Qualitative Research

Status, gender and geography: power negotiations in police research

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Status, gender and geography: power negotiations in police research

Jyoti Belur
University College London, UK

Abstract

This article is a reflexive analysis of the impact of researcher characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity and status on doing police research in conflict zones. The reported research explored perceptions of front-line police officers working in left wing extremism-affected areas in India. I suggest five working propositions that emerge from this work . First, power is necessarily negotiated between the interviewer and the interviewee throughout the interview process. Second, while researcher gender and age do influence the research process, it is proposed that status dominates power negotiations in hierarchical organisations. Third, working in conflict zones places many restrictions on the researcher and the research process, which impact research design and outcomes. Fourth, the microgeography of the interview site is relevant to how power negotiations are conducted. Finally, guidelines to resolve ethical dilemmas rarely provide solutions to tricky field research situations.

Keywords

gender, India, interviews, police, power negotiations, reflexivity, status

Introduction

In August 2010, as we bumped along the potholed country road in a jeep, the police officer accompanying me slid a pistol across the seat and said, 'Ma'am, keep this. The next section can be dangerous'. As I calmly took the pistol, two thoughts went through my mind, 'What would the University Ethics Committee make of this?', and 'I sincerely hope I remember how to use this weapon'. The fact that I was not nervous but genuinely amused required both introspection and explanation. For the brief spell that I held the weapon, I told myself, I could never have envisaged this particular scenario ahead of the field visit. The situation and my reaction to it merited reflection on the processes of doing and thinking about research as an ethnographic enterprise.

Corresponding author:
Jyoti Belur, Department of Security and Crime Science, University College London, 35 Tavistock Square, London, WC1H 9EZ, UK.
Email: j.belur@ucl.ac.uk

Conveying the lived reality of ethnographic research, or describing the 'storied reality' of ethnographic work (Madden, 2010) involves a discussion of the reflexivity and subjectivity that the researcher brings to the research. My research on the policing of Left Wing Extremism (LWE) in India highlighted that as a woman and a high-ranking ex-Indian Police Service officer researching a male-dominated organisation, factors such as gender, status, age and ethnicity were important, but varied in the degree of influence at different points. This article explores the effects of gender, status, age, ethnicity and geography of the interview site on the resulting power dynamics involved in conducting interviews. A number of studies emphasise the influence of gender when women study predominantly male settings (Gurney, 1985; Horn, 1997; Pini, 2005; Sallee and Harris, 2011). In juxtaposition, the central argument of this article is that in hierarchical organisations, such as the police, researcher status, rather than gender, becomes particularly salient, especially if the research is not about masculinity.

Five working propositions emerging from the research are discussed. First, power is necessarily negotiated between the interviewer and the interviewee throughout the interview process. Second, while researcher gender and age do influence the research process, it is proposed that status dominates power negotiations in hierarchical organisations. Third, working in conflict zones places many restrictions on the researcher and the research process, which impact the research design and outcomes. Fourth, the microgeography of the actual interview site is relevant to how power negotiations are conducted. And finally, there are few guidelines to resolve ethical dilemmas in tricky field research situations.

Conducting interviews as a means to gather primary data from relevant actors in the field is a recognised qualitative research technique (Hammersley and Gomm, 2008). The semi-structured interview is an active performance involving creation of meaning. Denzin (2001) suggests that every interview text 'selectively and unsystematically reconstructs the world, tells and performs a story according to its own version of narrative logic' (pp. 25–26). This narrative logic emerges from the context along with the interplay of various factors, such as the age, gender, ethnicity, class and status of both the researcher and the researched (Manderson et al., 2006). These factors impact power relations between the interviewer and the interviewee. Feminist scholars have long recognized that differential power relations have an impact on the way the interview develops. Answering the question 'who is asking whom what and where?' (Pini, 2005) becomes vitally important in assessing the quality of qualitative research.

Field research is heavily reliant on the researcher's perception of the field and is shaped by the researcher's personality and the interaction between the researcher and the researched (Punch, 1994). Reflexivity and explaining the influence of the researcher on the research process is necessary to make research findings more transparent, thus increasing their legitimacy (Hammersley, 2008). An account of the interview process and describing the researcher's experience helps give background to the reader to understand and interpret the findings (Ellis and Berger, 2002).

The article presents the background to the research, methodology and the interplay of characteristics that influence the research process. The main body of the article is organised according to the three stages of field research: gaining access, field visits and conducting interviews. It explores power negotiations between the researcher and the

researched during each stage, pivoting around how researcher status was crucial in delineating the research content. This discussion will be against the backdrop of the complex nature of conducting police research in conflict-ridden zones (cf. Haer and Becher, 2012; Knox, 2001) and how ethical dilemmas were negotiated.

Background to the research

The reported research examined police officers' perspectives on countering LWE in India, their understanding of the nature of the threat of LWE and corresponding counter-terrorism policies. LWE, inspired by Maoist ideology, also known as the Naxal movement[1] in India, is the 'single largest security threat' facing the country (Indian Prime Minister, 2006). In the conflict between the State and disenfranchised groups represented by Naxalites (or Maoists), law enforcement agencies are (often unwilling) party to the violence and are themselves the target of terrorist violence.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 81 police officers of all ranks (from Constable to Inspector General) in three states in India. Interviews were conducted on-site, in police stations or police offices, and lasted between 13 minutes and 2 hours. All interviews, except three, were recorded; detailed notes were taken during unrecorded interviews. Additionally, there were several informal interactions with officers after the recorded interviews, or while travelling long distances to reach police stations, or over meals. Extensive notes were made of these 'unrecorded' conversations – data which were often as important as the formal interviews (Warren, 2001).

Interplay of characteristics

Understanding how power relations manifest in particular cultures and research contexts and how they inform the ethics and politics of data collection and knowledge formation is essential (Elwood and Martin, 2000). In this project, field research was embedded in conflict zones adding complexities of security-related practical and ethical issues to multiple negotiations for power involved in researching a hierarchical police organisation where gender, status, age, ethnicity and class were significant factors.

Particular attention has been paid to how gender presents special problems when women interview men (Warren, 2001). A woman researching a masculine organisation has to contend with 'prejudice, sexual innuendo and unwelcome advances' (Punch, 1994: 87). Some female researchers have renegotiated identities or have been subject to initiation tests to be accepted and to develop rapport and trust (Cain, 1973; Hunt, 1984). The subjective exploration of the impact of the research on the researcher (Gelsthorpe, 1990) and analysing how these subjective responses affect the outcome are a legitimate aspect of research (Campbell, 2001). There are relatively few women police researchers. Their reflections suggest that gender strongly influences how research is conducted and experienced (Belur, 2010; Brown, 1996; Cain, 1986; Gurney, 1985; Horn, 1997; Huggins and Glebbeek, 2003; Hunt, 1984).The influence of gender in my research could not be denied, but it was tempered to a great extent by status, as I outline.

Analysing gender differences within interviews was not relevant because my interview sample of 81 officers included only two women constables. Policing in India is

inherently masculine where women comprise 5 percent of the strength.[2] This was especially true of policing insurgency where I was informed that countering LWE was considered dangerous work, across difficult terrain and under trying field conditions, thus, not very suitable for women officers. Consequently, my sample had only two women participants involved in front-line policing. These officers were personally affected by Maoism and were motivated to be involved in counterterrorist operations.

Ethnicity, age and social class are also influential factors in the research process, especially in establishing rapport and trust (Manderson et al., 2006). The police organisation is relatively resistant to the probing eyes of outsiders (Punch, 1993), and in this research, the fact that both the researcher and the researched shared ethnicity might have been important for gaining access and negotiating bureaucracy. However, its exact contribution cannot be gauged since the experience of other 'foreign' researchers suggests that ethnicity did not pose a problem for them in either gaining the confidence of police interviewees or developing valuable insight into the world of policing in India (Bayley, 1969; Jauregui, in press). Similarly, unlike other young female researchers who had to fend off sexual advances from police interviewees, my experience, in common with other middle-aged women researchers, was quite different (cf. Horn, 1997; Huggins and Glebbeek, 2003). However, in this, as in other aspects of the research, my status as a former senior ranking police officer bore greater responsibility than age for warding off unwanted advances.

Police research is especially sensitive to researcher status (Reiner, 2000). The four main types of statuses are insider (a police officer), outsider (an external researcher), inside-outsider (e.g. a civilian who works for the police organisation) and outside-insider (e.g. an ex-police officer), and there are associated advantages and disadvantages with each type (Brown, 1996). Given the sensitive nature of the research in conflict-affected areas, status (outside-insider) was experienced to be the most significant individual characteristic influencing the research process at every step. This included gaining access to the organisation, possessing shared cultural understanding, cultivating interviewee trust and affecting the interview dynamics, all of which, in turn, influenced data analysis. There is a general assumption that the insider possesses intimate knowledge of the researched community and therefore can interpret the findings and offer insights that outsiders will find impossible to access (Labaree, 2002). However, an outsider possesses the detachment and objectivity to question the observed phenomenon, unencumbered by preconceived notions and prior prejudice (Kauffman, 1994). I found that being an outside-insider accentuated the advantages associated with both statuses. I got access and possessed cultural understanding but simultaneously, moving away from active policing for many years had provided the space and critical distance to observe and analyse, unencumbered by any professional agenda that an insider might pursue.

Thapar-Bjorkert and Henry (2004) suggest that neither insider nor outsider status endows any essential form of power upon researchers but that power is dynamically negotiated between the researcher and the researched depending on the different constellations of identity and power at play. Sceptics might argue that my identity as an 'outside-insider' was uppermost in my consciousness, thus making status the most significant characteristic that defined the nature of the research, even though it might not have influenced officer perception and response to the extent I imagine it did. To counter this, I

present one example of a middle-ranked officer who received instructions to make arrangements for some lady researcher wanting to visit his remote police station. He was polite but patronising and not very interested in engaging in a discussion. However, during our conversation, when he realised that I had been a senior police officer, his entire demeanour changed as did his enthusiasm. The experience of other police researchers supports the importance of status in police research. Huggins and Glebbeek (2003) suggest that when researching the police, in many cultural settings, if interviewers are recognized as 'insiders', they are more readily accepted by police interviewees. The police consider those of their own rank as the most legitimate insiders, as a result I was given access to any police station and any available officers during the field research.

Gaining access: presentation of self to gatekeepers

Researching the police, an organisation that is traditionally resistant to outside scrutiny (Punch, 1993; Reiner, 2000) is never easy, but it becomes especially difficult if the topic is very sensitive and the field conditions are too dangerous for a researcher. My research involved travelling to some of the most violence-prone areas to conduct interviews with police officers in three states in India. For the pilot site, a state that was reportedly neither very successful nor a failure in dealing with the problem was chosen. Site 1 was chosen because the police response in that state was considered to be the most successful. In contrast, site 2 was selected because it was considered to be struggling in countering LWE.

I sought permission to conduct the research from the most senior officer in each state. My first contact in the Police Headquarters of the pilot site was a high-ranking officer who had helped me with my doctoral dissertation research when I was still a serving officer in the Indian Police Service. Whereas then his response had been very positive and enthusiastic, this time it was less warm,

> You have resigned as a police officer and are now working for a foreign university. Hmmmm. It might not be that easy for you to get permission this time. We will have to find out from the Ministry whether you can be allowed to travel to Naxal areas.

I was dismayed by the prospect. Past experience of the Indian bureaucracy had made me wary of the extraordinary delays and uncertainties of bureaucratic red tape. Contrary to expectations, I was soon asked to meet with the senior officer responsible for anti-terrorism in the state. I found that being a former police officer not only meant that I got a quicker response from the police but also gave me the confidence to interact with administrative staff, thus avoiding being fobbed off with routine dilatory tactics. Negotiating the labyrinth of official bureaucracy, especially police bureaucracy, can otherwise be quite a daunting prospect for most researchers.

During that first meeting, my instinctive response of 'standing to attention' in the presence of a senior officer was received very positively, 'I see you have not forgotten your police ways'. It instantly appeared to establish my credibility. Ten minutes into this meeting, the officer was happy to sanction official permission to conduct the research and further, went on to organise the logistics of my visit to the research site. First impressions in field research are extremely important in determining the subsequent success or

otherwise in data access (Warren and Rasmussen, 1977). Adopting this persona worked with all the senior officers I met with subsequently.

In sites 1 and 2, I directly contacted the chief of the state police force, the Director General of Police (DGP). Stating that I was a former police officer secured me a meeting with these officers within days. Both officers were very receptive to the research. Both meetings lasted well over an hour. This experience was in contrast with what other female researchers have reported in similar research encounters with powerful men who tend to be patronising and dismissive (Pini, 2005). This might be for two reasons: first, they accepted that my background allowed for understanding the subtle nuances of policing, and second, I had demonstrably accepted that they were powerful persons via my speech and actions, which therefore needed no reinforcement. Conferring 'expert' status to participants has been found successful in police research especially when high-ranking officers expect and accept deference as a key part of the construction and maintenance of their identity (Silvestri, 2003).

The power differential between the researcher and the researched can be bridged by co-opting participants in a collaborative enterprise. However, in this case, the research agenda was well defined, and collaborative input into the research was limited to asking senior officers in all three states for their suggestions about choosing specific research sites. Background research had indicated which districts would be ideal, and I was prepared to negotiate with senior officers. Fortunately, officers' suggestions aligned with my wishes with the exception of one district that was deemed dangerous with on-going police–Naxal confrontation underway. The officer said that he would make arrangements for me to travel to the district if I insisted, but operational officers on field manoeuvres might be unavailable to talk to me. As a compromise, we chose its neighbouring district, which shared geographical similarities and faced comparable LWE-related violence. I did not read any hidden agenda or covert attempt to divert me from visiting the area of first choice but possibly an attempt to ensure that my visit would be productive.

My conduct, in accordance with police etiquette, reassured them that I remained an 'insider' and would therefore understand and present a fair account of the police perspective. Senior officers probably felt that they had some degree of control over a colleague, regardless of the fact that I was no longer in service. Horn (1997) suggests that women researching the police are more likely to be 'tested' by male police officers, and the degree of acceptance may depend upon their responses. My experience was similar in that the most senior officers (as main gatekeepers) were interested in a face-to-face meeting – their questions clearly indicated that they wished to establish whether I could be trusted.

Arguably, access was granted because I was a woman and was therefore seen as harmless and naive (Easterday et al., 1977; Warren, 1985). My being female might have predisposed officers to view my request more favourably, but not all women researchers are allowed privileged access to LWE-affected areas (e.g. Sundar, 2010). Some officers admitted that they were wary of researchers/activists with a prominent anti-establishment viewpoint, even if they were women. My background and perceived pro-establishment persona appeared reassuring in contrast. This created an ethical dilemma because though I was sympathetic to the establishment in principle, the analysis would be objective and data driven. During these initial meetings with

gatekeepers, I had to explain that while I intended to give a voice to police officers on the ground, I would also critically analyse police counterterrorism responses to learn from good practice and avoid mistakes.

Horn (1997) found that as a woman researching the police, she was more liable to be seen as a 'spy' by the lower ranks, but an ineffectual one. Women researching in typically male arenas tend to get typecast in a traditional role: 'harmless, unthreatening and slightly incompetent' (p. 300), considered to be vulnerable and exploitable, thus more in need of 'protection, aid and surveillance' (Horn, 1997, citing Warren and Rasmussen, 1977: 351). Horn felt patronised by some officers but found it difficult to separate out the effects of gender and status on this treatment. I did not feel patronised but found police officers to be protective during field visits. I was given an armed escort while visiting the police stations, and appropriate pit stops were made in guest houses or rest houses for comfort breaks – an important consideration while travelling for long hours in isolated forest areas. While this was partly because I was a woman, similar courtesies would be extended to any senior officer, regardless of gender.

Senior police officers exhibited no anxiety about me travelling to extremism-affected areas. In fact, they were very keen that I visit these dangerous areas to get a first-hand account of policing there. This response was very different from what I was led to believe about police unwillingness to allow researchers to travel to some of these areas (Sundar, 2010). Officers expressed their distrust of the motives of some other 'activist' researchers who, as one officer frankly said, 'were more interested in holding press conferences, creating trouble, and inciting the crowds by portraying the police as brutal and oppressive' (Interviewee 74). Conversely, gatekeepers did not perceive my research agenda as threatening the fragile security in the area.

Though senior officers said that I was free to speak to villagers and militants to understand their perspective, I chose only to interact with operational officers. Researching conflict zones can be dangerous, and establishing legitimacy can be fraught with problems (Knox, 2001). Thus, my decision to focus on the under-researched policing aspects of the conflict was a deliberate strategy to gain police trust. It also provided a refreshing change for most officers. In their experience, anyone interested in LWE (academics, activists, journalists and inquiry commissions) was eager to hear accounts of the Maoists and/or 'victims of police brutality', but seldom focused on the operational challenges for policing.

Field visits: role of place in the interview situation

The interview site 'provides a material space for the enactment and constitution of power relations' (Elwood and Martin, 2000). In this case, there was little choice in location as the research could practically only be conducted by travelling to police stations in LWE-affected areas and interacting directly with police officers. I would observe actual working conditions and topographical challenges for officers, besides which, sample selection would be dictated by availability of officers in the police stations.

I travelled to five districts and 16 police stations and outposts. Since research approval came from their superior officers, all the young district superintendents of police were very co-operative. I was assigned a carefully chosen knowledgeable liaison officer and

was accompanied by an armed police escort. Standard operating procedure in LWE-affected areas dictates that movement of all police personnel and Very Important Persons (VIPs) is to be kept secret until the last minute, and destination details are revealed to select few. This is to prevent any leakage of information to the Maoists, allowing them to lay an ambush or plan an attack. A similar protocol was followed wherever I travelled. Consequently, I had to take my chances by arriving unannounced to a police station and interview police officers available there. This often meant that the sample was not as representative of ranks as desirable.

Elwood and Martin (2000) suggest that interview sites and situations affect social relations between the researcher and the researched. Choice of appropriate interview sites, locations where interviews take place, is important as it has implications for the power and positionality of the researcher and participants (Elwood and Martin, 2000). My interview sites were offices, police stations and, sometimes, the government guest house where I stayed. A typical research day would begin at 6.30 am in an unmarked vehicle full of plain-clothed armed police officers and the designated liaison officer. Police stations were located anywhere between 30 and 110 km away from district headquarters. In many areas, roads were in poor condition or badly damaged and often passed through dense forests and hilly areas. We had to travel at considerable speed as a precautionary measure to avoid any possible ambushes laid by the Maoists. After a jarring ride, we would arrive at the first police station, and I would begin the interviews.

Conducting research in sensitive police stations was severely time restricted since it was considered unsafe to remain in any one location for more than a couple of hours. Police officers accompanying me explained that Maoist sympathisers in every village kept a close watch on the proceedings in the police station and informed Maoist militants of all movements. Lingering for longer in these police stations would give them time to lay an ambush or attack the vehicle on its way out. This necessarily limited the number of people I could interview and kept the interviews short and to the point. Apart from short visits, other precautionary measures were taken, such as leaving the police station and travelling in the opposite direction before doubling back towards our intended destination; changing unmarked vehicles between police station visits; changing number plates of the vehicles and on one occasion, even travelling by state transport bus was contemplated, but ultimately abandoned. All these served to underlie the dangers involved in everyday policing of these areas.

After completing interviews at the first police station, I would then be whisked off to another location, where I would continue the interviews in a guest house or government office. From there, we would go on to the next police station anywhere between 20–80 km away and the process repeated. The security risks associated with remaining in any district for long meant that the research was conducted in short but very intense bursts. The officers organised lunch and comfort breaks for me in some government guest house in one of the safer towns. Once the police had given access, they felt responsible for providing safe accommodation and transport. In these rural districts, police stations are located many miles away from headquarters. There is virtually no public transport and not many hotels or restaurants fit for purpose. I realised that any kind of officially permitted research would come attached with the obligation to accept local help in conducting the research.

After police station visits, we would return to a government guest house by late evening. Some of the most interesting and informative conversations were with police officers accompanying me on these visits. After spending many hours on the road, we built rapport, and these officers were willing to have a more open and informal conversation about some of the relevant wider social and political issues as well as their working conditions. On a few occasions, additional interviews were conducted in the guest houses where I was staying. These officers formed part of my purposive sample, those with special experience or knowledge of countering extremism. I would then write up my research notes before gearing up for the next 15-hour long working day.

Conducting interviews: power negotiations

Even though initial access had been successfully negotiated, it was necessary to constantly renegotiate access with individual members of the organisation (Buchanan et al., 1988). All officers approached assented to being interviewed, but the quality of response depended upon interpersonal relationships developed during the process. In most cases, shared policing background helped build bridges. As this was previously unexplored research territory – I was not asked any questions (in fact, no one even read either the research synopsis, or the information sheet prepared), no guarantees were expected and often opening remarks about confidentiality and anonymity were waved aside. The trust reposed by the interviewees made me even more obliged to treat the material with care.

Feminist methodology traditionally presented the relationship between the researcher and the researched as one-way. The researcher has power over the researched and manipulates them at the personal and intellectual level (Stacey, 1991). Feminist attempts to give power to the researched by 'developing friendship with the interviewee' (Oakley, 1981) or by 'participatory research' (Cancian, 1996), are not appropriate in some research situations (Cain, 1986). This was one of them. Similarly, it is not always the case that the researcher–researched relationship is unidirectional. Laws (1990) talks about her awareness of the research process and interviewing as being a power struggle and her need to exert her 'power' over her subjects. However, while I strove to maintain power over the research agenda, during the actual interviews, power negotiations were often in the opposite direction where I had to downplay whatever power I had to encourage interviewees to take charge.

As a high-ranking insider (it did not seem to matter that I was an ex-officer) probably police officers I approached felt they could not refuse being interviewed. None chose to exercise the option that was clearly presented at the beginning of every interview. I found that lower ranked police officers often felt vulnerable, preferring to remain silent rather than express an opinion that might be considered inappropriate or impolitic. Indian police sub-culture brooks little freedom of ideas, and it is expected that subordinate officers generally conform to what senior officers want to hear. Some lower ranked officers found it difficult to accept that a senior officer was respectfully asking them for their opinion for the purposes of research. It made some of them uncomfortable – leaving them tongue tied. A few officers came in predetermined to say very little and gave monosyllabic or vague answers, not an uncommon experience for researchers in terms of responses (Hutchinson and Wilson, 1992). It might be one of the techniques that

interviewees adopt partly to manage their feelings of vulnerability (Knox and Burkard, 2009), especially if they felt that I was evaluating them (Adler and Adler, 2002). In a few other cases, I felt that their response denoted a sort of passive aggressive domination, almost as if they were adopting the stance, 'you might make me sit here, but you cannot make me talk'.

Most interviews began with the officers feeling apprehensive about the experience, something that Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2002) call a 'baseline threat' inherent in any interview situation. However, those who felt they could trust me were willing to engage in an open and honest discussion. Many young officers actually relished the opportunity to discuss their ideas with someone who, they thought, could empathise and was aware of operational realities. Their co-operation was perhaps based partly on the expectation that it would validate their personal experiences (Hiller and DiLuzio, 2004) and partly because they found the interview experience interesting and rewarding (Berg, 2001).

In most rural police stations, the station house officer's office is generally the only place where visitors might be received. When conducting interviews, there was often some awkwardness around the seating arrangements. The first officer to be interviewed would usually be the officer in charge of the police station who would insist that I take the officer's seat, as is the norm when any senior police officer visits a police station in India. I would, however, insist that it is not my place to sit in the officer's chair and that he should occupy his chair. However, this would be against convention, so as a compromise, I would pull out a chair and sit on one side of the table and request the officer to sit on the visitor's chair, leaving the main chair vacant. All other interviews would be conducted in this manner. It was my attempt to demonstrate that I was not there as a senior officer, demanding total obeisance but was there as a researcher to genuinely listen to their views. It was my awareness of the potential of 'surplus threat' in the interview situation that arose from my identity (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2002) that prompted these attempts to make the interview successful. While I might have partially succeeded in putting some participants at ease, it was perhaps not effective for everybody. I found this especially true of the low-ranked constables. The interview outcomes were varied, some officers revelled in airing their opinions, but others wanted to get away from an uncomfortable situation as soon as possible. This was reflected in the length of the interviews.

While Horn (1997) cultivated the image of 'naïve young researcher' to avoid being seen as harmful and dangerous, I played the role of 'fellow officer', one who was aware of operational handicaps and resource limitations. On occasion, I found myself sharing work-related experiences, to show empathy. In instances where officers discussed work-related and personal problems, it was more difficult to separate out the effect of gender and status. Were they discussing their personal situation because I was a woman and would be more sympathetic? Or was it because as an officer, I would understand the situation better and perhaps even influence policy?

I neither faced sexist remarks, nor derogatory comments, but some interviewees exhibited veiled contempt or scepticism towards the research, conveyed via their tone and expressions. I did not think there was any kind of 'gender performing', that is, conforming to gender-typical responses (Sallee and Harris, 2011) because none of the questions actually probed police officers' masculinity. Instead, questions focused on their professionalism. This reinforces McDowell's (1998) suggestion that it is the subject of

the research that will shape the interview, not just the identities of the researcher and researched. Gender was not as overt an influence on the interviews as status; nevertheless, it might have had a subtle impact on use of language, what was said and how people responded.

Ethical issues: deception

The main ethical dilemma was the reconciliation of empathy with detachment. I had presented myself as an 'insider' (specifying that I was an ex-officer) with the purpose of giving a voice to the police and as a result unrestricted access and co-operation was provided. I was afraid that gatekeepers and the interviewees would subsequently expect that I present the police in a positive and uncritical manner. Though the research intention to present a realistic account of police officers' perspective was always transparent, a critical appraisal of the ground reality was bound to highlight problems and lacunae in the police response to counter-insurgency. The only way to preserve research integrity and at the same time not betray interviewee trust was to ensure promised anonymity and confidentiality, present findings in the spirit of constructive criticism and include policy recommendations from lessons learnt.

The second dilemma arose out of the inadvertent deception embedded in my outside-insider status. Ethical norms governing field research insist that the researcher ought not to employ deception or disguise to obtain consent from the researched. Accordingly, I always introduced myself to the gatekeepers as an ex-officer. I also introduced myself to the individual interviewees by saying that I used to be a police officer from a northern state in India but was now conducting research on the policing of LWE, and I would tell them a bit about the research structure and the research agenda. I would then ask them whether they would be happy to discuss some of their views on this and whether I could record the interviews. I did not ask them to sign consent forms because I had requested the University Ethics Committee to waive this requirement in the interests of being able to conduct the research. My interactions with officers had made it apparent that almost no police officer in the Indian context would be happy to sign anything that could associate them with the research, regardless of the fact that it was relatively harmless to them personally. It had also been my experience during previous research that officers were willing to have their interviews recorded but were inherently distrustful of signing any paper.

In individual districts, even though the district superintendent of police was aware of my position, officers below this rank were led to believe that I was a serving officer. I realised later that the district superintendents must have given instructions to their subordinate officers to take care of 'Inspector General ma'am'.[3] This might be either because they did not think it essential to brief everyone about my exact status or it was a deliberate ploy to ensure that I got the requisite respect and response from the subordinate staff. Usually after a day or so in a district, officers accompanying me would feel comfortable enough to ask me questions about my career plans. That would be when I realised that they believed I was a serving officer. By then, it would generally be too late to disabuse them of the notion. I also realised that while I conducted individual interviews in an office or secluded place, officers accompanying me would inform the rest of the police

station staff about who they thought I was, and for some interviewees, this influenced their notion of my status much more than my own introduction to them.

Punch (1994) suggests that in field research, a small amount of deception is acceptable, especially if it does not cause harm or involve reneging on promises. I always felt very guilty about not setting the record straight, but rationalised it by ensuring that my answers to their questions were notionally truthful. In response to the inevitable question, 'When will you re-join work?' I would reply that I was currently doing post-doctoral research and did not know when and whether I would return to active policing.

There were some specific instances where this deception caused considerable ethical dilemma. The very first police station in the pilot site I visited in August 2010 was in a relatively safe area. I believe the officer in charge of the police station had merely been informed that a senior police officer would be visiting the station and would like to talk to the officers present. When I arrived (with my armed escort) at the police station, I was received with a full ceremonial salute. A tent had been erected in the station compound with all the officers and men sitting in disciplined rows facing a podium on which a table and chair were placed. To my horror, the officer had interpreted the information of my impending visit as being an official visit by a senior officer, and my intention of speaking with the officers, as a desire to hold a 'durbar' (a term that literally means 'holding court'); this being a well-established police tradition where senior officers address the ranks in a semi-formal interaction and where subordinate police officers can present their problems and grievances to the senior officer. I walked into the police station and explained my research agenda and asked the officer in charge of the police station to dismiss the waiting officers so they could go about their routine.

I am not sure how much the resulting confusion coloured the interviews that followed, but officers who came sequentially to be interviewed felt that this was some kind of test and that they should 'know the answers' to my questions. For example, one of my questions related to their knowledge of Operation Green Hunt – a central government initiative to counter LWE. One officer said he had never heard of it until the officer-in-charge had mentioned it to him just as he was waiting outside. Cleary, there was some discussion of the questions, and there were definite attempts to 'coach' officers in what were considered 'correct' responses. Worse was to follow; when I finally finished the interviews and came out of the office, I found the tent still in place and all officers continuing to wait patiently for me to address them. I was told that very few senior officers actually came to visit their police station and that the officers would be pleased to be able to interact with me. While I had conducted many of these 'durbars' during my active service, it was with a great sense of embarrassment that I sat at the table and spoke to the officers assembled. It was an interesting experience, and I got a better understanding of some of the actual problems that existed on the ground.

Subsequently, police stations were not given advance information, partly on my request, but mainly due to security concerns. As a result in one instance in site 2, at the end of a long drive, we arrived at a police station only to find it deserted. All the officers had gone on a routine 'area domination' exercise, and there was only one person left to man the wireless set. Paramilitary force providing police station protection was present, but no police officers were available to be interviewed.

In another incident in June 2011, I was given a tour around the fortifications constructed for the protection of a police station and given a detailed demonstration of the actual physical security measures put in place to prevent Maoists from attacking the police station. Just as I was leaving the police station, the commanding officer of the paramilitary force responsible for the physical security of the police station presented me with an inspection book and requested that I write out my inspection report. Despite protesting that I was not on duty or that it was not an official visit, he insisted that I write some words of encouragement. I was torn between the desire to refuse as was the proper and ethical thing to do and to write the report that I know would mean a lot to the young man who had spent such a lot of time and effort to show me around. In the end, I did write a short report and signed it with my name but added no designation.

Both incidents presented ethical dilemmas – do I act as expected and perpetuate deception? Or, do I refuse and let down research participants? I felt that my refusal to comply with the expectations of my perceived status would have had a greater negative impact on officer morale than otherwise. Since there are no suitable solutions for every peculiar situation arising in fieldwork, the researcher has to take a moral or ethical decision based on individual conscience (Van Maanen, 2008). I felt that reciprocity in the relationship demanded that I fulfil the expectations of the researched in return for their participation. Whether this participation was entirely voluntary is debatable, but there is no doubt that participants were wholly in control of the content of their responses.

Some might suggest that not denying the misconception to each individual officer might have arisen out of inadequate ethical supervision. However, in my defence, many of these situations were unanticipated prior to conducting the research, and I did not have a prepared response to them. I clearly explained to each participant that the research was being conducted independently under the aegis of a foreign university and that I was not there in any official capacity. In terms of the research outcomes, the deception affected only some of the officers accompanying me (who were not part of the interview sample) and interviewees who did not read the information sheet. This ambiguity might have affected a few interviews, and therefore, the findings have to be interpreted in the context of how the research was conducted.

Incidentally, I could not have anticipated that a police officer would hand me a weapon for personal protection, based on who he thought I was, when I completed the risk assessment exercise prior to the field visits. Then I had focused on taking necessary precautions to ensure my security, not realising that a situation where I could potentially pose a risk to other people might arise. I knew I was capable of handling the weapon responsibly and so did not refuse to accept it because the situation in these areas is genuinely very risky. Despite complying with institutional ethical review procedures, some exigencies of field research cannot be anticipated beforehand, and the researcher has to exercise her judgement to respond to the situation.

Conclusion

The complex ways in which researchers are positioned and perceived by respondents can vary according to age, gender, ethnicity, class and nationality, to which 'status' can be added as another dimension. In this research, it was found that while gender,

ethnicity and age might have had a bearing on how the research was conducted, researcher status as an outside-insider was a more important dimension affecting all aspects of the research.

My status as a high-ranking outside-insider brought power; however, I found that the researched were not quite powerless. They could choose whether to allow access to the organisation and particular research sites; choose to participate in the research and, even if officers felt manipulated into agreeing to being interviewed, they could choose their level of involvement with the research; finally, their input would ultimately shape research findings. So while some interviewees voluntarily engaged with the research questions, others exercised their power by giving monosyllabic or uninformative responses. The balance of power was negotiated during each interview. Both the researcher and the researched engaged in intellectual and power manipulations, and there is value in recognising how these dynamics influence the research outcomes. Power dynamics in the interview situation was further influenced by the fact that the research was being conducted in conflict- and violence-prone zones, which brought about its own limitations, making for less-than-ideal research conditions. The location of the interview sites in remote police stations and the negotiation of power in the physical layout of the interview site influenced the nature of the interview experience.

Outside-insider status made it possible to gain access to LWE-affected areas, interview front-line officers and understand operational conditions on the ground. Without police protection, conducting this research would have been risky and logistically difficult, if not impossible. Police officers might not have been willing to engage with an outsider, especially since the topic is very sensitive. The flip side of the outside-insider status was either that interviewees were not open and honest about their personal views or felt that they had to respond in ways that would be organisationally approved. The researcher's status as an insider with understanding of police sub-culture and subtle nuances of interaction within a hierarchical organisation was useful in unpacking these issues. Undoubtedly, some officers were reluctant to express their opinions honestly, fearing that it might be reported to their senior officers as criticism of the organisation or specific officers. But others were willing to engage in an open and critical discussion of policing because they thought they were talking to someone familiar with policing realities. On balance, the advantages conferred by status far outweighed the limitations.

Finally, ethical guidance on the conduct of field research exists but seldom prepares the researcher for the exigencies of ethical dilemmas arising in field research. These ethical minefields, implicit in conducting field research with human beings whose behaviour can be unpredictable, have to be negotiated by the researcher by making on-the-spot judgements about the implications of possible alternative courses of action. The lack of prescriptive rules to guide moral and ethical conduct in unexpected field research situations imposes responsibility on researchers to judge each situation on merit and justify their actions.

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Notes

1.   The term originates from the first peasant uprising inspired by Maoist ideology that occurred in the West Bengal village of Naxalbari in 1967.
2.   The ratio of women to men in the police is 1:19.3 (Crime in India, 2011).
3.   If I had stayed on in the Indian Police Service, I would have held the rank of Inspector General at the time I conducted part of the research, since promotions in the Indian Police Service are time bound and not merit oriented.

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Author biography

Jyoti Belur is a Research Associate at the Jill Dando Institute, Department of Security and Crime Science, University College London. She has a Masters degrees in Economics, Police Management, and Human Rights and a PhD in Criminology. She has previously worked as a Lecturer in economics before joining the Indian Police Service and working as a senior police officer in the North of India. She has recently completed a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship. Dr Belur's key areas of interest are policing, police studies, organized crime and terrorism.