each Moslem country in the Middle East uses a different national symbol for the identification of this international organization within the country.

[11]Lloyd and Susanne H. Rudolph, op. cit., pp. 242-243; and Michel Hoffman, op. cit., p. 67.