

INTERVIEWING WOMEN IN CULTURALLY SENSITIVE AREA

A STUDY OF KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA

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Abstract

This research study was conducted in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa that focused on interviewing women in culturally sensitive areas. Since, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was culturally very sensitive in dealing specifically with the issues related to women, therefore, five districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were selected for this research study. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews and the respondents were sexually abused women who were identified through social networks in the target areas. This was qualitative research and the approach was grounded theory. This research study founded that proper planning and management of insider-outsider reflexivity, power relationship, the use of vignettes, self-esteem and knowing and following the fundamentals of ethics were very effective in conducting interviews with women on sensitive issues. In addition, giving weightage and respect to the views of the respondents and going after their explanations was the key to reach to the depth of the problem.

Key Words: Sexually Abused Women, Cultural Sensitivity, Power Relationship, Insider/Outsider Relationship

Introduction

In some social setups, research studies on sensitive topics remain a herculean task. Because many problems are faced by the researchers, especially in identification of the key informers and dealing them in privacy while ensuring them that their data and information are protected. When researchers deal with women, extra care needs to be taken especially when they conduct their research in culturally sensitive setup. Beside the ethical considerations, some cultural norms require social protocols, and these social protocols must be ensured by every single researcher, especially when he conducts research on sensitive issues like sexuality or sexual abuse/violence. This research study was conducted on sexually abused women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, in which extra care was taken while conducting this study. In the following passage some of the ethical and social considerations which we ensured during this research study are briefly discussed. This research study is a proper guide which every researcher should put under considerations while

conducting studies on sensitive topics and working in culturally sensitive areas. Since, this research study is part of my PhD research project, therefore, the way I proceeded with the data collection process in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, is sequentially mentioned in the following passage with the aim to benefit other research scholars in this discipline.

Privacy and confidentiality are the two main elements which must be ensured before starting interviews in sensitive issues and sensitive areas (WHO, 2004; WHO, 2002). Privacy and confidentiality are desirable for every respondent to know about (Borbasi et al. 2005). Breach of privacy and confidentiality may cause severe harm to both the respondent and the enquirer, particularly in sensitive issues (Haverkamp, 2005). Since, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was culturally more sensitive, especially in the issues related to women and sexuality (WHO, 2004), therefore, extra care was required in interviewing sexually abused women. Extra care must be taken while directly interacting with women, particularly with victims of sexual abuse. Access to these women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was almost impossible but friends, colleagues and familial contacts were very fruitful in accessing these women. It means that while dealing with women and investigating issues that are highly private and sensitive, social network remains highly significant in identifying and accessing the respondents. Many problems are faced by the researchers in data collection, however, these problems need to be carefully managed. In this study, every contact was made with respondents through proper reference. Without reference, no woman agreed to be interviewed. The data in this research study was collected from almost six districts and every location proper reference was identified through friends and colleagues, including men and women. Women, with whom we had relationship, either familial or social, were quite helpful in arranging interviews. In this study, many respondents were asked for prior approval by the referees while explaining the purpose and venue. These respondents felt confident to be interviewed in the houses of the referees who contacted them, such as in district Swat, many respondents were interviewed in the head office of *Khwendo Tolena* (Women Huddle), a non-governmental organization working for the protection of women. Those women who were engaged with commercial sex were paid Rs. 500 to 1000 (US\$ 5 to 10) for the time they spared for the interviews. Money, that was paid, varied from respondent to respondent as per the demand, a respondent made. Usually, one interview took 1 to 2 hours, therefore, the demand for Rs. 500 or 1000 was compatible with the time in the local market. Making payment to the respondents was ethically not right, however, it was a mean to interact with them and the benefits of interaction with them were more than the harm. This research was highly significant for the issues related to victims of sexual abuse and for the entire theory of gender discrimination and exploitation. Hornsby-Smith (1993) argued that usually the disadvantaged group in the society is at loss because access to this group is highly restricted that obscures the real picture of the issues concerning them. Hornsby-Smith (1993: 62) further argues that “some measure of deception is acceptable in some areas where the benefits of knowledge outweigh the harms and where the harms have been minimized by following the convention of confidentiality and identity. One needs not always be brutally honest, direct and explicit about one’s research purpose” therefore, all the respondents were made proper payment before the interview. Greater flexibility should be ensured in making payment to the respondents to respect their consents or demands.

The Use of Vignettes

Vignette is an approach which is usually used by researchers in the inquiry of sensitive issues, particularly sexuality and sexual violence (Finch, 1987). In sensitive issues, the respondent felt hesitant while explaining events and experiences because of the degree of privacy and confidentiality attached to delivery of information. In such issues, the respondent sometimes try to avoid events and experiences of extremely private nature. Incidents and experiences of sexual violence and curse are considered taboo to disclose or discuss, therefore, these incidents are avoided by the respondents to discuss. In such situation, the researcher uses vignettes, to identify the views and tendencies of the respondents (Khan and Hussain, 2008). In vignettes, the researcher develops different stories, consisting of one or more scenarios, in which the respondent is given an opportunity to respond when confronted with events of the same nature. The researcher then observes and analyzes the responses of the respondents and derives conclusion, close to reality (Bryman, 2008). In this study, we dealt with sensitive issue, therefore, we used vignettes to identify responses of the victims regarding events of different nature. The vignettes approach was very useful in identifying tendencies of the respondents in different scenarios. These made-up stories were highly discussed and explained by the respondents because in such stories, a distance was created between the events and the respondents in a least threatening context. When there is distance created between the respondent and the question, the respondent then feels confident in explaining such events and stories. Stories developed for the respondents were all about the events of sexual abuse and violence. During the discussion, greater opportunity was provided to the respondents to speak and explain the events. While developing stories, no such materials were included which the respondents did not heed. It means that the stories would attract the interest of the respondents to discuss and express themselves.

Ethics in Research

While conducting research, ethical concerns must be put into account, before proceeding with the data collection. In this study, we carefully acted upon all the ethics in research. In research, it is compulsory to let the respondent know about the procedure, the purpose, the parameters, the output and the act under which the data is dealt with (McNeil and Chapman, 2005). Therefore, we clearly mentioned the aim, procedure and impact of this research to every single respondent. In order for the respondent to make an informed choice, it should be clarified that all the questions are clear and known, before starting an interview (Mason, 1996). In this study, we made such decisions on spot. We clearly mentioned such things in informed consent form which few of the respondents thumbed while others refused because they preferred oral commitment. Refusal by the respondents to sign the informed consent form was due to their inability to read and write. Secondly, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, oral commitments are usually made in such practices, therefore, we received oral consent from the respondents and made oral commitment with them. In oral commitment, we clearly mentioned the purpose of the study. Since my respondents were illiterate and they did not know anything about the possible harm and benefits, therefore, it was made clear for them that the data would be dealt with under the data protection act. Before starting the interview, the respondents were given choice, if they were to withdraw from any statement or opinion. It was ensured that all our questions were asked very politely and none of the respondents got absurd with any of my questions. Since, all the respondents, in this study, were women, therefore, they were very politely asked for and word 'sister' was used instead of name. When they preferred, their actual names were used to attract their attention or the word sister was usually used. None of the respondents was asked questions which seemed absurd to them. Audio recording of the data was clearly mentioned and re-mentioned before the

respondent to double check and ensure that the audio recording was only for the purpose of transcription.

Insider/Outsider Reflexivity and Power Relationship

Reflexivity is one of the issues of ethical concern in research studies (Gilgun, 2010). Reflexivity means proper awareness of the influences on the research process. Awareness means that the researcher knows and ensures sincere and proper account of the research process (Watt, 2007 and Gilgun, 2010). In this study, we were reflexive of the multiple influences on the research process, particularly working in a hostile environment and dealing with the opposite gender. It was ensured and re-ensured that a balanced relationship is maintained and that the respondents interpret and explain their views in an informal way. By the terms insider and outsider mean that at the same time, in this study, we were the insiders and outsiders which influenced the interaction. We were the insiders because we belonged to the same province, speaking the same language and belonging to the same ethnic group. As insider, the process of exchange of views was very fluent and productive. On the other hand, we were the outsiders during the interview process because a male interviewing females, working as a Lecturer in the public-sector institution, speaking and understanding different languages and knowing different skills in communication and social settlement while interacting with illiterate women. This insider and outsider relationship though influenced the interaction process, however, greater leniency in balancing the power relationship was ensured. Bryman (2008) argues that regarding the ethical concerns, the relationship between the enquirer and the respondent is very complex. At every move, the researcher should ensure conformity and compliance with research ethics. In this regard, the researcher needs to avoid over-ordinate position, attitudes and behavior. According to Bryman, (2008) a researcher should avoid the dominant and the submissive or the over-ordinate and the sub-ordinate attitudes to ensure greater transparency and compliance. In this study, time and venue of the interview on the respondent was not imposed rather an open option was given to the respondents to select time and venue for the interview but usually it was confirmed on mutual consent. It was also ensured and double confirmed that the venue and time was feasible and the atmosphere where the respondent was interviewed was proper and comfortable. Priority and preference was always given to respondents' consent. The biggest issue of insider and outsider reflexivity was gender. Being a male feminist – the advocate of feminism as a movement to end sexist oppression and inequality – we acted in the field with the will and commitment to contribute to feminism. In this research study no enumerators were hired because we did not believe in the general perception that feminist research is research by, for and about women (Gluck and Patai, 1991 as cited by Gilbert, 1994). Ending sexism and sexual exploitation requires collective struggle by men and women alike. Hooks (1984, pp. 80-81; Hooks, 2000) argues that “until men share equal responsibility for struggling to end sexism, feminist movement will reflect the very sexist contradictions we wish to eradicate”. Similarly, Hopkins (1998, pp. 51-52) argues that “feminism should be characterized by adherence to a basic set of beliefs and political positions. The core of feminism would be feminist positions not women's experiences”. Male feminists can better define and question the natural link between women and feminism (Heath, 1987). Men and feminism show compatibility (Lemons, 1997). Feminism is a movement to end sexism and sexist exploitation not to provoke anti-male sentiments, hence, it is for everybody (Hooks, 2000). Therefore, we participated in this research study as male feminists with the commitment to contribute and collaborate. We spoke to women as feminists, not on behalf or for them. Every man can speak with woman as a feminist but with collaborative and participatory voice and action (Stanovsky, 1997; Galam, 2008; Breeze, 2007).

Conclusion

Many factors need to be ensured and many protocols need not to be avoided while conducting research on sensitive issues and working in a fragile social environment. It is not only research ethics that must be ensured on every single step of interviewing the respondents rather local social norms and values must be paid homage and respect. Since, woman is regarded as epicenter of honor in Pashtun society, therefore, decency and respect in investigation must be ensured. Not to affect the emotions of a respondent by asking her questions related to past abuse, that usually results in reverberation of traumatic experiences, the use of vignettes is very effective and polite way of investigation. Vignette is a hidden and more sophisticated way of extracting information from the respondents about past episodes of victimization in which every respondent feels confident to express herself. Moreover, insider-outsider reflexivity needs to be maintained and preserved in such a way that every respondent feels indifferent in explaining past incidents of victimization. Usually, researchers avoid minute aspects of insider-outsider reflexivity which negatively affects the inquiry on sensitive information, therefore, every single aspect of insider-outsider reflexivity should be maintained and wherever the respondent feels different on occasions of responding to questions, the researcher must rectify by available means. It entirely depends upon the researchers and their strategy of investigation that nothing goes against the will of the respondents nor anything lose confidentiality. Failure to protect and maintain confidentiality is a severe ethical violation which makes every inquiry unethical and unacceptable. Therefore, prior to every sensitive inquiry, every researcher should make a proper plan that clarifies everything related to the research questions, respondents, social environment and the respective law.

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