

SHORTER ARTICLE**RESEARCHING SENSITIVE TOPICS: METHODS
IDENTIFYING WIFE ABUSE IN BANGLADESH**

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INTRODUCTION

Researchers are increasingly being called upon to carry out research on topics that are 'sensitive' in the sense that they deal with behaviour that is intimate, discreditable or incriminating. Such topics not only pose difficult technical problems but these also have implications for wider issues of ethics and politics of research. Issues of ethics and politics are implicit in any study. However, these are more intrinsically interwoven with research on sensitive subjects. Methodological work on sensitive topics, however, is often fragmented because researchers are frequently not intimately aware of the ways that their colleagues in different substantive areas, different disciplines or different parts of the world are addressing specific methodological difficulties.

Surprisingly, few instructions to indicate how this research is undertaken are readily available. Such materials as do exist deal with only a narrow range of matters: most usually with problems of getting into a setting and getting along with people while there. These, along with matters of bias, exhaust, for practical purposes, the topics covered in existing manuals or guidebooks on methodological aspects. But clearly, fieldwork for sensitive research involves much more than dealing with those rather negative aspects of the experience. A positive set of suggestions and directions is required, which this note attempts to facilitate research undertakings by young researchers.

Needless to say, this is but one way or method for sensitive research through mostly qualitative study. Other equally viable and even better approaches do exist. Nevertheless, other approaches may not be best suited for sensitive research like wife abuse in Bangladesh.¹

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¹ See, Nusrat, A., Keeping a Wife At the End of a Stick?: Law and Wife Abuse in Bangladesh, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of East London, School of Law, Essex, 1997.

The issue of wife abuse is a sensitive one especially in a country like Bangladesh where women are “ignorant of their rights” and have no voice of their own². This is so because ignorance makes women accept whatever is imposed on them. Their rights are thus lost along with their voice. Research in this area call for a great deal of caution. Sensitivity, as I have used the term here, affects almost every stage of the research process, from formulation through design to implementation, dissemination, and application.³ The problems that arise at each stage can take a variety of forms: sensitive research raises methodological, technical, political, legal problems as well as those with potential effects on the personal life of the researcher,⁴ not least in some contexts at the level of personal security.⁵ According to Cohen and Manion,

The subjects who are to be observed, the location, the duration and the methods of recording and analysing observation are all determined by the objective of the inquiry itself.⁶

Once the objective of the study area is determined, it is important to take the ethics of such research into consideration. Being ethical in the conduct of sensitive research also means being culturally sensitive in the way one designs the research and interacts with research participants. Cultural sensitivity is used here to refer to the understanding and approaches that enable one to gain access to individuals in a given culture, to learn about their actual life-styles (beliefs, habits, needs, fears, risks) and to communicate in ways that the individuals understand, believe, regard as relevant to themselves and are likely to act upon. Therefore, researching wife abuse in the socio-cultural context of Bangladesh, it is necessary that the researcher understands the sensitivity of the issue.

CHOICE OF METHOD

² Sobhan, S. Kamal, S., “The Status of Legal Aid Services to Women in Bangladesh”, mimeo, Dhaka, 1992, at p.27.

³ Sieber, J.E. and Stanley, B, “Ethical and Professional Dimensions of Socially Sensitive Research” 43 (1988) American Psychologist, pp. 49-55. And, Renzetti, Claire M. and Lee, Raymond M., Researching Sensitive Topics. London. 1993, at p6.

⁴ Plummer, K, Documents of Life. An Introduction to the Problems and Literature of a Humanistic Method. London, 1983.

⁵ *Supra* note 3, at p7.

⁶ Cohen, L and Manion, L.,Research Method in Education, London, 1980, at p. 13.

Once the area of investigation has been identified, there are choices to be made about the type of observation to be made. Bell explains: "...research methods can be broadly divided into quantitative methods, taking a positivist approach, and qualitative methods which are relativist in their perspective."⁷

It is further argued that quantitative research aims to make a specific statement, in an attempt to clarify certain social facts, whereas qualitative research emphasises the value of ideas and individual feelings and opinions. Quantitative research alone is not adequate to describe the feelings of the people studied or the situations which they confront in their everyday life. The qualitative approach though it may lack the quantitative dimension, may convey more of the researchers' impressions and observations, and often creates a more realistic picture and makes more interesting reading than a quantitative, statistical presentation. The purpose of this, mainly descriptive style of research, is to allow flexibility and opportunity for the research focus to sharpen during the observation. Bell suggests that "They (researchers) will be deciding and reaffirming that (they know), in the light of experience, all the time they are in the field."⁸

However, qualitative research can be biased and subjective and produce some irrelevant data. Researchers need to be aware of this and take steps to select an objective sample of data. Conversely, quantitative research is said to be more objective because "it must be scientifically 'respectable', a requirement which entails rigorous design, administrative control and clerical accuracy."⁹ Quantitative research is typically taken to be exemplified by social survey. Qualitative research, on the other hand, tends to be associated with participant observation and unstructured, in-depth interviewing.

Nevertheless, difficulties in quantitative research are evident in victimisation surveys. A major methodological problem in victimisation surveys is the underreporting of abuse. The consequences of massive underreporting are serious. As observed by Smith¹⁰, without a reasonably accurate measure of victimisation, an entire survey is put in jeopardy, for one cannot know if those who disclosed having been abused are representative of all victims in the sample. Underreporting also has negative implications for

⁷ Bell, J, *Conducting Small-Scale Investigation*. In *Educational Management*, London, 1984, at p. 20.

⁸ *Supra* note 7, p21.

⁹ *Supra* note 7, p23.

¹⁰ Smith, Micheal D., "Enhancing the Quality of Survey Data on Violence Against Women; A Feminist Approach" 18:1 (1994) *Gender and Society*, pp. 109-127, at p.110.

social policy: the greater the degree of underreporting, the lower the estimates of abuse, and the lower the probability of mobilising resources to combat the problem. Policy makers pay attention to large numbers. As Bart et al write,

The principal questions that organise policy efforts (with respect to violence against women) are ultimately quantitative-How many? Who? Where? How bad are the consequences? The answers to such questions can be staggering, but it is difficult to marshal reliable national estimates with which to answer them in the detail required.¹¹

Studies of violence against women fashioned in accordance with highly fundable mainstream research canons typically produce the lowest and least reliable estimates.¹² Social science in general has erased or gender-neutralised the violence women experience with such concepts as “family violence”.¹³ Brush’s analysis of the data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) shows that although both partners commit violent acts as married couples, wives were significantly more likely to sustain injuries. This survey

Reproduced the most serious failing of quantitative research on intimate violence because it did not enable researchers to investigate the context (other than disagreements) or meanings of violent acts and their outcomes for perpetrators or survivors of violence.¹⁴

What does it mean that men report fewer injuries to their wives than the wives apparently sustain? If denial is expected in addressing this behaviour, under what circumstances would interview data be more reliable? Kurz, as quoted from Bart et.al,¹⁵ challenges the analysis of the “*family violence or spouse abuse*” perspective for failing to check the findings against the data of police and hospital emergency rooms. The insights, as well as the questions raised, by qualitative data therefore, should be taken into account in designing future qualitative or quantitative research.

Methodologists have long advocated the use of multiple measures as a way of enhancing the reliability and validity of social variables¹⁶.

¹¹ Bart, Pauline B and Moran Geil Eileen, Violence Against Women, London, 1993, pp. 229-235, at p. 230.

¹² Supra note 11, at p. 231.

¹³ Id.

¹⁴ Supra note 11, at p. 232.

¹⁵ Supra note 11, at p. 234.

¹⁶ Supra note 10, at p. 113.

Nevertheless, most researchers, as observed by Smith¹⁷ seem to have paid scant attention to this advice when it comes to estimating the extent of violence against women.

It is argued by Brush¹⁸ that the most important factor in producing accurate data on woman abuse through surveys is the quality of the interaction between interviewer and interviewee, in particular, the ability of the interviewer to infuse a sense of “*trust, safety, and intimacy*” into the interviewing relationship. In the research of wife abuse being sensitive and intimate, the interviews with women victims of such abuse should be carried out with caution. It is essential to establish trust and confidence between the interviewer and interviewee so that even unwilling subjects are patiently and successfully persuaded to supply information which they would not, otherwise, offer.

Feminists researchers’ have well contributed to the methodology of researching sensitive topics as they often study issues that are controversial or laden with emotion. They have argued that when both researcher and researched are women, the commonalities of experience that result from their sex helps to overcome the problem of sharing their experiences.¹⁹ In addition, feminists advocate the use of self-disclosure or reciprocity on the part of the researcher not only to overcome participants’ inhibitions but also to place the interaction between the researcher and researched on a “more equal footing”²⁰.

Most writers on feminist research issues agree that there is no one method that can be termed *the* feminist methodology. Nevertheless, as methods of gathering data, qualitative methods and in-depth interviews have tended to be best suited for sensitive research.²¹

¹⁷ Id..

¹⁸ Brush, L.D., “Violent acts and injurious Outcomes in Married couples; methodological Issues in the National Survey of families and Households” 4 (1990) Gender and Society, at pp. 56-57.

¹⁹ Finch, J., “ ‘Its Great to Have Someone to Talk to’: The Ethics and Politics of Interviewing Women” in Bell, C and Roberts, H (eds), In Social Researching: Politics, Problems, Practice, London, 1984.

²⁰ Cook, J and Fonnrow, M., “Knowledge and Women’s Interests: Issues of Epistemology and Methodology in Feminist Sociological Research” 56 (1984) Sociological Inquiry, pp. 2-29.

²¹ Graham, H., “Do Her Answers Fit His Questions? Women and the Survey Method” . in Gamarnikow, E; Morgan, D; Purvis, J and Taylorson, D (eds), In The Public and the Private, London. 1983, at p. 136.

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

The situational framework of Bangladesh observes Huda,²² is so different from the circumstances prevalent in the West — economic and politic as well tradition, culture and religion — that it is impossible to apply in their totality the traditional social science methods of empirical study to the situations in Bangladesh. Even strong adherents of traditional social science methods are increasingly “feeling the need to appreciate the context itself as a primary issue in rural research.”²³

An appropriate research methodology is of importance in discovering the extent of wife abuse and impact of law in dealing with such violence. To analyse this situation, it is necessary to go into the depth of the violence. This is sometimes not possible to gather from structured interviews. To this end research methodology may include some case studies. This allows the researcher, as Cohen suggests, to be able to: “Probe deeply and analyse the multifarious phenomena that constitute the life of the unit.”²⁴

This description obviously requires further clarification, provided here by Bell who suggest that,

The case study draws on the techniques of observational studies, and aims to give a portrayal of a specific situation in such a way as to illuminate some more general principle.²⁵

Like all methodologies, however, it has its strengths and weaknesses. Nisbett quoting from Bell outlines some of these,

Primarily the results are more easily understood by a wider range of people. This is due to the fact that they are less complicated, immediately intelligible and allow the reader to judge the implications for himself.²⁶

The data can also be differently interpreted at a later date. Nisbett adds that case studies can often identify a pattern of variables too infrequent to be noted in a survey of greater breadth. Finally, it is a method of inquiry which is very much suited to an individual researcher.

²² Huda, S., Born to be Wed: Bangladeshi Women and the Muslim Marriage Contract, unpublished Phd Thesis, University of East London, School of Law, Essex, London, 1996.

²³ Islam, S., Exploring the Other Half: Field Research with Rural Women in Bangladesh, Dhaka, 1982, at p. 2.

²⁴ *Supra* note 6, at p. 129.

²⁵ *Supra* note 7, at p.74.

²⁶ *Supra* note 7, at p. 74.

There are various acknowledged weaknesses, however, with this type of research. It is time consuming and somewhat limited in the scope of its results and, therefore, the results cannot be regarded as a generalisation for all situations. One way of ensuring that the report is fair and accurate is to 'cross-check' findings from one interview with those of another.

THE RESEARCH METHODS VIABLE IN WIFE ABUSE

The first and foremost task for any research is to design an investigation suitable for such a research. Field research using participant observation, in-depth interviewing and the like has often seemed like an ideal way of studying sensitive topics. The researcher who uses such methods relies on sustained or intensive interactions with those studied as a way of establishing trustful relations between the researcher and the respondents. In these circumstances, it is assumed, barriers to the researcher's presence are eventually removed to reveal the hidden, the deviant or the taboo.

The research on wife abuse may be undertaken by deploying two techniques: participant observation and in-depth interviews by structured questionnaires. Participant observation characterises most ethnographic research and is crucial for effective fieldwork. Participant observation is immersion in a culture. Ideally, the researcher lives and works in a community for six months to a year or more, learning the language and seeing patterns of behaviour over time. This helps the researcher internalise the basic beliefs, fears, hopes, and expectations of the people under study.²⁷

In order to feel that one understands what is 'going on' with others, most people try to put themselves in the other person's shoes. People try to imagine or discern how the other person thinks, acts and feels. They try holistically to assess the life situation of the other as this other conceives it. In sociological parlance, this is called "taking the role of the other".

The fullest condition of participating in the mind of another human being is face-to-face interaction. Face-to-faceness has the irreplaceable character of non-reflectivity and immediacy that furnishes the fullest possibility of truly entering the life, mind and definitions of the other.

²⁷ Fetterman, David M, "A Walk Through the Wilderness – Learning to Find your way" in Shaffir, William A and Stebbins, A (eds), In Experiencing Fieldwork: An Inside View of Qualitative Research, London, 1991, at p. 94.

Through taking the role of another face-to-face, one gains a sense of understanding the respondent.²⁸

Research on wife abuse which revolves mainly around shelters and welfare agencies need observation in these areas to gain intensive details about their working ideals and how victims of wife abuse benefit by the services received in this centres. The importance of participant observation as may be used in research has been duly emphasised by Bell: "Direct observation may be more reliable than what people say- interviews reveal how people perceive what happens, not what actually happens."²⁹

It was observed by Pahl that women's refuges have been sensitive to the dangers of being *used* by outsiders and have refused access to outside observers who do not seem to be sympathetic to what they are trying to do.³⁰ At the National Women's Aid Federation Conference, a participant said that: "Research is not simply writing academic material- it is for the benefit of the women in the house."³¹

John Greve has also written perceptively about the role of the researcher in the community. He discusses the obligations people, who do research, have towards those who supply the information upon which the research is based, particularly in situations in which those who supply information are poor, deprived, inarticulate or of low status. He writes of the importance of introducing "measures designed to raise the status of people-as-research-objects in the research situation and, simultaneously, to achieve their real participation in the research process."³² The stress placed upon participation within the refuge made him sensitive to the possibilities of involving both workers and women in the work which he was doing; he felt that their contribution gave an added relevance to his enquiries.

There is a case to be made, however, for using more than one method of collecting information to avoid the problem of 'method-boundedness' as it has been termed.³³ Both the actual events and peoples' feelings are

²⁸ Lofland, J., *Analysing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*, California, 1971

²⁹ *Supra* note 7, at p. 84.

³⁰ Pahl, J., *A Refuge for Battered Women. A Study of the Role of a Women's Centre*, Department of Health and Social Security. London, 1982, at p. 12.

³¹ *Supra* note 30, at p. 12.

³² *Supra* note 30, at p. 12.

³³ *Supra* note 6.

important data however, and so it is appropriate to combine interview and observation.

The other method to be applied in the research may be by conducting open-ended one to one in-depth interviews followed by a relatively structured questionnaires. Open ended individual in-depth interviews are essential in the research to uphold the secrecy and intimacy of the victims as well as to get a closer look at the expert opinions of different community members; for example, lawyers, police officers, agency officers, doctors. Thus, the first part of the research may consist of 'discussion guideline' for victims of wife abuse, while the second part may consist of structured questionnaire for the community members.

The interviews may range from informal conversations to long sessions for which the informant may be paid. To pay respondents does not necessarily mean to bribe them. It can be best described as a means of attracting their attention to procure information. At times, use of notes and tape recorders are also valuable. Taking notes, however, may interrupt the natural flow of the conversation. Tape recording may have similar adverse affects. If notes could not be made during an interview, they may be made as soon as possible afterwards. However, in sensitive topics like wife abuse, researchers may take notes in case of interviews with women in the shelters as tape recorder may distract their attention as the women are surrounded with children and for them a tape recorder is an amusement. However, in case of interviews with community members, tape recorder is convenient.

The quality of information gained by this means depends on a number of circumstances. One is the ability to establish rapport with the informants that put them at ease and enable them to talk freely. The extent of the informants' knowledge is also important, as is their reliability as reporter.

The importance and advantage of combining interviews with participant observation has been rightly observed by Rossi,

Interviewing combined with participant observation has distinct advantages; when witnessing an event, anthropologists are in a better position to assess informant accounts of it or to complement such accounts. From participant observation they also can learn which people are mostly involved in a daily activity; they might try to use them as key informants, since they might have the most valuable first-hand information. Participant observation also reveals informants' roles in particular activities, what their stake is in the situation, and how this might lead to distorted accounts.³⁴

³⁴ Rossi, I., *People in Culture; A Survey of Cultural Anthropology*, New York,

The structured questionnaires may be supplied to community members to gain information useful for the research purpose. The questionnaires may be a combination of specific and open questions from which some specific details can be collected. This also allows interviewees the freedom to put forward their own ideas, which is also important for the research. Thus, the qualitative data is obtained through participant-observation, in-depth interviewing of women victims and community members.

Data on socio-economic-cultural context of gender-relation, gender-role and gender-violence in society and family, and the socio-economic and legal processes affecting these, may also be collected through use of relevant literature. Newspapers, the chief source of media in Bangladesh, are also important contributors to research. Qualitative data may be obtained from newspapers and journals to enrich the research. Although, the conventional categories used by the police are somewhat inadequate and there are limitations and drawbacks of newspapers, yet for broad statistics on violence these are necessary tools.

Many criticisms can be made of the data collection process for qualitative research. The interviews and observation which take place can be regarded as biased and subjective because of the problem of reactivity. In an attempt to address this problem the researcher may monitor his/her own reaction to the situation under observation and any interaction with whoever is being interviewed.

Women's socio-cultural status can best be understood if the interviewer and interviewee belong to the same culture. Otherwise, fear of talking to a stranger and different languages and socio-cultural distance may prevent effective communication between the researcher and the subject of research³⁵.

The problem of validity arises with the interview. To this end the researcher should try to ignore his/her own personal opinions or viewpoints and try to concentrate on those views held by the interviewees. The conversational style of the interview also helps because in this way respondents may feel more relaxed and thus more inclined to share their true feelings. Kitwood, as quoted from Cohen and Manion, supports this by suggesting that: "It is necessary to generate a kind of conversation in which

1986, at pp. 62-83.

³⁵ Benny, M., and Hughes, E., "Of Sociology and the Interview" in Denzin, K.N (ed), *Sociology Method: A Source Book*, London, 1970, at pp. 190-198.

the 'respondent' feels at ease. In other words, the distinctively human element in the interview is necessary to its validity."³⁶

It is acknowledged that by employing such a subjective technique as an interview, some form of research bias is inevitable. There is also the danger of sample bias and respondent bias. It may be that interviewees are led in a specific direction by the type of questions or indeed the manner in which they are asked. In other words the interviewee (especially the women victims) may give the answer which they feel the interviewer is expecting. The interviewer may also choose a sample which reflects the desired result³⁷.

It is necessary at this point to note that if the researcher has a strong feeling for victims of wife abuse and feels the need for advocacy, the research may be biased. However, the researcher may minimise his/her own bias through using more than one method of gathering data and by drawing conclusions only from the actual data collected. Thus, by being aware of this danger, the bias may not undermine the study.

The problem of bias in sociological research has been subjected to exacting scrutiny. On the one hand, it has been suggested that researchers should strive to be neutral, and objective in their search for the truth, while on the other hand, it was argued that it was impossible to do research that is uncontaminated by personal sympathies, and that what the 'truth' is depends on whose viewpoint one takes. Here one may re-iterate recommendations by Becker, quoted by Jan Pahl, that,

We take sides as our personal and political commitments dictate, use our theoretical and technical resources to avoid distortions introduced into our work, limit our conclusions carefully, recognise the hierarchy of credibility for what it is, and field as best we can the accusations and doubts that will surely be our fate.³⁸

RESEARCH DESIGN

For a clear understanding of the problem of wife abuse one needs to know not only the nature and extent of the problem but also the type, frequency of the abuse, the immediate reasons leading to specific incidents of abuse, and the factors which contribute to such abuse. For assessing the abuse. the current situation of help, advice, service which a victim may reasonably expect to avail of, the quality and extent of intervention, and where it is a

³⁶ Supra note 6.

³⁷ Supra note 7.

³⁸ Supra note 30, at p. 12.

legal research; especially that offered by laws designed to protect victims of such abuse and the attitude of law enforcing agencies to wife abuse are also important considerations.

It is necessary to see the demographic profile of the women. The family background reveals the nature of their socialisation which, in turn, affects their personality development. Similarly, their age, occupation, income, education and their rural-urban background and other such factors should be studied in terms of their relation to violence. It is often seen that certain positions in the social structure and particular family structures produce stress which can lead to violence in the family.³⁹

The questions that often come across one's mind while dealing with wife abuse should be considered while designing the research, for example: i) Why does he do so? ii) Why does she stay in such a situation? iii) Why do not others who are close to the couple not do anything to stop it? In search of these answers the research method must have questionnaires suitable to cover all such queries: such as: i) how much marital violence comes to the attention of public service? ii) how do practitioners working in different services view the problem of marital violence? iii) why do women victims of such violence often change their mind about seeking help? iv) where do individuals with marital problems most frequently go for help and what if any, is the significance of agency choice? v) how effective is referral and liaison between services?

In devising an appropriate research design for victims of wife abuse the type of violence to be investigated and the sensitive nature of the information to be obtained are important considerations. As observed by Hanmer and Saunders,⁴⁰ methodological problems are increased and intensified when the area of research involves the disclosure of personally painful information that may be experienced as shameful and involve a loss of status and self-esteem. Therefore, in such situations in-depth, structured interviews are best means of obtaining this information. The questionnaire at the beginning should cover respondent's general life history. It may then explore the particular or specific violence faced by her. Careful attention may be paid to the questions and their ordering so that at no time is it overtly or covertly implied that the focus of the inquiry is on stranger crime.

The method for lawyers to gain information about the extent and application of law in regard to wife abuse and their attitude towards civil and

³⁹ Supra note 1, at pp. 278-313.

⁴⁰ Hanmer, J., and Saunders, S., *Women, Violence and Crime Prevention. A Yorkshire Study*, USA, 1993, at p. 9.

criminal justice system may be reviewed by in-depth, structured, individual interviews.

Important consideration should also be given in devising a research design for agencies. They offer various type of specialist services to women victims. The depth of experience agencies have with these victims is also important to consider. A further consideration is that services are being provided through organisational structures that are not directly comparable. Therefore a typology of agencies by type of function and organisational structure (for example, those who offer services to victims of wife abuse) may be developed in order to select a sample for in-depth, structured, individual interviews.

As for samples, shelters may be identified for the purpose of the research. Victims of wife abuse turn to these shelters to seek relief. Interviews with these women are gathered from the shelters which may be situated both within and outside city. The agencies are also within research boundary as women victims also go to these agencies for help. These agencies are identified as women welfare agencies. They provide assistance to women in distress. The agencies may be government owned or private.

Research may also aim at community members to gain useful information suitable for the research. These members include lawyers, police officers, agency officials and doctors. For the purpose of understanding policy to safeguard against wife abuse, interviews of these community members are essential.

CONCLUSION

At this point it may appear to readers that researching sensitive topics is a daunting enterprise. Many problems that arise in studying a sensitive issue may indeed defeat the researcher unless she or he brings a tough, single-minded tenacious but pragmatic attitude to the task. Moreover, the fact that sensitive topics pose complex issues and dilemmas for researchers does not imply that such issues should not be studied. As Sieber and Stanley convincingly argue

Sensitive research addresses some of society's most pressing social issues and policy questions. Although ignoring the ethical issues in sensitive research is not a responsible approach to science, shying away from controversial topics, simply because they are controversial, is also an avoidance of responsibility.⁴¹

⁴¹ Supra note 3, at p. 55.

Likewise, it may be argued that ignoring the methodological difficulties inherent in researching sensitive topics is also socially and scientifically irresponsible because this ignorance may potentially generate flawed conclusion on which both theory and public policy subsequently may be built. If methodologists are not to opt out of research on sensitive topics, they must confirm seriously and thoroughly the problems and issues that these topics pose.