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**Researching a sensitive topic in an unstable environment:
Fieldwork dilemmas in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province of
Pakistan**

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**Researching in an unstable environment:
Fieldwork dilemmas in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan**

Introduction

What does it mean to conduct qualitative research as someone born and raised in an unstable region such as the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province in Pakistan? How do issues such as the insider-outsider dilemma, much discussed in contemporary reflections on conducting qualitative research (see author, 2016), or understandings and practices of masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) impact on the research process? And how does one conduct research in a context which cannot be described as the ‘interview society’ (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997) that is taken for granted in many countries? In this article we explore some of the dilemmas that emerged when XXX, the first author, undertook research on domestic violence, commonly referred to as ‘family violence’ or ‘family conflict’ (*gahrelo tashadud* or *gahrelo jagre*, and *korane zeist*, *nachaqe* or *rabre*—in Pakhto) in the north-western frontier area of Pakistan, a geopolitical space characterized by weak government control, constant conflict and civil strife, strong notions of particular forms of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995, Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, Connell, 2014), and associated high degrees of gender segregation. We draw on the fieldwork conducted by Author between September and November 2009 in three districts of the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan: Upper Dir, Lower Dir, and Peshawar. Whilst this fieldwork was undertaken some time ago, the basic dilemmas confronted during it continue to be relevant to researching in unstable geopolitical areas where violent masculinities prevail. Our focus in this article is on four key issues: what it means for a local-born man from the north-western frontier province of Pakistan studying abroad to conduct research on gender issues on his home territory; the issue of accessing research participants in this context; the use of vignettes in approaching a sensitive topic; and questions of informed consent. We do so partly because the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa region of Pakistan remains under-researched due to its long-term, ongoing conflicts, and because the issues encountered in conducting qualitative social research there are highly relevant to social researchers working in similar arenas.

Researching in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa region of Pakistan: contextual dilemmas

In 2008 author began his PhD at the University of York in the UK.¹ This latter context was significantly different in terms of its geopolitics, its gender politics, its research expectations and practices from the context in which he had grown up, the Dir valley in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. The UK continues to be a relatively stable society whilst Pakistan's post-2001 embroilment in the war against terror, radicalism within Pakistan and Taliban insurgency made Pakistan, and the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province specifically, a dangerous place for field researchers to work in. The war against terror wrecked Pakistan's internal security, undermining the political, economic and social situation of the country (Qureshi, 2010). The Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, close to the terrorist strongholds of the FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) and Afghanistan, where Author intended to carry out his fieldwork, was a highly dangerous zone, often under attack from militants. There was a strong sense of insecurity among the people as conflict affected every facet of daily life (Rana, 2009). Suicide attacks in public places were happening on a routine basis. Similarly, kidnapping for ransom was common because of fragile government control (News International, 2010). The highways were under military control and strict security checks were carried out at military checkpoints. Long curfew hours on the main roads would often make it very difficult to move around the province, and alternative routes were not safe, due to the presence of smugglers and kidnappers. Research there was hence closer to researching in a war zone than in a politically stable context.

Second, whilst the UK subscribes to gender equality², Pakhto culture, prevalent in the area where Author conducted his research, is highly sex-segregated and marked by strong, explicit gender asymmetries.³ Questions such as the ones asked by Buchbinder (2014, p. 16), e.g. 'Where do you think men will go from here, now that women have achieved their feminist objectives?', are nowhere on the horizon here. Indeed, in its report on Violence Against Women in Pakistan (Perveen, 2010), the Aurat Foundation ranked the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province top of the list concerning the total reported cases of domestic violence against women. And TrustLaw (2011)⁴ ranked Pakistan third on its list of *The World's Most Dangerous Countries for Women* (see also Zarar, 2018). Given Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa's sex-segregated, gender-asymmetrical culture, it made sense for Author to concentrate his research on men's views of domestic violence since, for cultural reasons, he was much more likely to access them than women.

Third, the area where Author conducted his research is a region which, due to its instability, attracts limited numbers of researchers. This is not the 'interview society'

(Atkinson and Silverman 1997) that is commonly assumed to be the backdrop for qualitative research in western cultures. Indeed, we might distinguish between ‘interrogative cultures’ where being asked about one’s views is commonplace and can be observed in many different public and private settings, and ‘declarative cultures’ where people may from time to time be asked to give their views (for example in elections or in/formal gatherings such as jirgas) but are not routinely asked their opinions in everyday life, either in private or public contexts. This extends to both men and women. As Saeed, describing the patrilineal joint-family system in which he grew up, wrote:

My older uncle and his wife were the absolute authority of [our] joint family. My father and mother, being the youngest members of the family, had little opportunity to participate actively in family matters and decision-making processes. My parents used to accept and enact whatever my older uncle decided for them. It was impossible for my parents, especially for my mother, to challenge my uncle’s authority, and even a slight violation in this regard was considered a breach of respect for elders, and more seriously a threat to the unity of joint living. In case of any internal family conflict and disagreement between my mother and other senior (female) family members, my father—even if he was aware of my mother’s innocence—would not support my mother, and, even more sadly, often would not hesitate to use violence against my mother if she failed to submit and kept on arguing. Using violence under such conditions proved him to be a gherate (virile, honourable and real) Pakhtun. (Author 2012: 11)

The point is that whilst in what we here term ‘interrogative cultures’ people are used to being asked about and to debate their views, in what we here term ‘declarative cultures’ this is not the case. It is obvious that this impacts on the conduct of qualitative research since the researcher’s starting point in ‘declarative cultures’ is dealing with people who are not used to being asked about things, but rather, tend to be told, or tell.⁵

Author’s focus on domestic violence in his research was strongly influenced by observations and experiences of family violence in his own immediate home environment and more widely in Pakhtun culture (Author 2012: 10-13). Initially interested in talking with local women about their experiences of such violence, Author and Author quickly agreed that he would focus on researching men’s views on domestic violence since as a man in a highly sex-segregated culture Author would have difficulty gaining access to women other than those from his natal family. Additionally, whilst violence against women in Pakistan has been, and continues to be, researched from the victims’ perspective (e.g. Khan and Hussain 2008; Perveen 2009, 2010; Saeed-ur-Rahman 2010; Zakar et al. 2016; Ali et al., 2015;

Pakeeza 2015; Hussain et al. 2017; Madhani et al. 2017), little research has been done on men's views of such violence.

Given the contextual challenges outlined above, we shall now turn to discuss Author's experiences in and reflections on the fieldwork he conducted, and, further, how he countered these challenges, and elicited data.

Researching as an insider-outsider in an unstable, hostile environment: Dealing with the everyday chaos of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan

Discussions of research in hostile or unstable environments have commonly focussed on three contexts: researching criminals, researching in war zones, and researching extreme political movements. Sometimes these have been researched by the same person/s (e.g. Winlow, 2001, Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2008, Winlow et al., 2017). Although Fielding (2004) maintains that 'almost any research environment can be hostile' (249), some are obviously more hostile and inhospitable than others. Regions that suffer from long-term military conflict and civil strife and which are inhabited by people with low levels of trust towards each other pose different problems from cultures that are relatively stable and with generally higher levels of trust.

These issues are compounded by one's status within a given community which, as much work on qualitative research has argued, may be that of an insider or of an outsider or of a mix of the two (e.g. Mullings, 1999, Merriam et al., 2001, Corbin Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). In Author's case, the fact of his family background in Dir meant that he knew the terrain, the prevalent customs such as paying respect to one's elders, and in particular older males who are not to be contradicted, as well as the local language Pahto or Pukhto. In these respects he was an insider who did not face the problematics described by Nilsson (2018), for example, of needing to gain basic knowledge of the research terrain. Nonetheless he had to negotiate the conduct of a practice unfamiliar in that region – research – in relation to his own position within the communities of the region.

Much of the discussions about insider-outsider positioning in qualitative research assumes a unitary position on the part of the researcher: one either is, or is not, a member of a given community, and as such one's potential research dilemmas may be more associated with the research process (i.e. not assuming one knows it all or the 'illusion of

[being] a cultural insider’ (Nilsson, 2018: 423)), or trying to deal effectively with assumed and/or actual but potentially shifting power differentials between researcher and researched, than with one’s own positioning or ontological specificities. However, in Author’s case this positioning proved particularly complex. As the son of a younger son and hence, in the natal family pecking order which is male- and natal-family oriented, he is a subordinated male. In the research context he would also automatically be subordinated to any male older than himself. This meant that asking questions of those older than himself was always hazardous since this is not part of the cultural script or gender regime that determines relations between males in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. When interviewing respondents older than himself Author would, for example, call them either *La-la* or *Khange*—culturally respected titles used for elders in Pakhtun society – rather than by their actual names.

Asking questions as such, and particularly of elders, was already a primary difficulty, not associated with lack of familiarity with the prevalent culture, but because of full recognition of that prevalent culture.

At the same time Author is a highly educated man in a region with very high degrees of illiteracy, including among men (Rehman et al., 2016). This positioned him as an outsider, not least because he was gaining his education abroad. Whilst this gave him a certain caché, it also rendered him somewhat suspicious, a fact that was not helped by his seeking to undertake research on a taboo topic – domestic or family violence – which might be seen by some as a form of provocation (Wong, 2015).

Seale et al. (2004) suggest that working in unstable regions requires thoughtful planning, anticipation of issues that may happen during fieldwork, and a strategy for responding to these situations. Working in unstable regions may not only endanger the researcher’s safety, but obtaining data can become extremely difficult. The British Sociological Association Statement of Ethical Practice (2017), as do other such documents from subject associations and funding bodies such as the European Commission, stress that safety issues need to be considered in undertaking social research projects, and that risk to researchers should be minimized. However, risk anticipation varies depending on the region, the status of the researcher and the nature of the research. In the case of this research, the researcher, being a Pakistani Pakhtun, did not face the risks usually encountered by outsider researchers in that context. Such risks might include having to deal with tough visa and scrutiny procedures prior to entry into the country, access to the field area, acculturation issues, the need for escorted research, fear

of sexual harassment especially in the case of women researchers, or of kidnapping for ransom, and strict surveillance by security agencies (see Dolnik, 2011, Wong, 2015). However, Author encountered other dilemmas such as how to protect himself from potential militia attacks and resistance from potential participants due to his research topic.

To mitigate potential risks Author chose to conduct his work in areas that were relatively peaceful, convenient to access and where he had family and other social connections that could be mobilized to aid his stay and his research. Hence he researched in three districts of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa: Dir Upper, Dir Lower and Peshawar. One important precaution he took was always to travel by public transport when he had to go on long journeys such as from Dir to Peshawar. Public transport means the company of others and hence protection through being part of a crowd rather than travelling alone. This was essential to avoid the threat of kidnapping but could also be extremely tedious as road blocks and curfews could mean spending long hours waiting to move on without food, toilets, or other amenities.

One of the 'gender practices associated with the position of men' (Connell, 2014, p. 6) in the area where Author was conducting his research was that as a local man, even if educated abroad, he was expected to carry arms whilst going about his research and traveling in the region. Since the area is insecure and there is generally very low trust among the population, Pakhtuns are expected to arrange for their own security rather than rely on entities that have little control in the region such as the government military or police. Carrying arms, something western researchers are not used to, is thus common practice among local men and expected of them. Adaptation to this environment (Lee, 1993, Seale et al., 2004, Wong, 2015) meant that Author carried a pistol whenever he went into the field, especially when conducting interviews in remote areas. It is in part an index of the level of suspicion that prevails among people in the region and which makes conducting research there a serious challenge. This included, even for a man, approaching other men to ask them about family violence. We therefore now discuss the issue of recruiting participants in this context.

The challenge of recruiting potential respondents from a diverse population in low-trust cultures

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Social researchers are required to choose appropriate methodologies for their research endeavours (Creswell, 2003; Denscombe, 2003; Mason, 1996). Author’s research centred on local men’s views of family violence. He had decided to engage with men of different ages and from different social backgrounds. Given the high degrees of illiteracy in the region, he could not readily use research methods that required writing from the respondents as many simply do not have that skill. So he decided to conduct interviews. Although these provide useful insights into how the social world is understood by the informants (Creswell, 2003, Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, Holstein and Gubrium, 2003, Mason, 1996), they are also difficult to conduct in a culture where junior males are not expected to question more senior males, and where questions about a taboo topic related to private matters is potentially constructed as a form of boundary violation.

Given these conditions, Author had to rely on introductions through family and friends to potential respondents. In this, Pakhto culture is no different from many others in the Middle East, Africa and Asia where connections of different kinds are key to accessing informants, and using the snowballing technique following first introductions by family and acquaintances is a norm. As in other cultures, then, Pakhtun society is strongly organized along family, neighbourhood and friendship networks and one commonly makes use of these networks to get what one needs (Ahmed, 1980, Barth, 1959). Whilst issues have been raised about the biases introduced through relying on known networks to access informants, there are cultures where this is the only means of doing so. At the same time qualitative research does not make claims for representativeness but rather seeks to elicit rich data that can elucidate the specificities of the issues involved.

Recruiting and accessing potential respondents in troubled zones has posed challenges for social researchers (Dolnik, 2011, Wong, 2015). This study also experienced such problems. In fact, Pakhtuns (educated as well as uneducated) are not familiar with participating in research, especially on a sensitive topic. This is partly because they are not familiar with the notion of research and partly because the topic of family or domestic violence violates the boundary between private and public and is taboo, though effectively legitimated, e.g. public authorities will commonly not intervene in cases of family violence (see Zarar, 2018) Therefore, it was difficult to recruit potential male respondents. To counter this dilemma, Author contacted some acquaintances in each area to find appropriate respondents through them. The snowballing technique (Bryman, 2008, p. 184) proved useful for recruiting potential

interviewees. The initially contacted acquaintances, all males of course, were given a brief about the purpose of the research and interviewed. They were then asked to help find other men to interview. Denscombe (2003, p. 16) states that with snowballing 'the sample emerges through a process of reference from one person to the next and thus each respondent in this process, on the basis of his experience, nominates other(s) who are relevant for the research'. In Author's case, indeed, each interviewee helped to find another respondent by using his connections. This strategy proved highly effective because a person who had already participated in an interview could often convince his friends or relatives to take part by referring to his own experience of being interviewed. Altogether Author conducted interviews with 32 respondents in four different locations of three districts. In each place eight respondents were selected and interviewed on the basis of four broad categories, i.e. ethnicity, gender, age and education.

This is not to say that there was not some hesitation among potential interviewees or that some, particularly older ones, refused to be interviewed. Author's impression in the latter cases was that potential participants might be afraid about being asked of their private practices regarding family violence. This has to be understood in a context where the majority of local people live in joint family systems where members of the natal family, elder males at the head, are considered more important than those who marry in, i.e. the wives of sons living within a joint family structure. Tellingly, for example, whereas Author as a son of a younger son, and very aware of the injustices this hierarchization produced in his own life (as an adult male he had never been able to make any major decisions about his own life from whom he would marry to how he would live to what he would do professionally), supported his sisters – members of his natal family – to become literate, this had not extended to his wife who was a second-order member of his family since she had been married in. The implication of this is that controlling family members through violence is tied to hierarchization within the family. One of Author's narratives, for example, was that it was common practice to beat wives publicly to demonstrate one's continuing allegiance to the natal family but then apologize to the wife in private (i.e. in the bedroom) for having had to exercise such 'demonstration' family violence.

Given the problematic of raising the topic of family violence coupled with the powerful hierarchization among social groups, and for our purposes here, specifically among men, it was not possible for Author to ask directly about family violence. Hence we decided to use vignettes to encourage men to talk about this topic.

Using vignettes to elicit data on a sensitive topic

Sensitive research topics may make people feel uneasy (Finch, 1987). This was also the case in Author’s research. In Pakhtun culture people do not discuss private matters such as domestic violence with others because of the associated cultural taboo and shame factor (Khan and Hussain, 2008). It was extremely difficult for Author to ask the interviewees about domestic violence directly since they might consider it a threat to their masculine self because ‘to open oneself to interrogation is to put oneself in a vulnerable position and thus to put one’s masculinity further at risk’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003, p. 59).

To counter this dilemma Author decided to use the well-established vignette technique. This technique is a research method that can elicit beliefs and attitudes from comments on stories, images, videos, texts, depicting scenarios and situations (Gourlay et al., 2014, Hughes, 1998, Hughes and Huby, 2004, Wilks, 2004). Finch (1987, p. 105) describes them as ‘short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond’. Bryman argues that using vignettes

involves presenting respondents with one or more scenarios and then asking them, how they might respond when confronted with the circumstances of that scenario. The fact that the questions are about other people permits a certain amount of distance between the questions and the respondents and results in less threatening contexts. . . (2008, p. 246)

Since Author was interested in his respondents’ beliefs, opinions and responses to the different characters in his vignettes as well as their own experiences and observations, if any, concerning domestic violence against women, he presented three stories of domestic violence against women to his informants and asked their opinion about the incidents and the characters involved. The vignettes were designed to portray a plausible picture of a common instance of domestic violence in Pakhtun culture. One of these vignettes concerned the fictitious characters Nadia and Akhtar:

After two years of court trials Akhtar and Nadia dissolved their marriage contract. The reason for their separation was that Nadia’s husband and her in-laws were not happy with her disobedient attitude. Actually, Nadia was not happy because she had a rich, educated and liberal family background while Akhtar’s family was joint, reserved and strict. In

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3 *addition, Nadia wanted a separate home while Akhtar was not ready to*
4 *leave his joint family. Nadia also blamed her brothers-in-law for*
5 *frequently being violent towards her.*
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8 Respondents were then asked how they thought about this narrative. The vignettes
9 proved very useful in engaging the respondents, not least because the majority of
10 Author's interviewees accepted the vignettes as true to life. Thus one young
11 educated respondent, Naeem, said: 'I often see such interesting stories of
12 domestic abuse in the local newspapers...I thought you probably have taken these
13 stories from these newspapers...in every family in our society you can find some
14 reflection of these stories.' Indeed, and as hoped, the vignettes also prompted
15 some respondents to talk about similar events of domestic abuse happening in
16 their own families or neighbourhood. Some talked in some detail about their
17 personal stories of un/pleasant conjugal relations, and tried to normalize and
18 justify their violent attitudes towards their women. This particularly happened
19 when Author asked the interviewees to think of themselves as being the vignettes
20 characters or adopt to the vignettes' characters and then respond.
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23 However, particularly some of the older respondents who were generally more
24 guarded considered the vignettes hyperbolic media stories. For example, Gul
25 Mohammad, an older educated respondent, thought Author had taken his vignettes
26 straight from the local newspapers and said: 'the media has become very corrupt and
27 reports malicious stories for strengthening the agenda of feminists and liberals...NGOs I
28 mean.' A similar response also came from another younger educated respondent, Ahmed
29 Hussain, who had a background in Islamic studies. He argued that Islam forbids
30 discussing the private affairs of others. He called it *Gheeba* (backbiting). He relented,
31 however, in terms of being prepared to talk about family violence from an Islamic
32 perspective. Overall, Author found that the vignette technique tempted the informants to
33 speak about, elaborate and challenge issues around family violence. We shall now turn to
34 the issue of informed consent which had to be negotiated carefully.
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53 **Informed consent – an ethical issue**

54 Conducting research on sensitive topics involves complex ethical issues (Fahie, 2014,
55 Mason 1996). One of these was gaining informed consent from the research participants
56 (McNeil and Chapman, 2005, p. 12). In western academia, social researchers can use a
57 consent form signed by the research participant. However, in Author's field area such
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practices are rare. Specifically, in Pakhtun culture, people believe in oral commitments and prefer to give oral consent. The majority of Author’s illiterate respondents who normally use their thumbprint as their signature, felt suspicious when he asked them to sign a paper they could not read. Even educated respondents often indicated embarrassment when asked to sign a consent form. Some respondents who initially consented orally to participate withdrew when asked to sign the consent form. Since Author was expecting his initial participants to help him with recruiting others by sharing their interview experience, he decided that asking participants to sign a consent form might potentially damage the snowballing procedure. To avoid such reactions, he decided to request only oral consent from his respondents. This they gave readily but it was not always fully obvious if they understood the implications of their consent. For instance, and surprisingly, whilst some readily accepted that their names would be pseudonymized to preserve their anonymity, others threatened to withdraw if they were not called by their actual name. This was somewhat unexpected but Author agreed to comply with their requests. Hence his research in the end included both pseudonyms and actual names.

Such a practice is not uncommon in contexts where it is easy to identify participants because they occupy a specific, readily identifiable position even if one does not use their actual name (Grinyer, 2009, Lahman et al., 2015). But here Author was dealing with people who, though maybe potentially identifiable within their immediate environment, were not readily identifiable in general. Nonetheless, the issue was one of respecting respondents’ wishes and it was in those terms that he consented to use a mix of pseudonyms and actual names.

Conclusions

This article has reflected on some of the personal, methodological and ethical dilemmas that emerged during fieldwork, conducted by a local man positioned in particular ways within the prevailing regimes of masculinity, in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan. The article showed how that positioning and the local environment structured the behaviour and research methods adopted by the first author whilst researching in this politically unstable region. Inhabiting a complex position within the prevailing regimes of masculinity, as the son of a younger son living in a joint family formation, Author enacted the requirements of local men operating under hostile conditions by, for example, travelling to fieldwork sites in the company of others by public transport and by carrying

a gun during such travels. He also used local networks and the snowballing technique to access informants – all male. Given the high degrees of illiteracy and the suspicion regarding signing any documents in the communities of the region, verbal consent was what could readily be asked for. Surprisingly, the offer of pseudonymization was not invariably taken up. To elicit data on a taboo topic, domestic violence, Author resorted to vignettes which encouraged respondents' readiness to talk since they recognized the stories as 'true to life'. The Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan is a terrain that has to be negotiated carefully, even by researchers local to the area.

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¹ See

http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/2271/1/Pakhtun_Men's_Perceptions_of_the_Conditions_Promoting_Domestic_Violence_in_their_Culture.pdf, accessed 1 May 2018.

² See the Government Equalities Office, at

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/government-equalities-office>, accessed 1 May 2018.

³ This is, of course, not to suggest that there is no sex segregation or, indeed, gender discrimination, or violence against women in the UK. However, all these take somewhat different forms in the UK, and it is beyond the scope or focus of this article to go into these.

⁴ See <http://www.trust.org/trustlaw/news/factsheet-the-worlds-most-dangerous-countries-for-women>, accessed 5 January 2012.

⁵ A similar issue was observed by Mohanraj (2010) in her interviews with women in rural India.

Many of them were so unused to being asked their views about anything that they found it hard to answer any questions. See also Author (2018).