

Fieldwork exercise: report back



Participants discussed the following about their experiences of Fieldwork Task:

- Amount of detail differs on different items
- Personal responses, no unnecessary detail
- Left out feelings of embarrassment
- People's reactions to researchers left out
- Nothing on problems faced in research
- Format of reports varied: structured vs fluid
- How to avoid preconceived notions in interpreting rather than describing
- Need for logging when, where, who, map
- Focus of attention on goods vs what customers were saying, wearing—fashion judgements!
- 'Staring' effects—how to observe without upsetting
- Writing styles
- Time management—note this down, keep in mind

Examples of notes that would be relevant for a project on disability

- “Through the transparent glass door could be seen a wheel chair kept there. Just beside this room were the lavatories with boards reading men and women in Hindi. To the left hand side of the courtyard was the entrance to other halls and rooms which were dark and seemed closed. The wall to the left was bordered by three wash-basins with taps. It seemed people used it to wash their hands after eating or before entering the holy place.”
- “On the other side of the hall, on the men’s side, there were about 9 men of various ages. The majority of these men would however fall between the age group of 60’s to 75. Some of them had placed their walking sticks against the railing behind them.”

And this

- **“One special feature that XY noticed was that all elevated places had ramps along with stairs to facilitate access to people with disabilities. XY also saw an old woman who was bent double with age and a young man with polio walk up this ramp.”**
- “When XY asked him if any extra curricular activities or skills were taught in their school he replied that the school taught music, typing and weaving chairs. XY asked him what skills he had learnt. He replied, “*kursi banana seekha par kya karein taar ki kursi kaun banwata hai aajkal. Majboor hain.*” (Learnt to weave chairs but what to do? Who buys woven chairs these days? I am helpless.)”

How to make justifiable inferences: is this OK?

- “A woman rushed in almost pushing MS to the side in order to enter before her. She touched the stairs and then touched her forehead before keeping her foot on the first stair. She climbed up and hit the big bell hanging at the entrance. She went and stood ahead at the corner in right. Many men and women entered in a few minutes to join the ceremony. It was clear now why the woman who came at the beginning had rushed to enter in. She had done it to capture a comfortable place for herself. Because soon the temple had become full and not enough place was left for anyone to even stand properly.”

Or this?

- “Among the women many of them were coming to the temple as if they were coming there to attend a marriage party or some other kind of social function. Most of the women were wearing “*saris*”, few of them wearing “*suit-salwar*” also but those also looked very colorful, in colors like red, yellow, pink, green etc. Three recently married couples in their beautiful dresses also came to visit temple at that time. They were looking very happy amongst all who were present in the temple at that time. It was also noticed that men most of the time looked more relaxed and comfortable, while on the other hand women were looking rather serious and concentrating on praying.”

Context outside the main focus

- This temple was spread in a huge square piece of land. This was located on the main road side of the village which is called Delhi-Rohtak Road. The temple was covered with a 7-8 feet high boundary wall with a huge black iron gate in front of it. Like it was seen from the outside the whole temple including the boundary walls were painted neatly with cream colored paint. The gate with its metal grills was painted black and the whole temple was looking beautiful. There shops which sold *“Prasad, phool malas, framed pictures of Shree Sai”* and audio cassettes of *“Sai Bhajan.”* One small tea and snacks shop was also there next to these shops. Few houses were also located in these areas which were not looking so attractive and most of them were painted in yellow.

Compare alternative descriptions of what 'happened':

- “My friend opened her shoes right before climbing the steps from the courtyard and covering her head with her stole walked ahead. I felt quite uncomfortable as there were hardly anyone to be seen in the area. However, I followed her steps and opening my shoes and covering my head with my stole made headway inside.” (R:1)
- “We covered our head and opened our shoes before going upstairs.” (R:2)

Ways of including personal feelings in the descriptions

- [As we reached the huge gateway of the Gurudwara the silence and the vastness of the area hit me simultaneously. I felt kind of uncomfortable].
- “However standing outside did not turn out to be as uninteresting as I thought.”
- “It was completely empty and hauntingly silent.”
- “It was weird to find that there was not a single visitor other than those working in the Gurudwara. The other interesting fact which caught my attention was that none of the workers in the Gurudwara were women.”

How much detail in relation to the main research question

- “After them another group was there; but it was interesting to see how in this group even the woman was wearing a turban although in a different way. All of them touched the floor before the stairs and then proceeded towards the hall. I could even see what was happening inside. All of them entered the hall and kneeled down before the structure inside the hall.”
- “On the left hand side railing there was a white board with ‘*mahila*’ (woman) and the right hand side railings bore the sign ‘*purus*’ (man). On either side of the hall, facing the Gods, some chairs were placed against the railings. The path to the Saint’s statue from the entrance had a white narrow carpet, which also strategically divided the area for women and men.”

And this

- “There was nobody to give instructions but men and women themselves started standing on the opposite sides. Women were standing on the right side and men were gathering more to the right. Men were singing more loudly than women. Women had covered their heads either with the *pallu* of her *saree* or the *dupatta*. It was not with the men; some had covered their heads with handkerchief but some had not.”

- After waiting for around half an hour a young couple in their early twenties entered the temple. Both the girls and the boy were dressed in jeans and shirt. The couple entered the temple together and straight away went to the Ganeshji's compartment. The girls sat in front and the boy stood behind her, both had their hands folded. The girl bowed down, touched the feet of the statue and the boy stood there casually with his hands folded. When the girl was finished with her prayer both of them moved to the next compartment where Radha Krishanji's statue was present. Again the girl stood in front and the boy stood at the back. When the girl was praying with her hand folded the boy was becoming restless and this time he did not wait for the girl to finish instead moved to the other gods compartment. By the time the girl finished her prayer and moved to the next and boy was already done with all the gods and goddesses and moved out of the temple. He stood outside the temple waiting for the girl. But the girl took her own time went to all the compartments of all the gods and goddesses and then when out of the temple. At that time the boy kept waiting for her.

Things to consider in descriptions of a temple or church

- ‘Temple’ or ‘worship’ is not self-evident—you need to put time into describing what exactly happens, in this case
- Map or plan of the building?
- Shrines/ Altars—how many? What kinds? Inside and outside?
- History of place (not from visit)
- Parking, access
- Surroundings: what kinds of neighbourhood?

Language of writing

- What language is best for the head notes: your own first language, or the language being spoken (if they are different)?
- What language is best for the full fieldnotes?
- Translation: by whom, when, where and how – and how to ensure quality

(We return to this in a later session)

Descriptions of actors

- Not just the people who are the focus of your attention—priests, helpers, attendants, security guards (inside and outside), parking attendants, etc
- Who was absent?
- Gender, age, class, religion, region, language, groups or individuals—as well as nationality

Descriptions of activities

- Praying
- Performing collective worship
- Chatting, sitting, observing
- Time-pass,
- Begging
- Cleaning
- Tourism
- Sorting temple out/ Renovation
- Clinic
- Minding children

Descriptions of objects

- How much detail of the worship items?
- Lighting, smells, sounds as well as items?

The benefits of unfamiliarity, or a comparative frame of reference:

- What was ***not*** there? Map, buffalo carts, audio guides

Descriptions of episodes

- Snatches of actual conversations,
- Descriptions of people coming in and walking round
- What happens *around* the acts of worship
- How people leave: who they talk to, whether they follow different routes out

Descriptions of times

- Provide a Start and End time for your observation
- Note how long people spent in the temple? Actual or perceived?
- Did people *talk* about time?
- There might be different behaviour at different times—e.g. before and after dark? So record the times of events

Descriptions of goals

- Many goals—can't assume all come just for prayer or worship
- Hard to assess goals by observation
- What other techniques, ideas would help you to gather better data on why people come (in general) or came (on this occasion)?

Descriptions of feelings

- Is there too much or too little in the reports: why or why not?
- Contrast accounts of the researchers' feelings and the subjects' feelings—how to interpret feelings of other people?
- Are interviews necessary? Adequate?
- Reflections after the event by the researcher—what to include?

Tense of the description

- Present?
 - Easy to remember, as if it was happening
 - In chronological order
 - More interesting to read?
- Past?
 - Natural—convenient and comfortable
 - Experience of writing like that
 - Quotes in present
- Future???

Considerations about the 'person' in which the description is written

- First person singular
 - Enables stream of consciousness
 - Shows that this is personal, ownership of the experience
 - Easier to write about feelings etc
- Second person singular?
- Third person singular
 - Harder for the reader to get into the experience of the research
 - Claiming less for the researcher

Style

- Notes vs full paragraphs as a final document? Both would be useful?
- Informal vs formal? Both?
- How to separate accounts of personal feelings from what was observed, and from what ideas these observations raise (either for analysis, or as ideas to follow up next time you are in the field)?

An example of RJ's Notes (a co-author of this manual)

- We went to Nangal for the first time since returning to India. Stopped for a while at Chhaya's house and talked to her father (who joked with CJ and tried to pick him up). RJ talked to Kameshwar about his crops: he showed me his rice drying in the sun and said that he'd been cutting rice for about 2 weeks now and there wasn't much more to cut. He said this was the normal time for cutting rice, he planted in July starting in the first week, and he agreed when I said it was a 90-day crop. He said the rice was fine, as long as you had water, because this year barsaat was halki. He was OK because he got excellent water from the canal, which was opened 2 years ago. He said they paid Rs 200 per acre per crop. There was no problem with the irrigation staff. No need to pay rishvat and it was such a small benefit that there was little point. He would provide chai-pani if he needed the water early. Some people would pay to get water for gunnah, which needs far more water, when they'd only paid for rice, but it wasn't generally a rishvat-wali baat. Then we asked him if the pradhan was in the village. He said yes, the pradhan was certainly there. We asked how he knew, and he said that the pradhan didn't wander around, it was her husband who did that. She was certainly in the village, all she did was cook roti.