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METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL ISSUES IN CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN THE CONFLICT ZONE: AN OVERVIEW

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to analyse the methodological and ethical challenges required for conducting research in multi-ethnic societies situated in conflict zone. Based on secondary sources of information, this article has proposed the essential ethical and methodological principles for conducting research in a conflict zone and how the confidentiality and anonymity of the research, as well as the rights and dignity of the respondents are ensured as per the ethics guidelines. This paper particularly aims to advance the knowledge and guidelines on methodology and ethical issues for novice researchers and graduate students who work and intend to work in a conflict area, or in a post-conflict society where multi-ethnic communities are living under a latent or manifest form of conflicts and human rights violation.

1. Introduction

Conducting research in social and behavioural sciences demands strict ethical and robust methodological issues in every situation, even when the research is not conducted in the conflict zone.¹ In fact, ethics and appropriate methodology guide a researcher in how to conduct a field study; what type of questions a researcher can ask the respondents; and under what circumstances, a researcher can put these questions to the respondents. Universities in developed countries, such as the United States of America (USA), Canada, the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia have introduced ethical principles for researchers to ensure the highest level of rights and dignity of research objects. However, many developing countries have yet to introduce ethical principles in the research field to guide researchers in conducting research. Thus, researchers either

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¹ Conflict zone refers to a conflict situation that continues in a certain period between and among communities, nations and countries for achieving a specific goal. This conflict can be international, national and communal conflict in nature. This has two dimensions: low intensity conflict and high intensity conflicts. See, Uppsala University Conflict Data Programme, available at <http://ucdp.uu.se/>, accessed on 28 January 2016.

face the difficulties or in some instances, manipulate the respondents' data and opinion for their own purposes. This practice is frequently happening in research conducted in conflict zones in many developing societies. Indeed, a conflict situation is characterised by the complex categories of social, psychological and political problems, such as psychological trauma, physical torture, violence, intimidation, forced migration and genocide.² As a result, researchers face difficulties while conducting research in conflict zones. Moreover, the scanty literature on methodology and ethics issue in the conflict and post-conflict society is a drawback for the researchers to go in-depth and collect data.³ In many cases, respondents cannot be adequately proactive to share information on the ground that they might be victimised and subjected to further exploitation, persecution and human rights violation. This is because of diverse power relations in every conflict zone, i.e., military, national and local political leaders and elites who tend to suppress the opposing forces for their own interests.⁴ Researchers, in such a situation, face difficulties in scheduling field study, understanding the long-standing silence of the respondents and creating an environment where respondents can talk and share their information.⁵

Against such a background, this paper attempts to put forward the major methodological and ethical issues that could guide researchers to handle a difficult situation in a conflict zone and accomplish research successfully. In this regard, diverse literature has been scrutinised in the domain of social research. Very few books and recognised articles provided a comprehensive overview to conduct research in a conflict zone. However, some books, articles and chapters based on conflict zone research across the world helped to develop questionnaires, methodology and research design.⁶ Some research works on social research methods on refugees, displaced people and minority communities have also provided insights for handling respondents and difficulties in the field.⁷ Literature shows that social research based on conflict zone is not academically

² P. Harris and B. Reilly, *Democracy and Deep-rooted Conflict: Options for Negotiators*, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IIDEA), 1998.

³ E. King, "From Data Problems to Data Points: Challenges and Opportunities of Research in Post-Genocide Rwanda," *African Studies Review*, Vol. 52, No. 03, 2009, pp. 127-148.

⁴ C. Brun, "I Love My Soldier": Developing Responsible and Ethically Sound Research Strategies in a Militarized Society, in D. Mazurana et al., (eds.), *Research Methods in Conflict Settings: A View from Below*, 2013, pp. 129-48; J. Madut, "Power Dynamics and the Politics of Fieldwork under Sudan's Prolonged Conflicts", in D. Mazurana et al., (eds.), *Research Methods in Conflict Settings: A View from Below*, 2013, p. 149.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ S. Brinkmann, *Interview*, New York: Springer, 2014; J. N. Clark, "Fieldwork and its Ethical Challenges: Reflections from Research in Bosnia", *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 2012, pp. 823-839; N. Cohen and A. Tamar, "Field Research in Conflict Environments: Methodological Challenges and Snowball Sampling," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 48, No. 4, 2011, pp. 423-435; J. Goodhand, "Research in Conflict Zones: Ethics and Accountability", *Forced Migration Review*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 2000, pp. 12-16; H. Ross and I. Becher, "A Methodological Note on Quantitative Field Research in Conflict Zones: Get your Hands Dirty," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2012, pp. 1-13; J. E. Wood, "Field Research During War: Ethical Dilemmas", in M. Mahler and J. Auyero (eds.), *New Perspectives in Political Ethnography*, New York: Springer, 2007, pp. 205-223.

⁷ K. Jacobsen and L. B. Landau, "The Dual Imperative in Refugee Research: Some Methodological and Ethical Considerations in Social Science Research on Forced Migration", *Disasters*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2003, pp. 185-206.

sound and methodologically appropriate. Most of the studies are somehow flawed and ethically suspected due to the complexities of the field, non-cooperation of the respondents, the diverse interests of the parties and inability to collect appropriate data for the security risk.⁸ This paper, thus, is an endeavour to highlight the major methodological and ethical principles for researchers and graduate students to enable them to handle respondents in conflict situation and collect data maintaining rights and dignity of the respondents. It also aims to sensitise the policymakers to enact some principles in the domain of social research, particularly pertaining to research on socio-culturally marginalised vulnerable section of the society, for protecting their rights, cultural speciality and dignity.

This paper is based on secondary sources of information. Drawing upon categories of publication on conflict research, minority research and combing both conflict and minority research, it has assessed both types of resources to outline the methodological and ethical challenges in conflict areas where ethnic minority people or different groups of people are living side by side. The objective of the paper is to advance the methodological and ethical guidelines as well as buttress researchers by making them sensitive to the rights and dignity of the respondents during and after the research. The paper is divided into five sections including introduction and conclusion. Following the introduction, section two defines the concepts of ethics and methodology in research. The question of methodological and ethical issues in conflict zone research is dealt with in the third section while section four discusses in brief the publication of the research. Section five draws together the discussion and concludes the paper.

2. What is 'Ethics' and 'Methodology' in Research?

Methodology and ethical issues are at the heart of research in social and behavioural sciences. Ethics in research is generally referred to as the procedures followed by researchers to conduct research in human and animal objects. This is a set of principles to guide researchers for ensuring the rights and dignity of the respondents and research subject. In research, whether it is a human or animal object, individual researcher and institution cannot conduct meaningful research on their own. Rather, a set of guiding principles and values exists for advancing the research work to investigate the common cause of humanity. This set of principles and values is regarded as the 'ethics' in research. Somekh and Lewin argued that "ethics in social research is a set of principles that judge the sensitivity of the research to the human subjects as well as the methodological soundness of the research tools to address the research questions".⁹ Sufian argues that ethics in research comes from the social context where the research is conducted. This is entirely related to the neutrality/ impartiality of the researcher to use the respondents in the research.¹⁰ On the other

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ B. Somekh and C. Lewin. *Research Methods in the Social Sciences*, Sage publication, 2005, p. 56.

¹⁰ A. J. M. Sufian, *Methods and Techniques of Social Research*, Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2009.

hand, methodology is the blueprint of research to design, conduct, analyse and publish the research result. To Leary, "methodology is a framework based on the pragmatic assumptions that help to conduct research. This is a technique for collecting data and analysing the entire step to present the research result"¹¹

Although methodology and ethics in research are separate concepts and also used as separate chapter in research methodology book, both procedures are fundamental for a researcher to accomplish a research work within the set principles and values. It means there exists the relationship between methodological aspects of research and ethical principles. Methodological aspects provide a comprehensive idea and a blueprint of how a researcher would draw the design, go to the field and collect the data. On the other hand, ethics in research does not provide any map for conducting the research processes but provides input to control the behaviour of the researcher while collecting data, analysing it and presenting as a research result. Ethical principles continuously remind researchers whom he/she should ask a question and in what circumstance and at what point, a researcher should stop asking questions or collect data from the field. There is no linear relationship between the methodology and ethics in research. However, both are intermingled and extremely important in conducting research in social science, particularly research in conflict zone.

3. Methodological and Ethical Issues in the Conflict Zone Research

The 'positivist'¹² and 'structuralist'¹³ approaches have advanced different theoretical grounds and methodological stands for conducting research. Along with these approaches, the Association of Social Anthropologists of Great Britain and the Commonwealth (ASA)¹⁴ has founded the ethical principles and incorporated the code of ethics in many research methodology books. According to the ASA, the most common ethical guideline for conducting social research is as follows:

"Negotiating consent entails communicating information likely to be material to a person's willingness to participate, such as; the purpose (s) of study, and anticipated consequences of the research; the identity of the funders and sponsors; the anticipated use of data; possible benefits of the study and possible harm or discomfort that might affect participants; issues related to data storage and security; and the degree of anonymity and confidentiality which may be afforded to informants and subjects"¹⁵

¹¹ Z. O'Leary, *The Essential Guide to Doing Research*, London: Sage Publication, 2004, p. 85.

¹² Positivist as a worldview supports the quantitative research method that depends on the scientific evidence and experiment for drawing research result. This approach uses statistical analysis for proving the research question.

¹³ Constructivism as a worldview supports the qualitative research method that posits knowledge is constructed through the learning process and a prior knowledge.

¹⁴ The ASA was founded in 1964 to promote research and teaching of anthropology in the UK and Commonwealth countries. This organisation primarily provides ethics guideline for research and teaching of anthropology in the member countries.

¹⁵ J. Pottier, L. Hammond and C. Cramer, "Navigating the Terrain of the Methods and Ethics in Conflict Research", in C. Cramer, L. Hammond and J. Pottier (eds.), *Researching Violence in Africa: Ethical and*

However, very few books on research methodology have incorporated chapters on ‘field study in a conflict zone’. This is because there is limited research on conflict zones and, therefore, associated difficulties for conducting field studies in conflict infested areas are widely unknown. As a general guideline, methodologists have argued that informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity must be maintained to avoid significant harms and at the same time ensuring a win-win situation for the researcher and the respondents.¹⁶ Indeed, research in conflict zone demands two major principles for smooth conducting of research and achieving the valid outcome. The first principle is ‘descriptive and causal inferences’¹⁷ and robust data collection process. And the second issue is conducting a field study with strict ethical principles.¹⁸ The self-flexibility¹⁹ and complete understanding about the field are essential for conducting research in an inconvenient situation. Moreover, knowledge of the field, good colleagues and resource persons, and willingness for taking any challenges also constitute major components for conducting research in a conflict zone.²⁰ The following section will highlight the major methodological and ethical issues for conducting a field study in the conflict-affected areas.

3.1 *Methodological Issue*

In conflict research, methodology selection is a crucial issue and researchers frequently face a dilemma on methodology selection, i.e., fixed and rigid method based on the positivist approach, or flexible and field supportive methodology based on the pragmatic paradigm.²¹ Kovats-Bernat outlines, the methodology should be “an elastic, incorporative, integrative, and malleable” in order to avoid the risk of the respondents and researchers.²² On the other hand, methodology selection and its application in the conflict zone inhabited by the minority community is hardly discussed in the field of social science.²³ Thus, Cohen and Arieli argue that conducting a field study in a conflict zone is challenging because of the complex environment, people’s suspicious attitudes and distrust among the groups living in the conflict

Methodological Challenges, Netherlands: BRILL, 2011, p. 3.

¹⁶ A. Mitchell, “Escaping the ‘Field Trap’: Exploitation and the Global Politics of Educational Fieldwork in Conflict Zones”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No.7, 2013, pp. 1247-1264.

¹⁷ In the conflict area, ‘descriptive information’ is the detailed story of the conflicts, major parties and their interaction in the conflict situation. ‘Casual inferential data’ are the information that makes correlation between the cause and effects.

¹⁸ Karen and Landau, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Self-flexibility means “the idealized type of professional managerial worker, who is open to change, malleable, adaptable, and socially and psychologically responsive to others and to change”.

²⁰ Brun, *op. cit.*

²¹ Pragmatic paradigm is the latest addition to the social research which have combined both the philosophy of positivism and constructivism and developed a new form of worldview. Pragmatism does not follow any specific system of philosophy or reality; rather, combine two independent strands of research, i.e., experimental and descriptive findings. Pragmatist researchers focus on the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of the research problem organised in a social setting.

²² K. Bernat and J. Christopher, “Negotiating Dangerous Fields: Pragmatic Strategies for Fieldwork amid Violence and Terror”, *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 104, No. 1, 2002, pp. 208-222.

²³ Cohen and Arieli, *op. cit.*

zone. Under this condition, they have proposed 'snowball sampling'²⁴ process as the best way which helps researchers to identify appropriate respondents. In the conflict zone, some sections of the people are marginalised and powerless which force them not to be proactive and share information. Snowball sampling, in this regard, provides scope to find out the right person to collect data.

In the complex situation of the conflict zone, 'focus group'²⁵ discussion has been described as a valuable tool for collecting data. Focus group provides the opportunity to researchers to gather diverse people with different background and receive multiple data from a single sitting. However, this method is a challenging task for the difficulty of gathering people from all sections, groups and parties in a common place to discuss the conflict situation, actors and major causes. Moreover, the security concerns also matter as security personnel and other vested interest groups having a stake in the conflict may target the gathering and cause insecurities to the researchers and respondents.²⁶ This may expose the identity of the respondents who may later be targeted by the state and security agencies. 'History telling'²⁷ and interview from the key people sometimes may be a crucial tool for research in the conflict zone. This method helps researchers to receive comprehensive data within a brief period and with limited risk. However, people in the conflict zone are sharply divided, and thus, existing history is contested and people may get the limited scope to express their views.²⁸ Respondents may also tell a lie or conceal the accurate history due to their fear of further persecution or may blame the opposite groups. This process is termed as the "mythoco-history".²⁹ In fact, the narrative of memories is not a good option to provide accurate information for drawing a conclusion about a significant event or about a question. Sometimes, leaders of contending groups intentionally spread false history to gain public sentiment and international support in favour of them. Information received from these sources may mislead researchers and weaken the validity of the research result.

In a conflict zone, researchers give emphasis on socio-economic survey for measuring causes, actors, and consequences of conflicts. The Conflict Survey Sourcebook published by the World Bank has, thus, emphasised on the 'socio-

²⁴ Snowball sampling is the non-probability sampling technique to identify key informants through asking a potential respondent. In this sampling process, researcher generally ask a respondent while conducting interview whether he/she knows someone else who can provide better information about the research.

²⁵ Focus Group discussion (FGD) is a qualitative research tool where a cohort of people with similar background and culture are gathered to discuss a particular topic for extracting information about the research question. Generally, the researcher moderates the discussion and helps the participants to take part actively. In the conflict research, FGD also refers to the similar meaning where similar section of the people (combatant, war victim or eye witness) are invited to a discussion meeting to share the information.

²⁶ J. Norman, "Got Trust? The Challenge of Gaining Access in Conflict Zones", in C. L. Sriram *et al.* (eds.), *Surviving Field Research: Working in Violent and Difficult Situations*, London: Routledge, 2009, pp. 71-91.

²⁷ History telling is an important technique used in research to define the situation, history, parties and issues of the research. In conflict research, history telling refers to the narrative description about the war, the parties associated with it, the issues, and outcome of the conflicts.

²⁸ King, *op. cit.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

economic³⁰ survey in conflict zones to unveil the appropriate information. But conducting a survey in such a zone needs to adhere to some basic parameters, like the sensitivity of the conflict, intensity of violence and addressing all possible channels of data collection. In such a situation, some potential methodological challenges, e.g., the type of conflict a researcher studies, the unit of analysis, the nature of the survey design, biases of the researcher and respondents, and the sensitivity of questioning the respondents constitute key issues for the researcher for collecting data from the conflict zone.³¹

In a conflict field research, another important concern is the silence of respondents or their unwillingness to participate in the research. In a conflict-affected area, people prefer to remain silent due to continuous pressure, torture, deprivation, and domination by the military, political elites and other social forces. This is called the 'culture of silence' in the conflict zone³² that does not allow the conflict-affected people to protest, share or to be proactive about what they have experienced in their lifetime. In this context, the multi-level analysis, e.g., micro, intermediate and macro level of intervention is an important way of extracting data from the field. The multi-level intervention helps researchers to extract data from top to bottom level and compare the data for the research results. Research in conflict zone requires adequate sampling process and appropriate respondent selection. Haer and Becher demonstrate that sound sampling process, 'cluster, snowball or chain-referral' sampling may help the researchers to avoid obstacles of the conflict zone, even in the dangerous conflict situation.³³ This sampling process enables the researcher to find out appropriate respondent who can truly provide accurate data for the research questions. In the case of data collection, researchers frequently face the problem of 'non-response'³⁴ and response error from respondents.³⁵ The non-response problem generally occurs in a conflict zone when the respondents do not like to answer some questions or any specific question assuming risk or insecurity. In some cases, respondents cannot remember the past memory occurred in his/her lifetime because of serious 'psychological trauma and shocks'.³⁶ Thus, researchers should know from where the interview should be commenced and where it should be stopped to avoid harm and psychological trauma. Haer and Becher again suggest introducing some open-ended

³⁰ Socio-economic survey is used in research to know the information on household income and household expenditure, consumption, assets, liabilities and ownership of the property. There are some characteristics of household survey, such as: household member information, income, expenditure, household goods and services.

³¹ J. Patricia, T. Brück and P. Verwimp. *A Micro-level Perspective on the Dynamics of Conflict, Violence, and Development*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

³² Brun, *op. cit.* ; Goodhand, *op. cit.*

³³ Haer and Becher, *op. cit.*

³⁴ 'Non-response' occurs when few questions are ignored by respondents. In the conflict zone, respondents do not like to answer all questions for fear of persecution, torture and further problem. Therefore, non-response has frequently happened in conflict research.

³⁵ Haer and Becher, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

³⁶ Dixon and Tucker. "Survey Nonresponse", in P. V. Marsden and J. D. Wright (eds.), *Handbook of Survey Research*, Emerald Publishing Group, England, 2010, pp. 593-630.

questions to reduce the non-response rate in the case of sensitive questions. Avoiding hypothetical and complex questions also help researchers to reduce the non-response rate in the survey research.³⁷ The verbal and nonverbal character, the involvement of local research assistants can be a good option to avoid the complexities and increase the validity³⁸ and reliability³⁹ of the data. It also helps to overcome the inadequacy in local language which sometimes makes interpretation of the responses tricky.

Betancourt and Khan argue that conflicts have had effects on the physical and mental health of the people.⁴⁰ People in a conflict situation feel scared and helpless that hinders them not to be an active participant in the research. Researchers also feel scared and anxious while collecting data in the conflict zone. The possibility of physical danger in a conflict situation does not allow the researcher to frame representative sampling to extract first-hand data from the field. Particularly, quantitative study may not be an appropriate tool to collect data. Respondents may also assume that their information may go against them. For example, tortured and raped women in a conflict zone hardly share their past experiences with outside researchers as it would reveal their identity and bring in the social stigma attached to crimes against women. Alternatively, people living in a distressed and deprived condition become more interested in sharing their experiences with the researcher in the logic that they could receive sympathy and assistance from researchers; or the information shared with researchers would bring the required attention of the government or external agencies to bring some positive changes in their situation.

Kristine Hoglund has raised the concern for power relation, changing the structure, repression of the people, the sensitivity of the research focus and the research design for collecting data.⁴¹ Powerful people and organised groups try to dominate the data collection environment if it goes against them. Given this situation, minority and powerless groups get less scope to share their information; or they do not like to share information for fear of the powerful or security forces. In such a situation, Hoglund⁴² has suggested that researchers should consider the issues of trust, cultural silence, sensitive issue and stigma in the conflict area for conducting research.

³⁷ Haer and Becher, *op. cit.*

³⁸ Validity in research refers to the soundness and accurateness of the entire processes of research, i.e., validity in research design, methodology, data collection and presentation of the research finding. There are two types of validity in research, e.g., internal validity and external validity. Internal validity means the accurateness of the measurement and test, on the other hand, external validity indicates how the research result has been generalised based on the targeted population.

³⁹ Reliability in research refers to the stability and consistency of the research result. If the result of a particular research is as same as it is tested second time or repeatedly, this is called the reliability of the research.

⁴⁰ T. S. Betancourt and K. T. Khan, "The Mental Health of Children affected by Armed Conflict: Protective Processes and Pathways to Resilience", *International Review of Psychiatry*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2008, pp. 317-328.

⁴¹ Höglund, *op. cit.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

3.2 Ethical Issues

Ethics in research provides a guideline about the duty of care towards and, the integrity of the researcher and their research participants. The first law of ethics in research in a human subject is to protect the anonymity and personal security of the respondents.⁴³ Researchers should strictly follow the following ethical principles while researching in conflict zone.

3.2.1 Informed Consent

Informed consent⁴⁴ is the first precondition of every human research which implies that respondents must be given the opportunity to decide the pros and cons of their participation in terms of providing information for the research, its potential benefit as well as its impacts for placing the information collected in the public domain. Respondents must be given full freedom to withdraw from the interview at any time.⁴⁵ In the case of researching in a conflict zone, informed consent must be strictly followed by the researchers because people under research are most likely characterised as displaced people, and living in a vulnerable situation.⁴⁶ Sometimes, it is seen that researchers do not expose his/her research aim and objectives for the sake of the research. Graduate students also adopt the same practice due to the time constraint and for achieving the degree. This practice in conflict zone is against the ethical issue which may carry ill fate for the respondents in the course of time.

In a conflict zone with minority dominated area, researchers in some instances become a part of the conflict, e.g., supporting people for smuggling, taking the side of a rebel group and providing them with information and assistance.⁴⁷ Under this condition, the given research suffers from serious ethical consideration. The engagement of local people and local organisation for language assistance or for any other purposes may also fortify the research result and create biases.⁴⁸ However, engaging people from the field or using them to receive information for selecting further sampling to collect data may provide wrong, invalid and inaccurate information, which may produce biased research results. The power structure in the conflict situation also constitutes a crucial issue for conducting data, as there may

⁴³ King, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁴⁴ Informed consent is a major requirement in a research which refers to the permission to be taken before conducting research. When the researcher knows the pros and cons, consequences of both immediate and future and challenges, it is called the informed consent.

⁴⁵ C. Y. B. Ausbrooks, E. J. Barrett and M. Martinez-Cosio. "Ethical Issues in Disaster Research: Lessons from Hurricane Katrina", *Population Research and Policy Review*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2009, pp. 93-106.

⁴⁶ P. G. Coy, "Shared Risks and Research Dilemmas on a Peace Brigades International Team in Sri Lanka", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, Vol. 30, No. 5, 2001, pp. 575-606.

⁴⁷ K. Jacobsen and L. B. Landau, "Forced Migrants in the New Johannesburg", *Migration Studies Working Paper*, No. 6, 2003, p. 9.

⁴⁸ Cohen and Arieli, *op. cit.*

have been the possibility of the community leaders or influential people preventing the respondents to share information with outsiders.⁴⁹

3.2.2 *Doing no Harm*

'Doing no harm'⁵⁰ is a major precondition for the ethics in research, particularly in the area where ethnic minority and migrant people are residing. The American Anthropological Association (AAA) 1998, Section-III first enacted the code of conduct to avoid harm to the respondents while conducting research.⁵¹ In the conflict zone, people are already in critical condition. Therefore, they do not welcome any research work to further make their life complicated and vulnerable.⁵² But for the pursuit of the research, researchers invite the respondents and request them to share their information. This information may sometimes be used against them either during the field study period or afterwards when the research result is published. More often, respondents do not want to share information if they are required to receive permission from the community leader, warlord, or any higher authority. They feel pressure and insecure for providing information to the researcher on the ground that they might be in trouble or face harsh condition for sharing their secret information. To Jacobsen and Landau, the missing control group, the issue of representatives, inadequate sample frame, and access to the study area are important issues in such a situation to conduct research in the conflict zone.⁵³ Goodhand, based on community-based research in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Liberia, has shown that respondents are inadvertently harmed by the researchers.⁵⁴ Different sources confirmed that the extremist groups of those countries killed many people as they have taken part in the interview or focus group discussion conducted by the foreigners.⁵⁵

3.2.3 *Maintaining Neutrality*

Maintaining neutrality⁵⁶ is a crucial issue in conducting research in a conflict zone. Here, neutrality means the neutral position of researchers as well as being non-

⁴⁹ C. Mackenzie, C. McDowell and E. Pittaway. "Beyond 'Do No Harm': The Challenge of Constructing Ethical Relationships in Refugee Research", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2007, pp. 299-319.

⁵⁰ 'Doing no harm' is applied in research in different fields in order to protect the subject of the research. In social science, doing no harm refers to the obligation imposed on the researcher not to cause harm intentionally on the subject where the research is conducted. Researchers must maintain the immediate and future no harm policy for conducting research.

⁵¹ Pottier, Hammond and Cramer, *op. cit.*

⁵² M. Bøås, K. M. Jennings, and T. M. Shaw. "Dealing with Conflicts and Emergency Situations", in V. Desai and R. Potter (eds.), *Doing Development Research*, 2006, pp. 70-78.

⁵³ Jacobsen and Landau, *op. cit.*

⁵⁴ Goodhand, *op. cit.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Neutrality means to keep impartial and unbiased while conducting research. Neutrality is widely applied in mediation and law practices. Generally, the lawyers and mediators maintain neutrality in providing the judgement. In social science, neutrality is the value neutrality which guides a researcher to be impartial and able to avoid biases in research.

partisan in the conflicts. Sometimes, researchers may intentionally conduct a research to expose an issue for a specific purpose that necessarily violates the neutrality in research. Therefore, setting up a safe place for the respondents is an important step so that they feel free to share the information. Sometimes, researchers depend on professionals and civil society people to enter the field for collecting data and information. To Brun, professionals of the universities and civil society personnel help the researcher to overcome the difficult situation and find appropriate method to enter the remote conflict zone for collecting data.⁵⁷ However, depending on professionals and members of civil society sometimes misleads the research result, as these people are highly polarised in a conflict zone. They may also provide false information for their personal benefit or for interest of non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

3.2.4 Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a major issue in conducting research in conflict zone. Researchers in many instances rely on gatekeepers, community leaders, and local research assistants to get access to respondents and avoid insecurities and complexities in the conflict area. However, getting help from gatekeepers and community leaders may hamper the integrity, authenticity, and confidentiality of the research as gatekeepers and respondents may have different interest and shared different power relations with respondents.⁵⁸ Under this situation, researchers should be aware of power relations, community relation and how elites of the study area play a role for their own purpose. Fluehr-Lobban has emphasised on maintaining highest neutrality to prevent potential harms (e.g., loss of life, disability, psychological harm); avoid violating ethical/moral norms (e.g., the informed consent and 'do no harm' principles); and should avoid the transgressive values, customs, and desires.⁵⁹

Under this situation, confidentiality⁶⁰ and anonymity⁶¹ are important tools to ensure the respondent's individuality. Researchers need to know the 'information economy'⁶² and maintain the sensitivity of the respondent's demand and security.

⁵⁷ Brun, *op. cit.*, p.141.

⁵⁸ Pottier *et al.*, *op. cit.*

⁵⁹ Fluehr-Lobban, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.

⁶⁰ Confidentiality is the explicit and implied guarantee provided by a researcher to the respondents and participants of the research so that their core values, secrets and information are not exposed to the public without their informed consent. In human research, a researcher must maintain confidentiality in all respects, i.e., collecting, presenting and publishing the research results.

⁶¹ Anonymity is derived from the Greek word which means the 'without name' or 'namelessness'. In a general sense, anonymity refers to address a situation where the identity of the person is absent. In the social science research, more particularly studying 'human' protection of anonymity is used to describe the researcher role of ensuring not to mention the name of the researcher.

⁶² 'Information economy' is a recently used term in the social research, especially researching the conflict situation. Information is now a source of income and profit. In social research, researcher and respondent both may manipulate or politicize information for their own purpose or for the vested interest. Therefore, researchers need to be aware of the value of the information and be sensitive to the information, because false information may cause significant harms to a community, nation and a state. For example, false information provided by the USA and Britain has made possible to attack on Iraq in 2001, which has already

Respondents may be unwilling to share the information to an unknown people.⁶³ Therefore, researchers should build trust, show restraint and must know where to stop in the interview session. Building trust and relationship with the respondents may help to break the silence and build confidence among the respondents to share information, memories, and past history.⁶⁴ Researchers also need to be aware that their interview may reopen the psychological and mental trauma and make the respondents hostile to the interview. In this case, they should avoid asking sensitive questions, and handle the respondents with care.

3.2.5 *Research Fatigue*

Research fatigue is related to the international involvement in the country and the conflict questions. In some society researcher, NGOs, University professors, and other professionals conduct research in a conflict zone and collect data for their own purposes, but they hardly share information with the respondents. This is extremely harmful to the community as something contrary to their interests may have been published by the researcher which goes beyond their knowledge. Høglund has warned that researcher should be careful of how the information received from the respondents is going to be used and how unauthorised publication of the research results can be used after the research.⁶⁵

3.3 *Practical Issue*

Besides methodological and ethical challenges, research in a conflict zone is extremely difficult from practical point of view. In fact, a conflict situation is a complex environment where some group of people become marginalised, helpless, tortured and object of persecution. Thus, accessing and extracting data from the respondent constitute a real challenge for the researcher. H. Yu and T. Liu based on their survey among Vietnamese refugees living in California, USA, have argued that the location, availability of the refugee people, enough courage to share accurate information, the fear of harassment by the security personnel and the fear of eviction from the place constitute major issues for conducting research in the ethnic minority people.⁶⁶

E. J. Wood based on his field work of 26 months in El Salvador conflict argues that conflict zone is highly sensitive and always difficult for a researcher to go deep into the conflict for gathering data. Respondents also do not cooperate and like to cooperate for the outside pressure, and fear of repression and persecution. The

cost significant harms in Iraq and the international community as well.

⁶³ Coy, *op. cit.*

⁶⁴ Brun, *op. cit.*

⁶⁵ S. H. Elena and T. L. William, "Methodological Problems and Policy Implications in Vietnamese Refugee Research", *International Migration Review* Vol. 20, No. 2, Special Issue, 1986, pp. 483-501.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

issue of self-presentation, mistaken identity, and emotional challenges are also important for conducting a field study.⁶⁷ Smyth and Robinson depending on research experience in eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle-East and Northern Ireland have explained the core questions of research in a conflict zone, such as researcher's role, benefit of the respondent, contribution of the research in the society and how the society as a whole suffers from the research result.⁶⁸

The notion of 'insider' and 'outsider' is an important term in conducting research in a conflict situation. Smyth has again outlined that insider may have received some favour while conducting data from the conflict zone, but an outsider may also have advantages, if the outsider is a foreigner having different skin colour, for receiving sympathy and cooperation from the respondents.⁶⁹ However, the issue of safety and security of the outsiders in an unknown place is an extremely crucial concern, for example, to approach the gatekeeper or a person who will introduce, or give a preliminary idea about the field. In regard to the objectivity of the research, 'outsider' can analyse the data impartially to see all sides of the conflict, which would help to look at the conflict dispassionately. As an outside researcher, there is a possibility of being misguided by the respondents, middlemen or research assistants who may not help in choosing appropriate diverse respondents for the research leading to a biased result either in favour or against a party to the conflict.⁷⁰

The safety and security of both the respondents and researchers constitute a major component of field study in a conflict zone, like CHT, Kashmir and any other conflict hotspots. In a conflict zone, researchers face security risk for accessing the respondents or may have a restriction in every step for collecting data. Armed groups and communities involved in the conflict may not believe the outsiders and may perceive that the information collected by the researcher will bring harm to their community.⁷¹ On the other hand, inviting people from multi-ethnic background seems to be a risky strategy, as respondents may not share the information in the presence of others. The subject of the discussion, research questions and body language of the researcher play an important role in collecting data in the conflict area because the sensitive subject and research questions may complicate the community relations and in some cases, it may escalate the conflict.⁷² In this situation, researchers should be aware of the environment, security system, and possible challenges. In order to receive prior information and understand the situation, researchers should talk to the officials and ordinary people before carrying out a field study.⁷³

⁶⁷ Wood, *op. cit.*

⁶⁸ M. Smyth, "Insider-Outsider Issues in Researching Violent and Divided Societies", in E. Porter *et al.* (eds.), *Researching Conflict in Africa: Insights and Experiences*, 2005, pp. 9-23.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ K. Westrheim and L. Sølvi, "A Zone for Deliberation? Methodological Challenges in Fields of Political Unrest", *Policy Futures in Education*, Vol. 5, No.3, 2007, pp. 373-385.

⁷¹ Coy, *op. cit.* pp. 575-606.

⁷² Goodhand, *op. cit.*

⁷³ Bøås, Kathleen and Shaw, *op. cit.* p. 76.

In conflict research, researchers also face some potential challenges, such as emotional drainage, loneliness, and harsh physical stress. The lack of local knowledge is also a barrier to conducting a field study in a conflict or post-conflict zone.⁷⁴ The entry point, i.e., the access point for starting the data collection is also challenging, as there is a question of informed consent and getting permission from the security and community leaders to get access to the field for data collection. In a conflict zone, interviewing with neutral groups for impartial information is truly a challenging task. Sometimes, researchers rely on university faculties and civil society personnel for getting prior information about the field and respondents. However, faculties of universities, NGOs, and other professionals are now polarised and partitioned both politically and ideologically. Thus, researchers should study the already published documents to judge their position about the conflict and engaged parties. This task will help the researchers to identify the group of professionals who can really help the researcher for getting impartial information.⁷⁵

4. Publication and Visualisation

Publication of the finding after the research demands sincere consideration and ethical standard of whether the publication would bear any potential risk for the communities or not.⁷⁶ It is generally perceived that research output would influence policymakers to intervene in the community to address the problem. However, the stories are sometimes used as images in book and DVDs for organisations or individual researcher for their own purpose which is a serious offence in the field of research, where the research subject is a human being or community.

5. Conclusion

The discussion on methodological and ethical issues in a conflict zone reveals that setting interview environment, selection of interviewee, asking questions to the respondents, setting questionnaire and publishing the research output depend on sound methodological issues and strong ethical consideration. As the environment of the conflict zone is always challenging, social scientists may face difficulties in attaining valid and reliable information. In this regard, a single methodology, either qualitative or quantitative, may not be appropriate to unveil data and information from the field. For example, the qualitative method may not be appropriate to explore the causal relationship between two or more variables. On the other hand, the quantitative study is not appropriate to explain deeper understanding and feeling of the respondents in the conflict zone. Based on the conflicting environment, the qualitative interview is more or less an easy approach to collect information as it targets a small number of

⁷⁴ Höglund, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

⁷⁵ E. Pittaway, B. Linda and R. Hugman. "Stop Stealing Our Stories": The Ethics of Research with Vulnerable Groups", *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2010, pp. 229-251.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

quality respondents. The comprehensive survey and focus group discussion in conflict zone seem to be difficult methods due to the access to the respondents and dangerous environment. For this reason, combining the qualitative and quantitative, commonly called as the 'mixed method'⁷⁷, is an important approach to collect data from the conflict field. Mixed methods research in the conflict zone provides an opportunity to apply multi-method from different angles that consequently made possible to extract appropriate data. Goodhand argued that researchers should conduct their field study in the conflict zone, otherwise the knowledge and understanding of the conflict zone would be unexplored.⁷⁸ Janine Natalya with her field work experience in Bosnia has outlined that methodology should not be a fixed one for conducting a field study in a multi-ethnic society. Appropriate methodology and ethical issues should be integrated in order to ensure the dignity, rights and development of the people in the conflict zone. The methodology should consider the impact of the research on the respondents and the society as a whole.⁷⁹ Understanding the 'whole story' is the best way to avoid silence and encourage the respondents to participate in research. Speaking frankly to the respondents is also a good strategy that helps researchers to break the silence in dealing with sensitive questions. Triangulation of data from the qualitative and quantitative studies is also a way of avoiding the problem of silence in the research.⁸⁰

The selection of research tools in a conflict zone is deemed necessary to explore the validity and reliability of the data. In fact, different parties in conflict situation express different views about the conflict which make the task of a researcher difficult to explore the accurate information from multiple sources in the field. Although the snowball sampling process is considered as a viable instrument to collect appropriate data, it may generate twisted information if the researcher chooses the wrong person. The survey in conflict zone may also not provide quality information if respondents are not educated enough and do not know the facts comprehensively. The environment in which interviews are conducted is equally important for the researchers and respondents to express their views without any fear and pressure. In this regard, a combination of tools based on qualitative and quantitative can be a good option to avoid the shortcoming of data collection in conflict research.

In regard to the ethical issues, confidentiality and anonymity of respondents and neutrality of researchers are extremely important to produce valid and reliable research result. This will equally help researchers to avoid significant harms to respondents. Sometimes, some researchers conduct research in the conflict zone either for their personal benefits or is determined by the objectives of some NGOs.

⁷⁷ Mixed method research is the third philosophical worldview for conducting research in social sciences. According to this worldview, both quantitative and qualitative methods are combined in every stages of research, i.e., designing, collecting data, analysing and presenting research results.

⁷⁸ Goodhand, *op. cit.*

⁷⁹ J. N. Clark, "Fieldwork and its Ethical Challenges: Reflections from Research in Bosnia", *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 2012, pp. 823-839.

⁸⁰ Pottier *et al.*, *op. cit.*

Nowadays, NGOs, both local and international, have their own objectives and tend to support specific policy direction and groups depending on their source of funding and political and ideological orientations. Accordingly, researchers work as per the guideline of INGOs and NGOs. In some instances, some NGOs completely depend on foreign funds and donors to operate at the local level. As a result, these NGOs could hardly address the ethical consideration while conducting research and are most likely to produce biased research results.

Graduate research students are now seriously involved in violating ethical and methodological principles in conducting research in conflict zone. Mitchell is critical of the growing number of field studies which are aimed at extracting actual data from the respondents. He is highly concerned about the subject or the respondents to whom the researchers and students rush to gather data for their study on the ground that field study may have an exploitative role in commodifying the experiences of victims and combatants.⁸¹ According to him, researchers are now more proactive to conduct a field study to secure a position in international organisations as most of the international organisations, especially the UN and development organisations prefers their employee to have firsthand experience in the field in conflict zones.⁸² He has also outlined that most students and researchers have been using the “internal states, trauma, and memories of the most vulnerable people” as a resource or instrument for their personal benefit.⁸³ In some cases, researchers published some information and pictures of the most critical section of the people in a conflict zone that most likely violate their privacy and, in some instance, allow them to be identified by insurgent groups or security agencies, which are completely against ethics of the research.

Publication of the research result has now become a fashion to researchers as it carries financial benefit and fame at the same time. However, researchers in many instances consciously and subconsciously violate the anonymity, confidentiality and personal security of the respondents in a conflict zone. Generally, they share their research finding with the public domain before publishing it in recognised books and professional journals. As a result, information received from respondents becomes public which is a clear violation of the ethics. In this case post-research, data handling, i.e., sharing drafts and data with others is extremely crucial. This should strictly maintain confidentiality and be vigilant while sharing data with other people.⁸⁴

Despite having these difficulties and questions of ethical considerations, research in the conflict zone is a growing demand in order to find the causes and consequences of violence and war. Moreover, proper policies and management approach also depend on the research and investigation of what factors constitute a

⁸¹ Mitchell, *op. cit.*

⁸² *Ibid*, p. 1256.

⁸³ *Ibid*.

⁸⁴ C. L. Sriram, J. C. King, J. A. Mertus, Olga Martin-Ortega, and Johanna Herman, (eds.), *Surviving Field Research: Working in Violent and Difficult Situations*, Routledge, 2009, pp. 56-68.

conflict and how best the conflict be managed for the peace-building and development. International organisations, especially the UN is increasingly emphasising the research and actions in a conflict zone to understand the conflict and attain peaceful management of all conflicts within and among nations. Therefore, researchers should meticulously focus on the methodological and ethical consideration to ensure the rights and dignity of respondents as well as promoting peace and security in conflict zone.

Developing countries like Bangladesh require giving special attention to formulating ethical guidelines and principles for researching in conflict zone as hundreds of research works are carried out from different perspectives. Surprisingly, there are no set ethics principles at the national level that could guide social researchers to maintain the confidentiality, anonymity and preventing harm to the people who act as respondents. Moreover, the demand of field study is growing in Bangladesh as government policymakers, development workers and graduate students are increasingly engaging in to exploring the existing and emerging problems, explore appropriate solutions and suggest policy guidelines. This endeavour is to understand the problems, but in many cases violating the rights and doing harms to respondents remains a major concern for the social research methods.

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