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Challenges of Field Research in a Conflict/Post-Conflict Setting – Lessons Learned in Afghanistan (Part 2)

This second part of my blog feature continues my exploration into the practical issues on the research implication in a conflict/post-conflict setting.

Researching Culturally Sensitive Issues

In a conflict setting, culture and traditional structures can resist research when it aims to explore social aspects that are taboo, sensitive, or associated with values and sacredness. This can include examples like religious beliefs, ethnicity, experiences of violence, sexuality and gender-related issues. Considering all these, local people might find inquiry damaging to their collective identity or ways of life in their community. For instance, in some Afghan communities that I worked in, men were highly sensitive about being asked questions on the activities of their female relations. Once, after spending time in the community and building friendships, the village head told me that on the first day of our meeting they were concerned that we'd been sent by the Human Rights Organization to get information about violent incidents among families (specifically, violence against women), and that they were not initially willing to welcome us. He added that their unease was because they felt they could overcome their issues on their own and didn't need others intervening.



Picture 3 – Afghan women register to vote before the election. © The Advocacy Project, CC BY-ND 2.0, 2004

In another case, a researcher shared with me his experience of conducting a survey. In his study, dealing with religious beliefs and ethnicity, he said that most respondents refused to mention their ethnic group. A participant reasoned that he does not want his ethnic group to be seen less in comparison with other ethnicities when the comparative results of surveys come out. The reason being that other people may find the tendency inconsistent with mainstream norms and values.

Informed Consent

Informed consent is always considered an essential component of research ethics and procedure. Research in a post-conflict setting is not an exception to this rule. It could be considered that research ethics is of even more importance in such a setting as there are potentially more barriers to overcome, particularly due to complex and insecure conditions, lack of guidance by the institutional review boards (IRB), and imbalanced power relations between researcher and subjects. There are two aspects regarding the issue of informed consent: firstly, informing and communicating with subjects; secondly, the documentation of consent expression.

On the first aspect, I noticed that among some of the research staff I interacted with, there was often concern that participants might refuse to attend a study if they knew the purpose of the research and considered it to be on a sensitive subject – of course, such a concern is a valid one. However, those researchers concluded that as the research was aimed at eventually improving the peoples' situation, then it was acceptable to skip ethical necessities. Such a justification is not valid and leads to the

ignorance of ethical principles in conflict research. It is a basic right of subjects to be informed about the objectives, risks, and benefits of any research they might participate in, and be given the choice whether to participate or not to participate at all.

As an example, in some conflict-affected areas participating in research may be seen as cooperating with outsiders who work for the government, invaders or foreign NGOs, in turn putting the community or individual at risk. In one community I met some local people, and after I described my research goals, they told me that it was safer for them not to take part because of militant presence in their original communities. They explained that they might be in danger if it was found out that they had collaborated with the research team. Therefore, it is essential to communicate with, and inform, participants about the details and purpose of any research or study, and in a language easily understood by them, in order to help them understand and analyze the risks and impact, as well as allowing them the choice to attend.

Expression of Consent: Asking for a signature?

The second aspect of informed consent relates to the way that a subject's agreement needs to be documented. I believe that, here, noticing cultural sensitivities is key. For instance, most Afghan communities consider research team members as guests, and it could be seen to be against the hospitality code if a researcher asks the respondent or the host to sign a "paper" giving consent for research work or participation. In particular, when the participant is illiterate it can lead to misunderstanding and create more suspicion about the research activity. In one case, when a member of my research team requested the signature of an elderly man, he refused, saying:

"So, you have my word, isn't this sufficient for you? I even have no signature. Throughout my life, I have only used my thumb a few times when asked by the government organizations."

Such a challenge requires the researcher to come up with more effective strategies to help the documentation process. For example, if allowed, a researcher might use an audio recorder, if only for the introduction and consent part or for recording consent with the presence of another independent person.

Conclusion

While this is purely a reflective article aimed at discussing some of the practical obstacles encountered by myself and fellow researchers during fieldwork in a post-conflict setting – specifically in Afghanistan – it highlights the importance of addressing such challenges faced. The researcher needs to be deeply familiar with the context of the study and well equipped with appropriate assessment mechanisms and

strategies to help and maintain the quality of research, particularly in terms of methods and ethics. Preparation to overcome potential obstacles and dilemmas should be embedded in the specific research design, albeit with a degree of flexibility and creativity for dealing with the actual challenges encountered in the field. Last, but not least, I believe it is vital for all research publications, presentations and other outlets particularly related to topics present in conflict and post-conflict settings, to make the methodological and ethical sections of papers more comprehensive in detailing all steps taken. There should be no excuse for skipping or shortening explanations when it comes to methods or ethics in research.

Further Readings:

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