

Navigating Methodological Approaches in Sensitive Research

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In April 2015, I left Cambridge to embark on fieldwork in Sukkur, Pakistan. The study was centred around the topic of blasphemy and aimed at understanding blasphemy-related violence in Pakistan through a criminological lens. Blasphemy is criminalised in Pakistan with severe penalties of capital punishment and life imprisonment. Blasphemy laws are disproportionately used to target religious minorities, and are enforced largely through vigilante violence. The state and criminal justice system appear either silent or complicit, and this phenomenon has a profound effect on communities.

Sukkur is a city of 1 million people on the banks of the river Indus in Sindh.² Sindh is renowned for its principles of Sufism, peace and multiculturalism.³ Historically many religious communities (especially Hindus and Muslims) have peacefully coexisted.⁴ It is also home to my paternal family. As an insider on the outside, fieldwork turned into a larger journey to critically analyse societal phenomena I had observed over the years: intolerance, overt Islamisation, and increasing levels of violence and criminality. In 2006 the only two churches in the city were destroyed by angry mobs based on an accusation of blasphemy.⁵ This was personally disturbing as it exposed the inequality and discrimination faced by religious minorities,⁶ and the changing nature of violence in Sindh. This incident sparked my inquiry into blasphemy, law, and violence in an attempt to situate these trends within a larger narrative.

I. Sensitive Research

Blasphemy is considered taboo and controversial. Often simply speaking about blasphemy is considered to be blasphemy itself. The research potentially posed a substantial threat to those involved and was 'sensitive' in nature.⁷ The security and safety of the participants and researcher was a major concern. I was aware of the

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² 'Sindh population surges by 81.5 pc, households by 83.9 pc' *The News* (Lahore, 2 April 2012).

³ Alice Albinia, *Empires of the Indus: The Story of a River* (John Murray Publishers 2012).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ 'Churches Torched over Blasphemy Rumor' *World Watch Monitor* (Karachi, 2 February 2006).

⁶ Menaal Munshey and Haya Emaan Zahid, 'Inequality and Discrimination faced by Religious Minorities in Pakistan' (*Oxford Human Rights Hub Blog*, 31 January 2017) <<http://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/inequality-and-discrimination-faced-by-religious-minorities-in-pakistan/>> accessed 15 August 2017.

⁷ Raymond M. Lee, *Doing research on sensitive topics* (Sage Publications 1993).

'presentational' danger in the form of aggression, hostility, or violence I might face.⁸ In these challenging circumstances, fieldwork required reflexivity, improvisation and flexibility.⁹

These conundrums are rarely explained in Western methodological training. Most criminological research is conducted in developed countries, whereas it is the global South that faces the highest levels of violence.¹⁰ As a result, theoretical knowledge and methodological training is skewed towards applicability in contexts where broadly the rule of law, democracy, and legitimacy of the state are upheld. Although we are taught how to tackle ethical considerations within a Western context, the same assumptions don't apply in relatively fragile environments. Fieldwork acts as a reminder to question the underlying assumptions of our methodological training and begin to create more appropriate ethical rules in the given context.

I planned a short period of fieldwork to minimise attention drawn to asking questions about a sensitive subject in a small community. This may traditionally be considered inappropriate for in-depth qualitative research, however, methodology must be adapted to the context safely and sensitively. For example, conventional advice is not to let participants know of your home address. However, in Sukkur this proved to be impossible. Sukkur is a relatively small community where members of the community are easily identifiable. Most of the participants were familiar with a member of my family, and knew exactly where we lived. Although this was not advisable, it was important to recognise that "[m]any important empirical and theoretical problems taken up in the social sciences can be thoroughly and honestly studied only by placing oneself in situations that may compromise safety and security in a normative or corporeal sense".¹¹

The methodological training I had received thus far was largely ill equipped to tackle situations of physical insecurity, and many decisions were instinctual based on a contextual understanding. The general guidance, for example, is to contact the police in dangerous situations. This advice was largely misplaced in Pakistan where the police is considered the most untrustworthy state institution and the topic being studied implicates the police.¹² Instead, I formed an exit strategy from the interview

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ruth Armstrong, 'From Paper Ethics To Real World Research: Supervising Ethical Reflexivity When Taking Risks In Research With The 'Risky' in Karen Lumsden (ed.), *Reflexivity In Criminological Research* (Palgrave Macmillan 2014).

¹⁰ Christopher Minkton, Masako Tanaka, Mark Tomlinson, David L Streiner, Lil Tonmyr, Bandy X Lee, Jane Fisher, Kathy Hegadoren, Joam Evans Pim, Shr-Jie Sharlenna Wang and Harriet L MacMillan, 'Global research priorities for interpersonal violence prevention: a modified Delphi study' (Bulletin of the World Health Organization, 20 October 2017) <<http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/95/1/16-172965/en/>> accessed 15 August 2017.

¹¹ Stephen Lyng, 'Dangerous Methods: Risk Taking and the Research Process' in Jeff Ferrell and Mark S. Hamm (eds), *Ethnography at the Edge* (Northeastern University Press 1998).

¹² Transparency International Pakistan, 'National Corruption Perception Survey' (Transparency International, 28 December 2011) <<http://www.transparency.org.pk/report/ncps2011/ncps2011.pdf>> accessed 1 April 2017.

location. Since I was not driving myself and public transport is largely unreliable and unsafe, I nominated a few contacts whom I could rely on to immediately pick me up in case of an emergency. This proved difficult when I was conducting research on an island in the Indus, with limited accessibility to the mainland! These situations highlight the importance of building trust and remaining reflexive when conducting fieldwork in a context that is largely untouched by research.

II. Identity and Building Trust

The study aimed at “getting the description right” in a “humanistic [...] creative and intimate” manner.¹³ A qualitative research method consisting of interviews and semi-structured interviews was considered most appropriate to “dig deep to get a complete understanding of the phenomenon” and create a “meaningful picture of a [...] multifaceted situation”.¹⁴ The researcher is thus the primary instrument for data collection and analysis.¹⁵ “Ultimately the outcome of the interview or focus group depends on the knowledge, sensitivity and empathy of the interviewer”.¹⁶ In fieldwork as in life, there are crucial moments when aspects of identity intersect fluidly, shifting their meaning in context.¹⁷ The researcher's identity is inevitably involved in the way they interpret participants' responses.¹⁸

I am part of a small proportion of the population that is viewed as privileged by the majority. I am a twenty-six year old woman, and was born and brought up in Karachi. I have lived abroad since 2009 while training to be a lawyer and criminologist. I have had the privilege of studying abroad mainly because of financial ability. Building trust between myself and the participants required offering a large amount of information about myself and often answering uncomfortable questions. I was careful to affirm mutual understanding and friendliness to break down these barriers, often discussing memories of growing up in Sukkur, and how the city has changed over my lifetime. I was asked, especially by the Muslim women in the study, why I did not wear a headscarf and why I conversed with men so openly. A Hindu man asked me how I felt safe on an island after sunset without a male member of my family as a chaperone. Many Christians asked me what it felt like to live in a ‘Christian’ country (i.e. the UK), and how I felt capable to live independently without a father or

¹³ Alison Liebling, ‘Description at the Edge? I-It/I-Thou Relations and Action in Prisons Research’ [2015] 4(1) IJCSD 18.

¹⁴ Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, *Practical Research: Planning and Design* (Prentice Hall 2013) 147.

¹⁵ Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (Jossey-Bass 2014) 15.

¹⁶ Steiner Kvale, *Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing* (Sage Publications 1996) 105.

¹⁷ Stephanie Kane, ‘Armed Robbery and Ethnographic Connection in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil’ in Karen Lumsden (ed.), *Reflexivity In Criminological Research* (Palgrave Macmillan 2014).

¹⁸ Martyn Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide for small-scale research projects* (4th ed, Open University Press 2011).

brother accompanying me. Many of these views linked to patriarchy and a culture of “women’s subordination” which I gently explained I did not subscribe to.¹⁹ A Muslim man asked me to explain and justify my religious beliefs, which I did by highlighting aspects of our common Sufi beliefs. Police officers often accused me of leaving Pakistan instead of dealing with the religiosity, extremism and violence I was studying. They saw this as cowardice in comparison to their frontline positions. I ended up sharing difficult and personal experiences, which I had not prepared for. Many Christians accused me of tokenism. It was their view that I could never understand what they experience on a daily basis, because I was privileged to be born a Muslim. To them, I was part of the antagonistic Muslim community and just by virtue of that could be seen as untrustworthy. I reminded the participants that in fact there is more that binds us culturally than simply our religion, and that most Muslims are not supporters or sympathisers of blasphemy-related violence. In fact, my work was a critique of the phenomenon.

While building trust and sharing stories, I was conscious of the need to be perceived as impartial. This often required masking instinctive responses when participants made shocking or borderline offensive statements. Police officers, for example, admitted to resorting to the use of force: “The criminals that are documented, and those we have information on, we usually kill them in encounters. We do this in Sukkur specially. People go to Court to protest this, and even though we are making society safer by doing this, the Court doesn’t support us. We have to face all these challenges personally” (Police Officer). In this statement, he explicitly acknowledged the use of extrajudicial killings of ‘criminals’, which the police increasingly use as an alternative to the formal, legal court process.²⁰ I had an ethical responsibility not to condone such acts, and was careful to remain impartial in my reaction and demeanour. In discussions with Muslim men, blasphemy-related violence was largely justified: “People just can’t bear this type of insult (blasphemy), it is too close to their heart, they have no tolerance or patience for it. People feel that they must act, even if the state doesn’t” (Muslim Man). To probe further, I asked the controversial question of whether Ahmadis were considered Muslims or are committing blasphemy by practicing their religion: “What if I told you I was Ahmadi?” Suddenly the mood in the room became highly tense, and the participants were outraged at the suggestion. They verged on ordering me to leave, but I reeled the situation back in by assuring them this was just a hypothetical question. It provides

¹⁹ Menaal Munshey, ‘Sheroes of the Subcontinent’ (*Sisterhood Magazine*, 6 June 2017) <<http://sister-hood.com/menaal-munshey/sheroes-of-the-subcontinent/>> accessed 14 August 2017.

²⁰ Asian Human Rights Commission, ‘A call for an immediate intervention to stop extrajudicial killings’ (*Asian Human Rights Commission*, 27 October 2014). <<http://www.humanrights.asia/news/alrc-news/human-rightscouncil/hrc27/ALRC-CWS-27-10-2014/?searchterm=extrajudicial%20killings%20pakistan>> accessed 1 April 2017.

an indication of the emotionally charged atmosphere surrounding blasphemy and religious beliefs.

I embarked on this study with the approach of being solely the interviewer, and quickly realised that these interactions would be organic conversations where I had to be forthcoming. I engaged in ‘active’ and ‘creative’ interviewing²¹. Instead of remaining impersonal as is suggested in traditional interviewing, I was willing to share my own experiences to activate the respondents’ knowledge in ways that were appropriate to the research aims.²² Although this blurred lines to some extent, without this it is unlikely I would have been able to elicit the authentic stories and life experiences that were shared with me. Knowledge was co-produced with the researched, and reflexivity was essential to this process.²³

III. Negotiating Access

There were many social dynamics involved in gaining access to participants during fieldwork with “the researcher's right to be present being continually renegotiated”.²⁴ The aim of the sample was to gather a range of perspectives from a variety of groups, including Hindus, Muslims, Christians and police officers. Access to participants was gained through discussions with family members and friends who acted as sponsors.²⁵ Sponsors acted as a “bridge” to “a new social world” and “patrons” who “simply by associating with the researcher, helped to secure the trust of those in the setting”.²⁶ Prior to conducting fieldwork I tried to contact these sponsors to set up interviews with participants. They were largely unresponsive, and none of the interviews or discussions were scheduled prior to my arrival in Sukkur. Despite being taught the importance of planning it was proving to be difficult to plan this research adequately in advance. I arrived in Sukkur worrying about the efficacy of the timeframe, and soon found that everything began to come together.

Prior to the police interviews, I felt unsure of the safety of the environment I was entering as it is male dominated and unfamiliar. Ironically, it was only for the police interviews that I felt I needed to take extra precautions. Due to these hesitations, I requested a community officer who works with a local charity in Sukkur to accompany me. I am a consultant with this charity and did not have to pay the community officer. The community officer was involved in off-the-record chats with police officers, however, he did not ask any questions during the interviews to limit his effect on these interviews. Despite the commonly-held view that the presence of a

²¹ Jack Douglas, *Creative interviewing* (Sage Publications 1985).

²² James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium, ‘Active Interviewing’ in Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein (eds.), *Postmodern Interviewing* (Sage Publications 2003).

²³ Aaron Winter and Karen Lumsden, ‘Reflexivity In Criminological Research’ in Karen Lumsden (ed) *Reflexivity In Criminological Research* (Palgrave Macmillan 2014).

²⁴ Raymond Lee, *Doing research on sensitive topics* (Sage Publications 1993) 122.

²⁵ Jack Douglas, *Creative interviewing* (Sage Publications 1985).

²⁶ Ibid 131.

person other than the researcher might skew results, it is my view that in fact having a male companion during this phase of data collection actually meant the police officers were not dismissive of a young 20-something year old girl, did not feel uncomfortable about being alone with a female stranger, and may have added legitimacy to my own presence. This is another example of an unorthodox practice, which I considered necessary in the context despite the potential limitations it might pose.

IV. Contextual Methodological Approaches

Social phenomena and societies are not the same, and methodology must be adapted to reflect this. This article is a contribution to bridging gaps in methodological approaches, while highlighting the benefit of adopting a reflexive approach in criminological research.²⁷ It is important to confront sensitive ethical challenges candidly, especially in fragile contexts where researcher safety is not guaranteed and many traditional rules do not apply. It is time for criminological and social science researchers to take a concerted approach to developing innovative and context-appropriate thinking on research methodology.

²⁷ Aaron Winter and Karen Lumsden, 'Reflexivity In Criminological Research' in Karen Lumsden (ed) *Reflexivity In Criminological Research* (Palgrave Macmillan 2014).