

ISSUES IN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH: FEMALE RESEARCHER'S DILEMMA IN A RURAL SETTING

ABSTRACT

In this paper I explore the issue of insider/outsider status with reference to the ethnographic research especially in terms of positionality, creation of knowledge and power. The data used herein was situated in the larger study conducted for the doctoral dissertation. During the process of research I frequently had to re-evaluate my strategies to interact with the respondents and for that matter I was constantly switching back & forth between my positions as an insider and outsider. In the rural community of Cholistan desert of Southern Pakistan, where I conducted ethnographic field research for my doctoral dissertation during the year 1998-1999, I had to face the dilemma that how to position myself, i.e., as an insider or outsider. I was considered as an insider because of my ethnic roots in the area, as well as my grasp over the language. Yet, at the same time, being an urban and educated female, I was an outsider especially in the presence of their relatives from around the area. During research my dilemma was and how to locate myself in relationship to different individuals, without compromising the objectivity of my research.

Key Words: *Pakistan, Cholistan desert, Insider/ outsider, pastoralists, Ethics of caring, passionate detachment*

INTRODUCTION

Field research is the systematic process of investigating an issue through face to face interactions & observations of everyday life. The researcher conducting field research in a rural setting has to tackle various issues, like where to conduct the research,

Dr. Rukhsana Hassan

Assistant Professor

Head Department of Gender Studies

Fatima Jinnah Women University

The Mall, Rawalpindi

drrukhsanahassan@gmail.com

whether to conduct fieldwork as an insider or an outsider to the research communities, and whether to conduct research in a setting which is familiar or unfamiliar to the researcher (Naples 2003; Bailey 2007, Macionis 2005). According to Carol A Bailey (2007:38) “opinion are mixed on whether it is better to conduct field research in a familiar or an unfamiliar setting. Some argue that if a person is familiar with the dynamics of a setting from participants’ perspectives than there is a little need to undertake the research.” Whereas, other scholars are of the opinion that familiarity with the setting provides researcher a firm foundation on which to build on.

In the rural community of Cholistan desert of Southern Pakistan, where I conducted ethnographic field research for my doctoral dissertation during the year 1998-1999, I also had to face the dilemma that how to position myself, i.e., as an *insider* or *outsider*. I was considered as an *insider* because of my ethnic roots in the area, as well as my grasp over the language. The locals thought of me as one of them in the presence of *Punjabi* farmers or government officials whenever they visited the area. Yet, at the same time, being an urban and educated female, I was an outsider especially in the presence of their relatives from around the area. The predicament I had to face was which methodological perspective I need to adopt? Whether the strategy of “passionate detachment” (Haraway 1985) or “ethics of caring” (Collins 1990), and how to locate myself in relationship to different individuals, without compromising the objectivity of my research.

In this paper I explore the issue of insider/outsider status with reference to the ethnographic research especially in terms of positionality, creation of knowledge and power. The data used herein was situated in the larger study conducted for the doctoral dissertation. During the process of research I frequently had to re-evaluate my strategies to interact with the respondents and for that matter I was constantly switching back & forth between my positions as an insider and outsider. I had to, as Sharon Bays (1994 as quoted in Naples 2003) has demonstrated; renegotiate my identity as an insider or outsider throughout my fieldwork. The research not only provided me opportunities but also challenges to study ‘my people’. It is my position that my association with same ethnic group & gender, knowledge of the language were uniting forces and created a bond of sisterhood during the process of interviewing, on the other hand my urban residence, socio-economic & educational status was the force that created distance between me & my respondents. Although the common culture between me & the community was helpful in gaining access, and developing rapport, but at the same time I had to decide how to maintain my naiveté in the culture that was familiar to me and how much distance to be kept in order to maintain the objectivity of the research.

The objective of the research, as Brayton (1997) has rightly indicated, is to capture and accurately convey "reality", be it the reality of an event or experience or the truth of a population and for that matter the researcher want to include the participant's perspective and voices in all aspects of the research process. Recent discussions on the issue of insider/outsider status have revealed the fact that the boundaries between the two positions are very fluid (Eppley 2006; Kee 2000; Lee 2000; Naples 2003). According to Oakley (1981) being an 'insider' to particular communities enables researcher to understand and empathize with participants' point of view. As according to Naples (2003) the proponents of "insider" research are of the opinion that non-natives may not be able to gain in-depth understandings of cultural practices and beliefs that are available to insiders as they have greater linguistic competence and can blend in well with the community members as compared to outsiders. On the other hand, according to her, advocates of 'outsider' research insist that non natives can be more objective in observing & analyzing the social setting and cultural beliefs. Scholars have documented that the processes & the outcomes of field research are greatly affected by the reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the community members (Bailey 2007).

Feminists believe that the traditional social science research is dominated by male bias as well as patriarchal values and beliefs which shape both the construction and definition of how research is done, data is interpreted & knowledge is determined. They have also questioned the issues of power and control in the research process, i.e., how problems are defined, which knower's are identified and are given and how research findings are constructed. It has been well documented that there exist power issues between the researcher and the researched as well as how the researcher's decision making in the field affected participant observation and the role of participants' in affecting the direction of the research (Brayton 1997; Eppley 2006; Ntseane 2000 Mariam & Muhammad 2000; Anderson & Jack 1991 Cotterrill 1992, Lee 2000; Naples 2003). According to Lather (1988:571), "the overt ideological goal of feminist research in the human sciences is to correct both the *invisibility* and *distortion* of female experience." Brayton (1997) is of the opinion that in traditional research, knowledge of women's lives has been absent or constructed from the perspective of men.

Reinharz (1992:262-263) is of the opinion that in contrast to much of mainstream research which generally seeks to attain value neutrality, feminist researchers will often integrate personal experiences into their research. Along with it, the social location of the researcher (e.g. age, race, orientation, class) is also one of the important factors in shaping the research process. This close relationship between the researcher & the respondents, according to Reinharz (1992:262) has also initiated a

debate among feminists researcher about "how to walk that fine line and "work out the tension between objectivity and subjectivity". Charmaz & Mitchell (1997:194 as cited in Naples 2003:32) are of the opinion that a researcher has to find a middle ground between "deference to the subjects' views" and "audible authorship" and stress that they do not pretend that their stories present autonomous truth, but neither do they share the belief that ethnography is biased. This middle ground in turn will address the dilemma of "privileging the researcher's voice over others whose lives were the subject of inquiry" (Naples 2003:31).

Naples (2003) is of the opinion that a feminist researcher enables respondents to share their deeply felt experiences. They acknowledge that power is infused in social relations including relationships between the researcher & respondents. Brayton (1997) believes that women as researchers bring their own experiences and history into the role of researcher and the research process. The feminist researcher may be both insider and/or outsider to the environment and topic they are exploring. As insider, they have a stronger understanding of the dynamics of social relationships that inform the prevailing situation. The issue of inequality may be overcome through the affiliation of the researcher with the real situation where participants may feel more comfortable in sharing information with someone who has the knowledge about the context (Matsumoto, 1996:165). By contrast, the feminist researcher who lives outside the situation being examined may also be able to change the imbalance of the power relations with the participants. Having to explain personal experiences and feelings with an outsider allows women the space to critically assess their own lived realities. It reinforces their location as author and expert to the situation.

It also gives women the opportunity to safely criticize their community, organization or situation without fear of discovery. Striving for balance and equality between researcher and participant entails negotiating the often blurry insider/outsider relationship between the two parties. Feminist scholars like, Naples (2003, 1998a); Bays (1994); Wasserfall (1997); Williams (1996); Smith (1992); Collins (1990) have discussed in detail the issue of power between the researcher & the researched and are of the opinion that the power relations between the two should be non hierarchical. As women, both researcher and participant share a common location in the social world on the basis of their gender and can communicate on the basis of this similarity. It is also a fact that the research on women issues need to recognize the differences between women based on class, religion ethnicity, and geographical locations. According to Naples (2003) this can only be possible when dialogic reflective strategies, which are based on having an ongoing dialogue between and among participants and researchers, are adopted. This strategy was also supported by Susan Stern (1998) who believed that conversational strategy is an integral part of

ethnographic research and points to the significance of friendship which in turn leads to more egalitarian research.

RESEARCH SETTING & METHODS

Cholistan is a vast desert in the southern part of the Bahawalpur division of Punjab province in Pakistan. Lying between 27° 42' and 27° 45' north latitudes and 69° 52' and 73° 05' east longitudes (Arshad, Rao, Akbar 1995), its total area of 26,000 km² (10,399sq miles, 6,400,000 acres) cover about two-thirds of the total land area of Bahawalpur Civil Division and about 8 percent of the total land area of Punjab province (FAO 1993:10). Formerly part of the princely state of Bahawalpur, Cholistan is now administered as part of the districts of Bahawalpur (50% of the area), Rahimyar Khan (40% of the area), and Bahawalnagar (10% of the area). On its west, lies the Thar Desert in Sindh and on its east the vast desert of Rajputana (Rajasthan) in India.

The Cholistan desert is about 480 km long and its width varies from 32 to 192 km. locally, the desert is also known as *rohi*. Cholistan Desert is divided into two distinct regions: because of differences in topography, soil and vegetation, the southern part of Cholistan presents a true picture of desert and is known as **Greater Cholistan**, while the northwestern portion is called **Lesser Cholistan**⁴ Greater Cholistan makes up 70 percent of the total desert area⁵ (FAO 1993). The main human use of the desert is pastoral nomadism. Because of its arid climate and lack of water for irrigation, agricultural activities are limited to the area bordering Lesser Cholistan. The climate in the region is characterized by hot and dry summers with temperature ranges between 50°-53°C. During the summer months, especially in May and June, low pressure triggers very hot dry winds, locally known as *loo*. The temperature during winter ranges from 6°C to 15°C with occasional frost during December.

⁴ . The area of Lesser Cholistan borders the irrigated areas and many pastoralists have their semi permanent settlements in the area of Lesser Cholistan.

⁵ . Lesser Cholistan is devoid of high sand dunes and much of its desert area consists of wide-open level spaces, or flats, of alluvial clay locally known as *dahars*. In fact, these *dahars* were more leveled and smooth as compared to the majority of metallic roads as well as jeepable tracks in the area. Clayey loam dahars with sandy soil support the scrub vegetation. The main vegetation that these dahars can support are *Haloxylon salicornicum* (or which is locally known as *Lana*), and *Haloxylon recurvum* (locally known as *Khar*). Greater Cholistan is characterized by huge sand dunes, predominantly comprising coarse to fine sand or sandy loam, with variable masses and height. The height of these sand dunes ranges from 100-500 feet. The vegetation of these sand dunes differs from place to place depending upon texture and structure of the soil

Settlement of the pastoral nomads selected for the fieldwork was about 45 miles south of Bahawalpur City at *Kakaranwalatoba*⁶. The estimated total population of Cholistan in 1991 was 97,000 (FAO 1993), which is scattered over a large area. This site was chosen because of its population size, ethnic heterogeneity, and broad mix of pastoral and agropastoral activities as well as its proximity to four other settlements. The majority of the population in these settlements belongs to three major clan groupings of the area, **Panwar**, **Channan**, and **Laar**. Apart from these major groups there were households that belong to the **Sheikh** and **Dahey** clans. Around 56% of the households in these settlements derive their sustenance from the livestock they own, while 44% are agro-pastoralists. Within the Cholistani community three categories may be identified on the basis of household herd size and land holdings in 1998-99. Of the 104 households in the sample, representation was ensured from households of all economic strata. The monetary value of these productive assets was calculated by taking the prices quoted by the respondents (also my personal observation) at the time of fieldwork. The three economic strata are:

• Poor (miskeen) 20,000/annum	Less than PRs
• Middle (malдар) 50,000/annum	From PRs. 21,000 to PRs
• Rich (ra'ees) above/annum	From PRs. 51,000 and

Almost all the respondents agreed that the prevailing structure of stratification has emerged on the scene in the recent past because of the concentration of herd ownership in the hands of absentee herd owners and agro-pastoralists, commercialization of livestock and livestock produce, as well as an increased percentage of land ownership. Increased involvement in other economic activities as wage labor, small businesses, and to some extent employment in government departments has also increased economic inequality among Cholistani pastoralists.

⁶ .During the summer months runoffs from the monsoon accumulate in natural or man-made depressions called *tobas*. The life of each toba depends on its size, evaporation, and the number of livestock and humans surrounding it. Some tobas are covered and are specifically for human consumption, and these are known as *kunds*. In Cholistan every clan in the area has specific rights to its water point or toba. Rights to toba mean the right to camp there and to water livestock until the toba dries up. These rights are originally established by excavating the toba and keeping it desilted. The tobas managed by government departments are open to all the pastoral population of the desert, while private toba sare primarily used by their owners. Each toba has a specific name and also serves as a reference point during the pastoral transhumance

Following a period of initial appraisal and rapport building exercises, case study households & key informants were selected in each of the selected settlements ensuring the representation from all socio-economic groups. An extended period of intense interaction with these households and their neighbors enabled the researcher to gather detailed information regarding their life style, socio-cultural values, festivals, religious beliefs as well as political & economic activities. Apart from it information was also collected on the changes that have occurred in the Cholistani community over the period of last two decades, and the affect of these changes on intra-household relationships. In-depth interviews, group discussions, case studies and observational tools were used to gather information on these topics through a process of methodological triangulation. Detailed field notes were recorded. Efforts were made to question intensively both male and female respondents but there may be a female bias to the work that follows as being a female researcher I was more inclined towards the female respondents. In fact it enabled the researcher to gain insight of both male & female perspectives on various issues affecting the lives of Cholistani pastoralists.

During the initial stages of research process I tried to rely on the traditional interviewing. The community members, especially women, used to ask me what benefit they would get out of my work? What is the use of wasting so much time on useless questions? These questions were difficult to answer, and I knew that the benefit flowed in one way only: in my direction. I wanted information from them and I could offer very little in return. These questions had bothered me since the first time I entered the field. Every morning before getting ready for the field I used to ask myself, What right do I have to ask these people questions regarding their lives, their income and assets, and the innermost details of their personal lives and interpersonal relationship. Why would Cholistani women want to talk with me? Why would they like to disclose intimate details of their lives to an urban based, educated and economically privileged woman like me? What would be my reaction if someone from their village would come into my home and start observing me and asking same questions?"

This critical thinking enabled me to reexamine my research methodology. Therefore, instead of depending totally upon the technique of interviewing, I tried to utilize the technique of interpersonal dialogue (especially with women) and group discussions. In this case they used to ask the same questions of me which they were expected to answer, as a result instead of being mainly subjects of research they were participants in it. My life and their life opened to each other. The women were as curious about my life as I was about theirs. They wanted to know more about me, my family life, and my relations with my in-laws and with my husband. They sympathized with my

childlessness and especially, with my sonlessness. Therefore, I found it useful to tell them about my own family affairs. This not only made the setting informal, but also helped me in my discussion with them about the intimate details of their family life. They felt at ease while discussing issues regarding their love and sex life, their relations with their husbands and in-laws. Mayer (1975) has rightly observed that people want a balanced exchange of information with the fieldworker.

Being an outsider, only when I was able to establish a relationship of trust, understanding and friendliness, after a long and tiring effort and spending long hours in conversing informally, sharing and observing their daily work and problems, did women feel free to relate intimate details of their lives. They used to discuss issues that matter to them the most, especially their relationship with their in-laws and their husbands. Once, I was able to develop an intimate relationship with them my *gopa*⁷ became their safe haven. Therefore, they mostly share their information on issues, which can't be discussed in the presence of others, at night in my *gopa*, after they were done with their daily household chores. It was their time, their time of peace and relaxation. I used to listen to their views, and to what they themselves had to say about their own lives. They often started talking about matters that were not very relevant to most of my question but I never intervened. All of their narrations were equally important as they reflected their experiences and their memories of their childhood. During the course of their narration they not only expressed their feelings regarding their overall situation but also their insightful opinion on various issues affecting the population of Cholistan as a whole.

Despite their remoteness and lack of basic social services, they exhibited signs of their awareness regarding various issues affecting their lives. They also realized the importance of education and regretted their lack of it, and believed that the major cause of their poverty is their lack of education. During the field work among Cholistani pastoralists I experienced the advantages and disadvantages of being both insider & outsider. As discussed above common culture, belonging to same ethnic group and gender was a useful tool in establishing rapport, and being accepted by the community members, but at the same time this easy access to all information is not without problems, as Ntseane (2000) has documented, "because of the interlocking nature of culture, gender & power." Reexamining the research methodology not only enabled me to understand the complexity of my insider/outsider status but also shed light on the multidimensional power relation that affected & shaped my research. My positionality was subjected to variations. Having same language and cultural

⁷. Residential unit. *Gopa* is a form of hut made up of leaves and branches covered with cloth. The exterior and interior base walls are then plastered with a mixture of mud and cow-dung.

background I was granted a general insider status, but as I was not the actual resident of the area, therefore I was considered as somewhat of an outsider to the community. My fictive kinship role⁸ and my grasp of the local language reduced the social distance between me and the participant of my research but it did not eliminate it altogether, as the sub-cultural factors like education, urban residence, & economic status I was considered totally different from the community members. Having my ethnic roots in the area, along with the knowledge of the language, I was considered as an insider and they thought of me as one of them in the presence of *Punjabi* farmers or government officials whenever they visited the area. Yet, at the same time, being an urban and educated female, I was an outsider especially in the presence of their relatives from around the area.

Another issue which I had to face as an *insider* was that the participants in a shared culture used, in our conversations, cultural understandings such as language, proverbs & non verbal expressions to explain prevalent issues, & concepts with the assumption that as an insider I would be able to understand which in turn resulted in the problem of interpretation. In Kondo's opinion, "these cultural meanings are themselves multiple & contradictory they cannot be understood without reference to historical, political, & economic discourses" (1990:300-301). Apart from it being a female researcher I had to face the hostility of some women, because I as a woman seemed to be breaking the very norms of self-effacement and humbleness⁹ that they were trying to teach their daughters. They used to wonder why I was trying to reach such heights in education as it wouldn't relieve me from my household duties, and I would have to do the *tookar-bhaji* (cooking of bread and curry) just as they did. Some would say that because I didn't have any kids or mother-in-law, I had no work to do and was free to roam about anywhere. This hostility on part of the women was no surprise to me as I was aware of the fact that my gender was going to stir up contradictory currents emanating from the concurrence of my role as a researcher and my identity as a woman in the society, so I had to maintain a delicate balance

⁸. As a "daughter" or "niece" I used to help out in various errands and as a "granddaughter" I often offered my services in cooking, dish washing, fetching water or repairing clothes. It was customary for married girls to bring gifts when they used to visit their natal families, so I too had to get some gifts for community members whenever I went to Bahawalpur. Although it was impossible for me to bring gifts for all community members every time, I tried to compensate by giving money for their functions, or if someone was going to Bahawalpur to get some vegetables or fruits, tea biscuits or candies.

⁹. My form of speech and few of my actions were quite contrary to what they believe and were trying to teach their daughters, e.g., my addressing of my husband by his first name, asking him to help me with my chores when he was around, my pinpointing when he was wrong and not waiting for him to finish eating (rather eating together), so on and so forth.

between them. I had to be on guard in order not to provoke social and sexual hostility. I had to be very careful though, not to make village women suspicious and threatened by my talking to their men alone. I was always careful to ensure that I was not entirely on my own with a male informant, and used to talk to men in the courtyard or in the open and maintained a reasonable distance with them by immediately assuming the role of daughter, niece, or sister.

Throughout my fieldwork there was a constant tension within me to appear traditional and yet gain acceptability as a professional, and while accepting certain norms I had to make sure that I did not completely conform to their female stereotype. The fact I was doing research was not important but how to keep my family ties intact (despite my childlessness) was. Almost all my female respondents wanted to advise me on how to manage this tragedy and kept the interest of my husband intact. They were curious about my family background, the number of brothers I have, and about my education. The most frequently asked question was about the benefits of my research to them and how it will affect their life and how it will solve their problems. Despite their good intentions, their perceptions and mine regarding data collection didn't always coincide. They used to get bored and tired of repetitious questioning, as they saw no need for me to interview different households and male and female members of the household repeatedly.

Another aspect which made me an outsider in the community was my social status, as all my respondents both males & females had low economic & educational background. So the interviewees felt that I was an outsider to the community. Issue of power was another dimension that I have to negotiate. For example my academic status was not a threat to women in the community, but my urban residence and my norms were somewhat threatening to them. As discussed earlier while conducting ethnographic field research, I had to face a challenging question that relates to the location of me in relation to different residents of the communities without compromising the quality of my research.

In order to tackle with the issue I resorted to different methodological approaches, one was 'ethics of caring' (Collins 1990), 'passionate detachment' (Haraway 1988) along with reflective strategies. Collins (1990) describes 'ethics of caring' with reference to three interrelated dimensions, i.e., an emphasis on Individual uniqueness, appropriateness of emotions in dialogues, and capacity of empathy. The strategy of 'passionate detachment' (Haraway 1988) is based on developing a close relationship with residents and reflecting upon these relationship after each field trip. This was challenging to sustain, as discussed earlier, once the researcher is in the field, the fieldwork roles and relationship keeps on shifting. Although building relationship is

an important and essential part of gaining trust and access to the community, so I had to address various issues like, how to intervene effectively to assist them in their personal crises, or to help them fight against social evils before interacting with the participants. While doing so I had to make an attempt to keep a distanced stance in an effort to achieve more objective analyses. While conforming to reflective strategies I have to rethink my plan of action during the process of research because as an ethnographer we interact with human beings therefore each delicacy and detail of reflective exercise needs to be taken care of. Which stretches from accommodation and boarding in field work to dress codes that need to be adopted, to the point where one should contemplate as to who should be the primary respondent and how should the respondents be addressed at large. Plus, as El-Or (1997) points out about the phenomenon of conviviality between the investigator and respondents i.e. it do offers hospitable conditions but it tends to be misleading at times, my contention is that it is productive to have such “intimacy” but to what extent is yet to be examined

CONCLUSION

Adopting feminist research methods gave me the flexibility to be able to relate to Cholistani women in ways that conforms to their terms rather than on my terms. It is not sufficient to simply add women to the research equation. Feminist research is not simply having women engaged as researchers. During my research I came to realize, as Hsiung (1996) has mentioned that I had oversimplified the binary power relationship between the researcher & the researched and overlooked the multidimensional power relationship shaped by the prevailing cultural values, gender educational background and my urban association. It seemed that due to my identity, urban affiliation and overseas residence I was excluded from much of their experience therefore I was an outsider. As an ethnographer we are never fully inside or outside the community. Our relationship to the community is constantly negotiated and renegotiated in everyday interactions. These interactions are enacted in shifting relationships among community members.

From my field experience in various settings I have come to the conclusion that the respondents of a particular research setting are also active participants in the research process and can play powerful roles in shaping what we investigate and find out about their lives and communities in which they live & interact. Although building of relationship & trust is an important part of ethnographic field work still during the course of field work I had to constantly ponder on issues like, to what extent I should intervene in the personal crises of community members, or to help in their issues with government officials, and neighboring Punjabi farmers? Should I be extending

financial help to my respondent during their financial crisis? Where & when should I draw a line to be a researcher or an advocate? As a result of the questioning “my people” strategy of “ethics of caring” coupled with “passionate detachment” had to be utilized. Intertwining the two enabled me to gain a profound insight to the issues faced by Cholistani women and thus was able to uncover the enigma of reproduction and perpetuation of those inequalities; it also assisted me to maintain the objectivity of a research. Numerous new lessons were learned in the course of every research where one had to face new dynamics and several challenges every time. Despite reexamining my research methodology during the research process, the dilemma remains that whether it is possible for a researcher to situate oneself as a participant observer in the lives of others without affecting them?

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