

Studying Political Elite in Pakistan: Power Relations in Research

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Abstract

This article details the ethical, social and political dilemmas that a researcher has to face in studying the political elite. It is argued that the all too common assumption about the vulnerability, thus need to protection, of research participants does not hold true in research with powerful political elite. Political elite have powers to determine, among other things, some fundamental research processes such as who studies them, how they are studied and for how long, rendering the researcher vulnerable in the researcher-researched relationship. It is suggested that the standard research method courses and research ethics protocols need to take into account and adapt to this reversal of power relationship.

Key words: Political elite, research ethics, research participants, power relations, researcher's vulnerability

Introduction

A considerable shift has occurred in research community attitudes towards the reporting of field experience. We have come a long way from, when it was considered 'narcissistic', 'self-indulgent' and a 'contamination of data' (Punch 1986, p.14) to talk one's field experience. These days, sharing one's experience is considered to be 'academic self reflection' (Gallaher 2009, p.136) in which 'reflexivity' has become a part of the analysis (Denzin & Lincoln 2005; Lincoln & Guba 1985). However, there are always those, who, on the basis of their experience, argue that there is continuing paucity in social science research on practical challenges and dilemmas that inevitably arise in the field, particularly in a difficult and unstable context (King 2009; Lee 1995; Punch 1986). Often, researchers are left to their own sensibilities and skills to resolve these challenges. The codes of ethics and guidelines of research/academic institutions, in the words of John King, 'almost always fall short in helping the researcher successfully navigate unanticipated ethical, social and political challenges in the field'(King, 2009, p. 8). An analytical

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account of the pains and perils of conducting field research can serve to highlight ethical, social and political issues (Punch, 1986), help other aspiring researchers avoid reinventing the wheel (Mertus, 2009) and, in the long run, may contribute to review and further development of existing codes and research methods.

In this article, I discuss the challenges and dilemmas related to 'studying powerful/elite' in within existing research ethics protocols developed from the global 'North' perspective. I start with a short discussion of conducting research with 'people in position of power and/ or elite' in the first section. In the following section, I introduce the research project on which this article is based. The third and main section deals with practical issues including 'ethics', 'access', 'safety' and 'identity' that I had to face while conducting research with Pakistani political elite. I conclude by reflecting on my experiences and suggesting how sharing these experiences could be useful for other researchers working with political elite in the global South.

1. Studying Elite

Some forty years ago, in 1969, Laura Nader appealed to anthropologists to 'study up', that is, to analyze the processes and institutions whereby power and responsibilities are exercised in complex American society rather than adhere to traditional anthropological focus on far-flung exotic cultures and marginalized populations (Nader, 1974). Her argument was that 'the quality of life and our lives may depend upon the extent to which citizens understand those who shape attitudes and actually control institutional structures', that is political elite (Nader, 1974, p. 284). Many others have contributed and encouraged fellow social scientists to spell out the processes of power and politics (Handyman, 2000; Marcus, 1992, 1999; Wolf, 1996; Wolf, 1974). From the political science and public policy perspective, Cyril Belshaw (1976), Catherine Marshall (1984), Chris Shore and Susan Wright (1997) and Janine Wedel and colleagues (2005) considered analyses of powerful institutions and political elites the main focus of anthropology of policy and politics. However, the difficulty of studying a powerful institution or elites, that is, people in high positions, who are literate, articulate, self conscious and with the power, resources and expertise to control information and protect their reputation is painfully obvious to many researchers (Gilding, 2002; Marcus, 1992; Marshall, 1984; Punch, 1986). In short, in the research context, while the powerless are those who cannot easily refuse to be researched (Skeggs, 1994), the powerful are those who can determine, among other things, some fundamental research processes such as who studies them, how they are studied and for how long (Williams 1989). With such challenges regarding research participants present, the task almost always becomes one marred with unanticipated practical and ethical dilemmas.

2. Research Context/Background and Introduction of the Research Project

To examine the broader research question, 'how do policy makers in Pakistan conceptualize child protection? I used multi-methods of data gathering. This article is based on the ethnographic fieldwork experience of my doctoral research into child protection policy in Pakistan and focuses on the ethical and practical issues that arose while I was interviewing political elite such as parliamentarians, sitting and former federal ministers, department heads and senior bureaucrats. Some were based in the capital city-Islamabad, others, especially those who were retired or not in the Parliament, were approached in their home towns all over the country.

This fieldwork was carried out between January 2010 and August 2010. I was based in Lahore studying newspaper archives in a public library in between interview appointments in Islamabad and elsewhere. In Islamabad, ministries and government departments were under high security. One could not enter the premises unless one had a confirmed appointment. In addition to the law and order and security issues, there was an increased sense of institutional breakdown. Government was seen as corrupt, uninterested and ineffective in delivering services and unaccountable to the masses (International Crisis Group, 2010; Transparency International Corruption Report, 2009). Above all, in Pakistan, there are no national statements or standards for the ethical conduct of research (Jabeen, 2009).

I conducted 26 interviews (15 men, 9 women) in all, with sitting and former ministers, parliamentarians, serving and retired bureaucrats and representatives of non-government national and international organizations. Interviews were conducted in English, Urdu, and a mix of English and Urdu as the participants chose and took place in offices, homes, federal parliamentary lodges and social clubs of the participants. Most participants were aged, some retired or at the highest level of their career; some were in late forties or early fifties. All interviews resulted from a prior request for interview, although some were confirmed at such short a notice that it allowed for only a few hours to reach the place.

3. Issues faced during the fieldwork

In research, teaching and publications, there is a tendency to sell students an almost idealised model of the research which is neat, tidy, smooth and unproblematic. There is little mention of how the reality of field hazards is experienced, mostly 'situationally, even spontaneously' (Punch, 1986, p.13). It is edited out of social research theory, method and ethics or there remains insufficient discussion of the practical and ethical issues faced by researchers,

especially those conducting research in different (from the global North) context.

3.1. Ethical issues

In the wake of the Nuremburg trials, hardly anyone would claim all research as objective, neutral and beneficial. Today, we have the disciplinary codes of ethics and institutional review bodies to oversee the research process. These professional codes of ethics tend to adopt the assumptions behind bio-medical research, which has often been performed on vulnerable individuals and groups, and are typically focused on protecting the powerless researched (Gray, 1979; King, 2009; Wax, 1987). Based on my recent fieldwork, I share the concern and experience of the researchers, who, time and again, find these codes narrowly focused, irrelevant, naïve or insufficient to guide their actions through the different field condition within which they work (Gallaher, 2009; Gallihar, 1980; Punch, 1986; Wax, 1980; Wedel, 2001). Being based in a leading research university in Australia, I was following the university's Human Ethics policy and guidelines based on the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (2007) and National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007), together termed 'the code' from here on. In applying the code, I found myself struggling with mainly two ethical issues in the field.

First, the code is mainly concerned with protecting the integrity of the research participants to the relative exclusion of any protection of the researcher. I had to make difficult decisions, faced with the 'take it or leave it' situations of demands for undue favours or cash payments in return for an introduction to/appointment with a potential participant. I term these situations 'take it or leave it' as the potential participants were very busy, important people (in their present position as well as in their role related to child protection policy in Pakistan), and hard to access and I knew that it was my only chance to interview them. In addition, I had to make these decisions on the spot because I knew from my previous experience that these were the places I could not enter/reach again. For example, in one case it was a highly cordoned off, select entry government building where I went with an insider and in another case, I was invited to interview someone and I travelled some hundreds of kilometers over night to reach the place.

According to the National Statement, it is appropriate that participants may be paid for time involved (chapter 2.2). However, does it apply to the 'gatekeepers' such as a personal secretary or staff officer of a person in high position who might or might not be authorized by this person to act in such a manner. Also there is the question of whether it applies to very well paid professionals – where it could well be argued that participating in research is a professional obligation. This is especially hard to assess in a political and

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administrative atmosphere where corruption is the norm from bottom to the top.

My second area of unease is with the code concerned 'informed consent'. The code requires an informed consent of the participants, which may be expressed orally, in writing or by some other means (2.2.5) depending on the nature, complexity and level of risk (2.2.5a) and participants' personal and cultural circumstances (2.2.5b). In my ethics protocol, I opted for a 'written consent' considering the status of research participants as educated, well-informed and powerful. However, the reality of the field was different. Many politicians were willing to issue a 'press statement' or to do a 'meet the press' session on child protection issue rather than sitting for an in-depth interview and signing a consent form. Others offered to talk to me over the phone but would not allow recording and without acknowledging any direct or indirect responsibility for the information shared.

Similarly, bureaucrats had different stories to share when the sound recorder was switched off at the end of an 'official interview'. Signing a consent form might have given them a sense of accountability, which they are not used to. In this sense, the ethical principle of informed consent served to protect the powerful, who, in a democratic set up, are publically accountable to the citizens. This is the situation which has long been debated among social and political scientists as to whether the powerful, when they are publically accountable figures, warrant same protection as a powerless participant? (Gallagher, 1973, 1980; Punch, 1986; Wedel, 2001). Some have claimed that written consent can be counter-productive, often reduce participation (Martin-Ortega & Herman, 2009; Reiss, 1979) while refusals seem more frequent from high-status, powerful people (Pariyadharshini, 2003; Punch, 1986). Others argue that factors such as custom, tradition, prestige, social obligations and past experiences can all affect informed consent (Mulder et al., 2000; Wax, 1980).

In my case, powerful political personalities typically consented to an interview when I was introduced to them by one of their own, for example, by a leader from their own party or another parliamentarian from the same area. Comments such as, 'I could not refuse XYZ, who sent you to me, but, can you please switch off the recorder for a while' or 'this is for your information only as you are like one of our own, owing to the fact that XYZ sent you' are all too common in my recordings. This is far from the ideal form of informed consent the codes require. Further, in some instances when I was introduced to the potential participant/s by a third person, 'here is a friend from Australia, doing something related to children's policy', they took me for an Australian (and not necessarily a student) and agreed to be interviewed by an 'expert from abroad with stylistic quirks and exotic ideas' (Bell, 1993), which they might not had they known that I am a Pakistani, studying in an Australian university. I did not

feel comfortable with this vague introduction, but it worked more often than my accurate personal and project description.

3.2. Access issues

Gaining access to research sites is never a given. Most researchers acknowledge that getting access to the powerful/elite is even difficult and daunting (Czarniawska, 2007; Gilding, 2002; Lee, 1995; Norman, 2009; Priyadharshini, 2003; Thomson, 2009). In particular, as Catherine Marshall put it in a widely quoted article written by her some 26 years ago, 'actors in policy arena have a talent and affinity for pressuring to get their way. They are playing politics; they would not survive if they did not' (Marshall, 1984, p.236). In Pakistan, they do not only 'play politics' in their present positions, they are also fully aware of their 'elite' status otherwise-majority of them belong to a small privileged class of feudals and aristocrats (Gardezi, 1991; Jones, 2002). In a weak democratic system, they seem to be accountable to no one. They are adept at maintaining their privacy even when serving a public office. On the top of that, continuous security concerns have legitimated their insistence on keeping their separation from the public as safeguarding national security, albeit, protecting the regime and political status quo, is a goal which no one seems to challenge in Pakistan.

Children issues may be acute, but, the policy and administrative circle dealing with them is not big in Pakistan. As informed by the experience of other researchers and my own, I conducted as much desk research as possible before going to the field (Lee, 1995) and I could identify the key policy players (Martin-Ortega & Herman, 2009) and planned to 'snow ball' if some were missing from my list. From my previous experience with government in Pakistan, I knew that I would get no response if I send e-mails-in most cases, a department website would have been last up dated couple of years ago at any given time.

So, I arrived in Pakistan and embarked on a futile attempt (as known later) of sending my 'project information sheet' and request for an interview via post and facsimile, which are the 'proper and official' ways of doing business with government and by calling at the public access phone numbers of the concerned ministries and departments. I did not get a single response in approximately one month. Then I decided to visit the ministries to access people in person. I came to know that due to security concerns, members of public are not allowed to enter the premises of a ministry until they had an appointment with an official inside-how would I get an appointment? I was clueless. However, one thing that was clear by that time, was that it cannot be done through 'proper', 'formal' and 'official' channels.

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My only resort proved to be the Pakistani 'high-context' culture characterized by relationship-building, face-saving, indirect problem-solving and communication strategies (Hall, 1976; Cohen, 1997). In using and explaining the Pakistani norms of having '*ta-aruf*' and '*sifarish*', which can be loosely translated as 'introduction' and 'reference or recommendation', I am borrowing from Courtney Radsch (2009), who has given an excellent account of Arab traditions of '*Wasta*' and '*Isnad*'- connection and credibility, in gaining access to her research sites in Egypt and Lebanon. Similar to the Arab context, '*taaruf*' is a means to informal networking and '*sifarish*' can be seen as facilitation in getting things done. People oblige each other with '*taaruf*' and '*sifarish*' out of good will, generosity, desire to help or with ulterior motives of increasing their network or for reciprocation.

I gained access as following; a family member or a friend, especially some journalist friends know some one, that is, have '*taaruf*', in political or official circles, introduce me to this person, that is, I get '*taaruf*' and the person then refer/recommend me -'*sifarish*'- to the potential participant and by sitting for an interview with me, the participant will show respect to and/or oblige the referee. My own credentials, at least I thought so, such as international reputation of the university I belonged as student, and prestige of the university I worked with in Pakistan before starting my PhD, meant nothing to most potential participants of the study (Martin-Ortega & Herman, 2009).

The practice of '*taaruf*' and '*sifarish*' worked especially well with bureaucrats who have a great regard for their batch mates or seniors. However, with my middle class background and early career as an academic, I did not have any family, friends or colleagues influential enough, who happened to know ministers or politicians, as they mostly belong to the feudal upper classes. Mostly, I or people in my networks could approach the public relation officers (PROs), personal assistant (PA) or personal secretaries (PS) of the politicians - the gatekeepers, who are trained to protect the privacy of the elite (Burrage, 2002; Marcus, 1992; Marshall, 1984). For example, the PRO and the PS of one minister gave me three appointments and cancelled over a period of three months & when I could meet the minister through '*taaruf*' and '*sifarash*' at her home, she did not know about even single such appointment.

In some cases, the issue was as much of gaining access as of gaining it on my terms. These were the situations where traditional conception of the researcher as powerful is challenged yet again (Wedel et al., 2005). Some senior politicians agreed to talk to me on the condition that I would only listen to them and would ask no questions. In at least one case, this person was a key decision maker, so, I agreed for this talk rather than interview. Further, whether I gained or denied access was, at times, contextual. It was determined by factors such as prestige, personal situation and experiences of the potential participants. For example, days before I started my fieldwork,

Shazia - a 12 years old girl child domestic with serious bodily injuries was left in the emergency of a public hospital in Lahore by her employers stating that she injured herself falling from stairs. She died due to those injuries and her parents registered a murder case against the employers (*DAWN* 23 Januray 2010). 'Shazia case' became the new term for domestic child labour. Ministries related to children issues such as social welfare and labor were under serious media and public criticism. So, an initial response from all those I contacted was one of avoidance. One particular department head refused an interview explicitly on account of this case, despite receiving my 'project information sheet' and my telephonic explanation that this interview was not focused on the 'Shazia case'.

3.3. Security and safety issues

Nancy Howell in her *Surviving Fieldwork: A report of the Advisory Panel on the Health and Safety in Fieldwork* (1990) made first serious endeavor, to appraise the hazards of the field in a systematic and objective manner. She evaluated 80 separate variables, from sunburn, robbery, malaria, military attack, to suspicion of espionage, acute conflict and political turmoil that a sample of 236 members of American Anthropological Association reported in her survey. Almost two decades later, Sriram, King, Mertus, Martin-Ortega and Herman are still lamenting the absence of academic analysis and debate on this important issue, thus, researchers continually reinventing the wheel (Mertus, 2009, p.1). Off course, we are better informed, than the past, in terms of the nature and types of potential risks in the field, however, what is lacking is the improved operationalisation of security for fieldwork.

What I experienced was mixed feelings of shock, disbelief, admiration and even gratitude on part of some participants whom I reached at places that they themselves thought beyond reach or not so safe and that affected their response to my questions. For example, an old retired person, who is still active in his child protection work but keeps a low key profile and living in a remote town could not believe that I had not only traced his whereabouts, but actually reached there to interview him. To be useful, he was trying hard, even asking his colleagues for help to refresh his memories on some issues. Similarly, one former minister took me for an Australian (of South Asian origin may be!), regretted that I had to do my fieldwork in the heat of May amidst power break downs, gave me much more time than initially agreed and went into 'behind the scene' details of some important child protection policy issues. However, there were those too, who thought that I am there, risking my safety and comfort, because I am a Western agent, working on the (so called) anti-Pakistan agenda of the global North.

3.4. Identity issues

Different researchers may face different risks because of identifiers such as their origin, affiliation, race, age or gender (Martin-Ortega & Herman, 2009). According to Stephen Brown (2009) a researcher's self-representation and reputation are important in fieldwork. In my case, my identity in terms of country of origin, that is, Pakistan and country of residence at the time of research, that is, Australia was constantly being negotiated. During the fieldwork, I was 'insider', 'outsider' and 'returner' (Lee, 1995) at different times. It had both advantages and disadvantages. Those who were proud of themselves as Pakistani (which is not an easy thing these days when Pakistan is badly struggling with images of terrorism, corruption and lawlessness) did relate with me as Pakistani-an insider or a returner. For them, I was a 'local girl who had done well' (Leonard 1993 cf Lee, 1995, p. 25) and my work was extension of their desire to do something for the country. Though, some expressed their reservations based on their past experience and observation when Pakistanis, especially those based in Western universities or in local NGOs and media, have fabricated data (Thapar-Bjorkert, 1999) and tarnished country image to get published or receive funding. Another downside, of being native, was that of limiting my ability to ask questions (Lee, 1995). The standard response towards questions on various aspects of Pakistani culture related to children was, 'you know, don't you?'. Sometimes, in order to get participant's views on some local/cultural issue, I had to position myself 'for' or 'against' it, which might have effected their response.

As mentioned elsewhere, some potential participants took me for an Australian of Pakistani origin may be, and agreed to be interviewed believing that they are being hospitable to a foreigner. There were also those who looked me in the light of stereotypes they believed characterize most Westerners, such as an advocate of child rights and would say things, at least initially, that they think I wanted to listen. Yet, in Pakistani culture, especially in the male dominated political circles, it was hard to negotiate a working relationship based on equality. Age is significant in Pakistan as elsewhere in south Asia (Thapar-Bjorkert, 1999). It means elder hood, respect and power (Bell, 1993) and it is not counted in one's years but in terms of age difference between the two people. Deference towards elder is expected (Thapar-Bjorkert, 1999) and whenever the participants felt that my questions challenge their assumptions, I was told, 'I am like your father/grandfather, you listen to me and don't question' or 'I have more experience than your age'.

Further, my single-marital status further pushed me to a less adult status (Gurney, 1985) wherein well-intentioned senior politicians and retired bureaucrats assumed responsibility of my safe arrival to their places and return 'home' despite my assurances that I can look after myself and I have been independent, living abroad, since long. On that, I was told, 'but not here,

in these circumstances (of poor law and order), here in our town, you are our responsibility'. The stereotypes for women researchers in policy setting that Marshall (1984) identified some 26 years ago, still hold true in Pakistan. According to Marshall, many policy actors are accustomed to see women in typical roles of naïve, harmless and admiring listeners (1984). I was told in surprise and admiration that 'you have done your homework', when participants found me well-prepared, well-informed and difficult to lead astray (Brown, 2009). It happened mostly on my questions related to the background/other side of events and to legalities and practicalities of certain policy decisions. Women, even if they are qualified in political and policy studies, are not expected to follow political negotiations and policy implications. In short, I was stuck with some identifiers, some of which I could negotiate and others could not.

Conclusion

To sum up, I tend to think that my successes or failures in negotiating ethical issues, access, personal safety and identity were more situational, even spontaneous, depending on my personal sensibilities, skills and past fieldwork experience, and on good will, generosity and support of those who facilitated and/or supported me in the process. However, my formal training in standard research methods courses and in courses designed for postgraduate research students or my reading research methods texts was not of much use. These courses and texts hardly ever include a mention of the ethical and practical issues of actual research in the field, let alone proposing any coping strategies. Most important of these issues is too much focus of the current ethical research protocols and standards, developed in the global North, on protection of the researched based on assumption that the researched is a vulnerable subject. In this article, I have demonstrated that this assumption is justified neither in research with powerful political elite nor in a different cultural context such as the one in the global South. This is where I want to contribute through this article. I am not asking for or proposing a 'blue print' approach to fieldwork, which I believe is the death of social research. But, I do want to argue for a need of an open academic debate and analysis of issues relating to field research and suggest how sharing these experiences could be useful for other researchers working in similar conditions.

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