

## Notes from the Field: Navigating the Role of Researcher at a Factory Fieldsite in Appalachian Kentucky

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Kelly rolled up her sleeve in the locker room to show me the tattoo on her right arm. It was a lightning bolt, cleanly outlined in black and shaded inside with red and purple. Below it, her only son's name was inked in italic script. The letters TCB surrounded the lightning bolt—inspired by Elvis Presley's personal motto, "taking care of business." She told me that this was her personal motto as well. It reminded her of who she was working for and why. From struggling to support her son when she began working years ago as a single mother, to completing college classes by listening to vocabulary on headphones while she worked on the production line, Kelly had always very determinedly taken care of business.

Kelly helped me to gain entrance to the production floor of an auto parts manufacturing plant in the foothills of Appalachian Kentucky. Though I spent fifteen months here investigating how manufacturing workers negotiated their labor responsibilities in precarious and hierarchical work environments in relation to their job expertise, gender, and regional identity, Kelly had been working there for fourteen years. We met when I was observing a training class in the corporate offices, and she agreed to do an interview with me in the evening after a twelve-hour shift on the sixth day of a seven-day workweek. While we sat in a large, empty conference room, she shared stories about her work experiences, telling me how she had learned her way at the factory and earned her assertiveness:

*When I first came in, you know, I was real shy, real quiet. And then this one guy, he kept aggravating me. He tortured me. I mean literally. I mean, he would stick ink pens in my arm and pull em. I mean, that's how bad it was... He was just one of those male dominant kind of people. And then finally, I just snapped on him one day. You know, I tore into him and it felt good. I mean, I cussed him. I really let him have it... I was like you, "You son of a..." you know, "You're not gonna treat me like this!" Blah, blah, blah. I finally snapped. And he said, "Well, Kelly, you don't have to be such a bitch!" And I was like, "He just called me a bitch. Nobody's ever called me a bitch. Man that felt good!"... I mean, from then on, I just became assertive. You know, I mean, you can probably ask anybody in my room. I don't take a lot a crap off people.*

When I arrived to the floor area to see what Kelly's everyday work was like, she showed me a locker and set me up with a long blue robe with snap closures and two big waist-level pockets, a pair of safety glasses, and a white bonnet that Velcro-ed under my chin. The room where Kelly worked with about thirty others—half men and half women—was a “clean room,” meant to be kept free of stray hair, fuzz, or food particles that might contaminate parts and cause them to fail final testing. Kelly introduced me to each step of their work process and to the people who completed each task. She moved through the room with a steady and straightforward confidence and a deep knowledge of everything around her—picking a screw up from the floor and knowing its number and size and on what part it should be and communicating information from the front of the room to the back. Kelly possessed what she liked to point out was a positive quality in new workers: gumption.

The ways that workers relied on gumption to navigate

an uncertain work environment was part of my research focus. It was also part of a larger anthropological question about the structure of production relations in a capitalist system and the ways that workers contest their precarious placement. This essay describes the unanticipated competing relationships I experienced during my fieldwork as I explored this question and balanced affiliations with production line workers and the corporate office.

### **A Lean Manufacturing System and Precarious Work**

Uncertainty regarding the schedule and hours of work and the difficult conditions under which workers here labored were built into the operating structure of the corporation in response to market demand. This particular plant, and most companies in the auto industry, relies on a lean production system also referred to as the “just-in-time” system. This means that component parts and finished products—inventory—are not kept in stock, but are rather built to quickly meet demand for product orders as they come in. Constant quality checks are designed to minimize waste. The corporate offices at this factory devised trainings that celebrated the ideal of an innovative, flexible, and empowered worker who complemented this system while, at the same time, they struggled to reduce high turnover rates.

The effects of this system on workers’ everyday activities were dramatic, including longer hours, mandatory overtime, and sudden increases in pace and intensity. Scholars have described workers in these environments as “buffers” who are often held personally responsible in the case of quality issues (Rinehart 1999; Yates 1999). I witnessed workers pushed out of jobs because of drastic changes in their shifts; one woman was moved from a weekend night shift to a seven-day daytime shift. Others had to individually navigate a complicated internal hierarchy in order to access the benefits of a permanent position and be moved out of a seemingly permanent temporary one.

The lived uncertainty of this kind of labor became apparent as I scheduled interviews and meetings to gather data. I had difficulty finding people when they moved positions frequently from night to day shifts or among the three plants separated by nearly a mile. It was hard for workers to follow through with planned interviews when they suddenly had weekend shifts, or when they had so little time at home to catch up on their lives. Some workers were only at the factory for days or weeks before the demanding hours strained their other everyday obligations to the point of seeking alternative employment opportunities. I was only able to arrange times to meet in locations outside of the workplace on several occasions. Workers told me that they “had no social lives” or that “you couldn’t plan anything while working here.”

I used creative strategies such as offering to help with work as I chatted and interviewed line workers during their normal hours. I brought them dinner if we met after work. The condition of a fieldsite that was in operation for twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week made my fieldwork schedule in some ways unpredictable but also overwhelmingly constant—somewhat like the workers own experiences.

### **Conflicting Allegiances**

In my role as an anthropologist trying to understand the day-to-day life of these manufacturing workers and how macroeconomic shifts like spikes in demand affected everyday labor practices—ones that are often obscured—I relied on classic models of such investigations. Examples of ethnographic fieldwork in factories ranged from Burawoy (1985) and Braverman’s (1975) studies examining the re-organization of capitalist relations based on their own work and participant observation on the factory line, to Striffler’s (2005) entrance into an Arkansas poultry processing plant as an employee, only later revealing his identity as a researcher to fellow line workers. These examples

suggested that to labor alongside factory workers—perhaps even in secret—was the way to build trust, to truly understand the corporal experience of assembly line work, and to discover the hidden narratives that shaped the story of capitalism.

Ethnographic models like Striffler's were difficult to replicate, however, in a site and study where cultivating trust among line workers, supervisors, and office managers alike was necessary to maintain my access to multiple aspects of factory life. I was constantly aware of my liminal position. My desire to be accepted by line workers was validated when managers who didn't know me told me to keep my safety glasses on, when visiting executives stared at me just like the other workers through the factory room windows—the “fishbowl”—when I stopped at a machine to chat, or when I earned respect after stapling my finger with an industrial stapler while helping to assemble boxes.

On the other hand, I was reminded of my privileged position as a researcher operating with a promise of confidentiality when workers told me stories about conflicts they had with management, or when human resource employees explained hiring decisions or how they had dealt with a contentious event on the production floor.

Allegiances became confusing at times and I questioned the clear power structure that I had assumed existed in such an environment. When I entered the floor one day, for example, an older male line worker let me in on something he had overhead. He said that his supervisor had complained about my presence on the line and attributed it to their slower production, but the supervisor's superior, a plant manager, had defended my right to be present and conduct research.

These allegiances also made it frustrating to deal with situations in which I had little control. A human resource worker discouraged with women's position in the manufacturing world told me that a woman I was shadowing on the floor had not been promoted because of what the human resource worker

thought was the sexism of the interviewers making the decision—telling me they had described the women’s confidence as “aggression.” While this human resource worker was making hiring decisions about entry-level line workers, she was in a position of powerlessness to explicitly protest this decision. Likewise, I was in a position of powerlessness to discuss this information with anyone else, including the line worker I was shadowing, at the risk of compromising my trustworthiness among the human resource workers or discouraging the line worker from applying for a different promotion. Conducting participant-observation in the professional offices and on the production line, often during the same day, meant that I had sometimes conflicting affiliations, had to constantly work to build trust in both places, and had to take care with what information I shared when workers in different departments asked me questions. Constantly adapting methods of ethnographic fieldwork in response to this unique fieldsite allowed me to see the ways that decisions at the top were made and to view the power relationships and unexpected cross-department alliances that might never had been visible from one perspective.

## Conclusion

An anthropological background made me think that the logic of capital might have been more cut and dry than my fieldwork demonstrated, that the relations dictated by hierarchy in such a place as a factory—the iconic location of capitalist production—would be so much more clearly defined. My research found that the wage relationship and the condition of global capital had to be understood as Ong (1987) has contended: within a local context of power, taking into account all of the cultural, gendered, and regional affiliations that this includes.

Line workers at this factory experienced the highest level of surveillance at the plant, with the least amount of power over the schedule of their work and the structure of their

workday. There were human resource managers, however, from rural towns who had also worked on factory lines, interviewers with the power to decide potential new hires' fate but who found that they were from the same place in the mountains and had kin in common with the interviewees, and line workers who were studying sociology while paying tuition with their factory salaries. Workers in all positions of the production system were navigating complicated and contradictory identities, allegiances, and hierarchies.

Kelly, who had introduced me to the production floor, was one of them. When she was finally promoted to a management position she got a new tattoo: a queen's crown with the word "Bitch" inked in script underneath—symbolic not only of the permanence, stability, and sense of empowerment she felt with a change in status from production worker to a formal leadership position, but also a reminder of how precarious and challenging her long-time position as line worker had been.

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