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GENERAL ARTICLES

"Going into the Field"

Tales from Two Female Researchers Conducting Research in Post-Conflict Nepal

Varsha Gyawali and Yvette Selim

ABSTRACT: This article examines two female researchers' fieldwork experiences researching the transitional justice process in post-conflict Nepal. Drawing on social anthropology and applied research, it explores the complexities of researcher positionality, including their gender and social status, and addresses the challenges of engaging with the "local" and managing emotions. The authors argue that researchers need to move beyond self-awareness and sit in the complex, liminal space to examine the changing agency between researched and researchers. This article also contributes to the insider/outsider dichotomy and promotes two primary reflexive practices in ethnographic research. It contributes to discussions on intersectionality of researchers' positions, emphasizing the relational and situational nature of social identities, and the need for a nuanced understanding of the fluidities of researchers' roles in the field.

KEYWORDS: emotions, fieldwork, gender, Nepal, positionality, post-conflict, victims

This article examines two female researchers' fieldwork experiences researching the transitional justice process in post-conflict Nepal. The researchers, Varsha Gyawali, a Nepali early career researcher based at a UK institute, and Yvette Selim, an Australian, senior (post-doctoral) researcher based in Australia, conducted research with the conflict victims from marginalized communities (Browne and Moffett 2014; Gready 2014.). Gyawali's research critiques the narratives of victimhood and agency in Western transitional justice scholarship by exploring how they are constructed within the complex, lived realities of Nepal's post-conflict society. Selim's research critiques transitional justice and interrogates the victim/perpetrator binary, including the notions of suffering, harm and support, and the politics of transitional justice in post-conflict Nepal.

The article offers two prominent lenses: one of a Nepali origin researcher who is based at a research institution in the Global North, who returned to her home country for her PhD fieldwork and explores the inherent tensions surrounding her multiple identities. Within the literature on research methods, there is limited but increasing discussion about the unique chal-

lenges faced by researchers who are likely to conduct research in their home regions or in areas where they share racial and/or ethnic backgrounds (Giwa 2015). The other lens is that of a researcher of Australian origin whose approach aligns with Colin McFarlane's notion of a plural mode of knowledge production and a more globally informed social science (McFarlane 2006: 1417). Based in the Global North, Selim recognizes the value of understanding and exploring the Global South and emphasizes the importance of amplifying voices from the Global South to gain a comprehensive understanding of the local context. Understanding both these dynamics is crucial for transforming the discourse, enhancing learning opportunities, and expanding the concept of reflexivity.

In this article we argue that researchers need to move beyond self-awareness and self-consciousness to sit in the complex, temporal liminal space which continually examines and reflects on the changing agency of the researched and researchers and that it is within this liminal space, social identities and roles are dynamically renegotiated, challenging established norms and fostering a more nuanced understanding of how power relations shape the researcher–participant relationship over time. It is within this dynamic temporal framework that agency undergoes shifts, influenced by conditions such as shared emotions and experiences. This article further advances ethnographic research and theoretical debates by providing a nuanced understanding of the researcher's positionality, challenging dichotomous perspectives, introducing the concept of temporal liminal space and advocating for reflexive practices that address power dynamics and considers gendered perspectives in post-conflict research contexts. In so doing we take heed of the work of Ahmann et al. that through fieldwork confessionals we are "affirm[ing] the ongoing centrality of vulnerability to ethnographic insight. . . , while complicating intimacies often understood as foundational to ethnographic expertise" and that "'admitting together' opens pathways for co-thinking and co-writing too long marginalized within this [the anthropological] discipline" (2023: 263 and 264).

This article has three sections. The first section focuses on the context of Nepal where we outline the conflict and post-conflict dynamics. The second section provides an examination of our experiences in the "field".[1] Drawing on social anthropological and applied development-oriented areas of research, this section examines the concepts of agency and power between the researchers and research participants, the researchers' insider and outsider positions, including examining the impact of the researchers' gender and social status, as well as dealing with emotions. The third section offers our key reflections and suggestions.

Our Research in Nepal

The following section outlines the civil war and post-conflict context in Nepal and our research approaches.

Context

The 10-year civil conflict in Nepal (1996–2006) had its roots in deep-seated socio-economic inequalities and poverty. The insurgency waged against the state by the then Communist Party of Nepal–Maoists (hereafter referred to as the "Maoists") grew out of discontent toward the exclusionary social and political system and persisting ethnic, caste, and gender-based disparities. The Maoists found support based on the country's "long legacy of oppression based on caste and ethnicity" (Sengupta 2005: 2) and made demands for an overall state restructure,

including land reform, abolition of monarchy, declaration of secular state, and a wider range of social reforms, such as the end of discrimination on the basis of caste, gender, or ethnicity (Harrowell and Gyawali 2019).

The armed conflict impacted a large section of the population; it claimed over 13,000 lives and led to over 1,300 disappearances with a particularly heavy toll on the poor, marginalized communities from the rural, remote parts of the country (OHCHR, 2012). The conflict was also characterized by serious human rights violations, including systematic use of torture, enforced disappearances, killings, and sexual violence by both the Maoists and the state. The same communities that were historically marginalized—socially, politically, and economically—were also the direct victims of conflict because they were either disproportionately targeted by the state security forces for being Maoist sympathizers or they were caught in the middle of the conflict (Do and Iyer 2010; Lawoti 2016).

The conflict came to an end in 2006 with the signing of the historical Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The transitional justice (TJ) process in Nepal began with much momentum; however, this quickly dissipated. In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and a Commission on Disappearances were finally established. Despite receiving over 60,000 complaints concerning violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law, both commissions have yet to complete a single investigation and continue to have their mandates extended. Both commissions continue to be the focus of TJ efforts with limited progress on other TJ mechanisms (prosecutions, reparations, vetting, memorialization, and institutional reform).

Methodology

We adopted different methodologies for our research in post-conflict Nepal. I (Varsha Gyawali) adopted critical ethnography that privileged an engaged and contextually rich form of qualitative research. Using this methodology, I examined the wider structural factors that underlay how the victims attached an array of social meanings to their identity, particularly through their experiences of poverty and marginalization. The methodology facilitated a reflexive inquiry process that encouraged me to reflect on how my positionality influenced how I acquired and interpreted knowledge. My fieldwork in Nepal was conducted over a period of nine months from October 2017 until June 2018 in Bardiya, a predominantly rural district located in the mid-western region and Makwanpur, a hill district in the central region of Nepal. My primary research participants were victims of conflict from marginalized communities, mostly from the Dalits, *Adivasi Janajatis Madhesis*, and women who were directly impacted by the Maoist insurgency.

I (Yvette Selim) used the constructivist grounded theory approach, where the research was "grounded" in the data and examined the empirical in its real-life context, shaped by people's words and everyday lives (Charmaz 2004: 497). The constructivist grounded theory approach holds that the meanings given to the real world are socially constructed and value-laden and that it is through our individual interpretation that we construct our (different) viewpoints of the world. By adopting this approach, I was able to explore individual's perceptions, experiences and interpretations in the context of the TJ processes in post-conflict society like Nepal (see Denzin and Lincoln 2005: 3). I conducted over 125 interviews in nine districts—Bara, Dang, Dadeldura, Kailali, Kathmandu, Ilam, Lalitpur, Morang, and Rolpa—comprising all the five development regions in Nepal. My research participants ranged from victims, ex-combatants, community members, political representatives, human rights advocates, journalists, and representatives from diplomatic missions, international organizations, and the donor community.

In the "Field"

The following section explores various issues (and vignettes) that as researchers we found the most significant and difficult to grapple with during our fieldwork and after, during our analysis and writing.

Unpacking our Insider and Outsider Status

In this section, we examine the ways in which our preconceived notions of being an insider (Varsha Gyawali) and an outsider (Yvette Selim) were challenged both in the field and beyond. Researchers have found that insider-outsider identities are not static and change based on situations. Regardless of whether the researcher identifies as an insider (sharing characteristics, roles, or experiences with the participants) or an outsider (who lacks the commonality with the participants), the researcher's personal identity, including their membership status in relation to those involved in the research, remains a crucial, complex and multifaceted aspect of the investigation (DeLyser 2001: 442; Dwyer and Buckle 2009: 55). One must be aware of the influence of our multiple identities as they significantly affect data collection and data interpretation, including what is observed or overlooked and what is deemed significant or insignificant (Langhout 2006). As Phyllis Rose articulates, "neutrality does not exist. The only difference lies in the extent to which one is aware of their biases. If you fail to recognize the significance of what you're excluding, you have not fully grasped the control over your work" (1985: 77). Even if one initially considers themselves (to be able to pass as) an insider, issues of gender and social standing can further complicate perspectives. Bouka (2015: 6) a Western researcher from America who was part of the African diaspora, doing research in post-conflict Rwanda found that identity negotiations actually complicated negotiations further, as people became uncomfortable with not being able to pinpoint her identity and would, "look at you and think something is off." Further, historically, knowledge production has reflected a division between insiders and outsiders, almost mirroring the Global North/South research paradigms (Sidaway 1992; Twyman et al. 1999). As a result, knowledge production predominantly seems to flow from the North to the South, both institutionally and in terms of resources and understanding, often characterized by solution-oriented approaches (Ellerman 2002; Ellerman et al. 2001; Mawdsley et al. 2002; McFarlane 2006). We explore these challenges here.

For Gyawali, my primary data collection tools were semi-structured interviews, life histories and focus group discussions. My primary research participants were state/army and Maoist conflict victims from lower castes and ethnically marginalized communities. Other participants included representatives of the TJ commissions and other relevant state authorities, international and national human rights organizations, and the leaders of various victim-led groups and networks.

In the initial stages of my PhD research, I (Varsha Gyawali) had primarily seen myself as a native ethnographer because I am a Nepali and have spent a considerable time of my adult life in Nepal. I even wondered at times why I was expected to engage in reflexivity when ultimately, I was conducting research in my own country. I have extensive experience working with victims during the conflict period and beyond, so Nepal was a preferred choice for my research and was almost instinctive. Researching Nepal enabled me to swiftly establish networks and develop meaningful connections with the communities I researched. Being considered an insider—commonly determined by factors such as access, intimate knowledge of the research community, and membership within it—held significant appeal (as it does for researchers from other developing countries) (Kanuha 2000; Labaree 2002; Merton 1972).

I assumed that my insider knowledge would allow me to see the Nepali TJ situation more clearly and that my understanding of the culture, context, and political sensitivities would help maintain research rigor during the fieldwork. While undertaking the fieldwork, I quickly realized that my preconceived notion about me being an insider was rather questionable. In many ways, I remained an outsider for the marginalized communities whom I worked with, while also somehow being an insider to them. My identity as a Nepali and my multiple sub-identities within that—of being a woman, traditionally from a higher caste and class and from an urban city like Kathmandu—had a strong bearing on how I was perceived by my research participants. For example, in Bardiya, which is predominantly inhabited by people from the *Tharu* community, I was initially seen as a high caste person whose complexion was "fair" and whose hands were "soft", indicative of my high class and privilege. More importantly, I belonged to the same social group that had historically placed the *Tharus* at a disadvantage by exploiting them over land and tenancy issues for centuries. Similarly, where I conducted my research differed from Kathmandu, the capital city where I grew up and had formative experiences. So, even before I had navigated my fieldwork settings, I had to confront the baggage of my social identity and what it represented to my research participants. As Sonya Dwyer and Jennifer Bukle (2009) explain, the claims of insider status do not imply complete similarity or uniformity within the group being studied. Researchers inevitably bring their own belief systems, ideologies, and ways of existence that differ from those of the participants. Furthermore, their position is further complicated by factors such as material and cultural advantages, gender, sexuality, age, social status, religious affiliations, and other identities.

To manage the situation, I swiftly reflected on how my personal life experiences were either similar or different than that of my research participants and which of my social identities could prove useful or complicate my research process. Being aware and self-reflective of my status and privileges was important because it helped expand my understanding on the power hierarchies that laid between me and my participants, as well as encouraged an introspection on my accountability toward them and their stories. Nevertheless, the "insider" status did not come as naturally as I thought it would. Moreover, I felt that it was important to negotiate acceptance and carefully examine the boundaries between myself as the researcher and my research participants, especially because I was a native researcher. What helped me immensely was living among the research participants and spending a considerable amount of time with them, which helped me gain some degree of closeness and trust.

Having said that, my attempts to become an insider often proved fragile and unpredictable because it was never visibly established during my fieldwork. It was malleable and situational, where it kept shifting depending on who I met, what I said to them, how I said it, in what setting I met them and how, in return, I was perceived by them. While living in the *Tharu* villages of Bardiya, for example, I was acknowledged by many women research participants as "one of them" in their informal spaces, in their fields and houses, and even when they got together at their local tea shops. Some women even shared intimate details of domestic abuse and violence suffered by them, beyond my research topic. Having the opportunity to participate in the everyday lives of the community through informal spaces, where the research participants felt comfortable in confiding with me, helped me gain a deeper understanding of their lives—what they thought and how they felt—which was rich and contextually embedded.

However, I also often found myself feeling like an outsider. The stark differences in our lived experiences, cultural backgrounds, and social contexts created a sense of disconnect and unfamiliarity. As a PhD researcher, it was challenging to fully grasp the nuances of their daily struggles and the depth of their experiences as a conflict victim. Despite most of the research participants being open and generous with their time and insights for my research, there were

moments when I sensed a level of skepticism and reservation from the participants, further highlighting my sense of outsiderness. Having an ethnographic lens helped because I was able to recognize the differences in our lived experiences, cultural backgrounds, and social contexts, and understand the importance of these factors in the context of my research. However, not being able to fully grasp the nuances of my research participants' daily struggles and experiences also made me feel guilty of my privilege. Moments of skepticism and guardedness of some of my research participants also served as a reminder of the historical and systemic factors that have perpetuated their marginalization and hinted at power dynamics inherent in the researcher–researched relationship.

This dialectic of simultaneously being an insider and an outsider was an unfamiliar space for me, as my researcher status was constantly negotiated and influenced by a range of factors, particularly the context in which my interaction with the research participants was taking place. Perhaps, I was what Judith Butler (2016) characterizes as occurring in an "in-between" space, where I was experiencing a sense of belonging and/or contestation from among the various sub-identities I had that came along with my insider status. This exploration emphasized the fluid nature of these identities and shed light on how researchers can simultaneously occupy insider and outsider positions depending on the particular context (Bruskin 2019; Deutsch 1981; Labaree 2002).

For Selim, my primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews to obtain insights into stakeholders' viewpoints, knowledge, attitudes and preferences about TJ (see Charmaz 2004; Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011: 602). I was deeply interested in hearing private accounts "that might contradict official reports given in formal situations" (Hollowaay and Fulbrook 2001: 542). I was interested in examining TJ in Nepal from multiple perspectives. I conducted interviews with a range of respondents, including victim-survivors, former combatants, NGO workers, human rights advocates, political representatives, students, business owners, and representatives from diplomatic missions, international organizations, and the donor community. In addition to interviewing victim-survivors, my approach examined how TJ is sought and experienced by ex-combatants, perpetrators and affected community members (see Backer 2009: 60).

Before I left for Nepal, I (Yvette Selim) reflected on my identity and participants' notions that I was an outsider. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in my interviews with certain types of stakeholders, like senior NGO workers, diplomatic representatives, and UN workers, I found that being an outsider did not hinder, but perhaps may have enhanced, my relationships with my participants. I recall an interview with two key human rights workers in Kathmandu. Over time, the interview felt like it changed from a stunted exhange to a flowing deep conversation where one of the participants shared a Nepali proverb with me. He told me the TJ situation in Nepal is encapsulated in a Nepali proverb "*kali kali milera kham bhale*" which means in effect, "You are black, I am also so let's celebrate together."[2] He explained top-level politicians from both sides say, "You did terrible things, I did terrible things so let's be friends." He conveyed that it is difficult to separate political issues from TJ because there has been a tacit agreement.[3] After I left that interview, I knew that something "special" had transpired. I felt the participants had shared some of their deep, personal reflections about the TJ process in Nepal and their and others' role in it. I often wonder if I had not been an outsider if these participants would have been so frank and generous with their time and insights. Maybe, but maybe not. I realized as I began analyzing my data that the proverb and a number of the other insights they shared with me, were one of the most important findings of my fieldwork. In essence, it helped me develop my theoretical lens and action spectrum (see Selim 2018).

Once I traveled outside Kathmandu, to district headquarters and to surrounding villages, it was there that I truly felt my outsiderness. I was unclear about how to navigate the "local",

including the local NGO dynamics. In my first visit outside Kathmandu, I traveled with a group of male Nepali NGO workers from Kathmandu who were meeting with their local partners in a southern district. In this context, my interpreter was a young, high caste male Nepali NGO worker from Kathmandu. Although I was an outsider, his invitation to join this trip and introduction of me to the others in some ways helped to endorse me. This experience meant I had direct access to a number of key NGO workers in the area and that by working with my Nepali interpreter, I arguably was afforded a degree of trust. While I was very much aware of being the only female in a group of male Nepali NGO workers, I often felt that the gap between outsider and insider closed ever so slightly when we shared our evening meals. Like Varsha Gyawali, spending time, particularly in non-formal settings helped me gain some degree of closeness and trust. The evening conversations were not always directly related to my research but at times the conversation veered onto topics like how the NGO was formed, pivoted for funding and the like, which helped me consider the ways NGOs working on TJ operated and draw distinctions between the NGOs I had met with in Kathmandu. This encounter highlights my privilege and opportunities for access that are largely inaccessible to marginalized people in Nepal. It also shows that through genuine interactions in people's everyday lives there are opportunities to bridge some of the divides between researchers and participants, something that is often missed in TJ research.

Negotiating Our and Participants' Agency and Power

In this section, we examine the concepts of agency and power in our relationship with the research participants during our fieldwork in Nepal. Literature contends that the relationship between the researcher and the researched/participants is a continuous negotiation and requires ongoing reflection on how the positionality and agency between the researcher and participants impacts the data production process (Satki and Reynaud 2017: 162). Discussions surrounding the positionalities of researchers and participants, and the resulting power dynamics that emerge between them, have predominantly centered around situations where the researcher holds a position of power over the participant. This emphasis may reflect the significant amount of research conducted with individuals who are economically disadvantaged or marginalized (Lal 2018; Patai 1994).

Given the complex notions of victimhood in TJ settings, Olivera Simic (2016: 110) using her own experience as a woman who was born in, but left, Bosnia and Herzegovina and has conducted feminist research there, argues that a researcher's positionality and identity in a TJ setting may impact the type of victims that are studied. This leads to the increased visibility of some victims in a research project, while others are not acknowledged. She concludes from her own experiences that it is important for more attention to be paid to the researchers' experiences and relationality to the field in order to understand the impact this has on data collection and knowledge production in these settings. Further, Bert Ingelaere (2015) argues that in contexts where a researcher will likely be treated with suspicion by research subjects while at the same time being in the position of being a knowledge producer, which creates a power imbalance, the researcher needs a heightened awareness of their position as a researcher in data collection. Positionality can also be impacted by using local aids such as research assistants and interpreters, whose own status or prejudices may change the knowledge produced, either by influencing the interpretations and data collection of the researcher or by impacting on the participants' ability to respond (Selim 2018: 27).

Numerous feminist and other researchers have supported the concept of a participatory model that strives to establish "non-hierarchical, non-manipulative research relationships, with

the aim of bridging the gap between the researcher and the researched" (Reinharz 1983, cited in Cotterill 1992: 594). This has involved a critical exploration of issues such as who gets to speak, who speaks on behalf of others, and who possesses the authority to speak (Kapoor 2004; Sultana 2007). Participatory action research has been heralded as the least extractive form of research which affords participants with the most agency. For example, in the context of Nepal, Simon Robins and Ram Bhandari (2012) have conducted participatory action research with victims of the disappeared. This research seeks to provide opportunities for marginalized victims to agitate for change when power structures often impact ability to do so. While this research is valuable, it is not always feasible, scalable nor without unintended negative consequences. We explore some of the challenges our research raised in terms of agency in this article.

During the fieldwork, the power relations with my (Varsha Gyawali) research participants were impacted by several factors, including my ethnographic standpoint, my fluid insider/outsider status, my social standing in the Nepali society, and my ethical obligations toward my participants. Being a Nepali, my relationship with the research participants was impacted by my social class (middle class), caste and ethnicity (higher Brahmin), appearance, language, and gender in contrast to theirs. My identity of being someone from a higher class and caste group perhaps gave me an undue advantage of being positioned as more powerful in my relationship with the research participants. Being from a higher caste and class group also meant that I had better access to education, economic resources, and preexisting social networks and connections, which helped facilitate entry into certain spaces or communities.

In my interaction with research participants, there seemed to be an unspoken understanding of my privileges and the power disparities within our social contexts, which could potentially compromise the authenticity of our relationship. Moreover, any knowledge produced by me, during and beyond the fieldwork, was value-laden by my own sets of beliefs and values and by the exposures and experiences I have had and did not have. As an example, for those research participants who lived in extreme poverty and marginalization, I could try and understand and empathize with their life situation, but I would never have any lived experiences of it. From the onset, to minimize these barriers, I acknowledged my social identity and my sub-identities, without hiding or denying it, particularly if my research participants had any questions or reservations about it. I was also deeply aware of the underlying power relations between us, and therefore, offered plenty of opportunities for my research participants to object or criticize any aspect of my research. As Lisa Russell and Ruth Barley (2020) argue, researchers constantly attempt to find a balance to pursue ways that are least disruptive to the research itself and not impede with power asymmetry and emotions.

However, the more I reflected, the more I realized that the idea of me having exclusive power and control was only partially true because my research participants also had the power to negotiate and chose the extent to which they would engage and cooperate in my research. At first, it was entirely up to the research participants if they wanted to take part in my research or not. And during the course of the interview, if they wanted to, they could shift the focus of the conversation and speak about things that were more significant to them, beyond my research topics. The research participants ultimately held power over their stories and to gain access to these personal, intimate experiences, I needed to build a considerate and empathetic relationship with them, as well as a sense of mutual trust. To negotiate such inevitable power differences, what helped me the most was having adopted a constructivist paradigm and critical ethnography for my research, which encouraged a rebalancing of power in the research–participant relationship every now and then and focus on the marginalized understandings and experiences (O'Connor and O'Neill 2004). This way, I was more cognizant of the power hierarchies that pre-existed and my own role in minimizing that in how I constructed and interpreted knowledge.

First, as a critical ethnographer, I strongly believed that nobody could better articulate their grievances, their sense of justice, agency and activism than the victims themselves. I saw them as true knowledge bearers and social agents, who were best suited for suggesting avenues for social action if given an opportunity. The opinions from the TJ "experts", therefore, were peripheral for my research although I was conscious of how such top-down narratives influenced the grassroots' stories. More importantly, I was mindful of the imperative role that the participants had in my research and how their stories were valuable for my work. Given my positionality, therefore, I was very open about my commitment toward the research participants' stories and often, shared my solidarity toward the injustices they had endured. In the meantime, to maintain an egalitarian relationship, I was also forthcoming in explaining to them about my own sets of skills, knowledge and experiences that gave the research credibility and reliability. Through a more balanced and empathetic relationship, we were able to create a mutually trustworthy and respectful environment for each other's experiences during the fieldwork. By generating a feeling of empathy for the participants, the researcher enables "people to open up about their feelings" (Taylor and Bogdan 1998: 48).

Second, from an ethical standpoint, I aimed at creating an informal and non-hierarchical environment between the research participants and myself during the fieldwork, so that it would also help create conditions for power equality. To attempt to establish a relationship of equals in a society embedded in power inequality and exclusion was, however, not easy because the question of power dynamism and its reciprocity always had a contextual resonance. There was a constant need to rework and renegotiate the power relations and not be co-opted within the existing power hierarchies, so a continuous reflection on the particular experiences and contexts that enabled and hindered a more equitable interconnection was necessary.

Similarly, I (Yvette Selim) was aware that the respondents developed an impression of me even before I opened my mouth (see Oppenheim 1992: 95) but the same was also true in reverse. During my fieldwork, I was aware that my identity as a young woman of non-Western heritage, coming from Australia, with an academic and legal professional background, would influence how my respondents perceived me. At the same time, I was cautious of essentializing these facets of my identity and acknowledged that many times, these details were not relevant to the people I met in the field and were dependent on the context. To give an example pertaining to my education status, if the research participants gave me their business cards, I would usually offer mine, which had details of my qualifications. When they read my card, I noticed that there were subtle yet immediate differences in how the research participants engaged and interacted with me.[4] On some occasions, I observed that the person's facial expression, demeanor, and body language changed after they read my card. This was more evident among the male respondents who would want to hear my opinion; they would ask me about my thoughts on TJ or the constitutional drafting process in Nepal. In one instance, I offered my card to a male NGO director when having a meal together, and after looking at it, he said that he was proud of my achievements and congratulated me for it. This relates to David Gray's ideas about "handling identity" where the personal identity of the researcher invariably affects the research practice (2004: 252). After a number of these incidents, I tried to delay sharing my card until after the interview, if at all.

Similarly, while I was clear about my role as a researcher during my fieldwork, particularly around having no connections with any donors or funders, I observed that my very presence in the community could raise hopes and expectations among the community members, particularly the victims. In one example, a male respondent whose sister was killed during the conflict allowed another respondent present to speak more extensively with me but was adamant that I recorded his name. Despite my explanation, I suspect he made this request because he believed

that I was somehow connected or able to influence the way in which compensation or reparations were distributed, perhaps due to my "outsider" status. This belief is perhaps not uncommon for marginalized people in the Global South who perceive outsiders conducting research are connected to development and aid organizations. Further, when I returned from my fieldwork, I was able to reflect upon the fact that no individuals who were invited to participate in the research declined. Again, there is a danger in essentializing their consent to participate but one point of view is that if they understood the role of the research, then perhaps they participated because they believe they could contribute or (indirectly or directly) potentially gain by participating, thereby exercising their agency.

In my fieldwork, among the four research assistants I worked with, one assistant was a female from the Terai region in Nepal. Although grounded theory recognizes that the researched and the researcher co-produce knowledge, I had underestimated the extent to which my research assistants could impact the knowledge production process (see Jones and Ficklin 2012: 106). The female research assistant was a young journalist from the Madhesi community, an ethnic group that had recently gained greater recognition and power in Nepal's political processes. I noticed that along with my identity, her gender, identity, and domineering personality often changed the dynamics in the fieldwork even before the interviews were granted. To put this in context, one of my contacts in Kathmandu informed me that his colleagues in a particular district were reluctant to take part in the research and excused themselves as being "busy", primarily because of the manner in which the research assistant requested interviews. And even during the interviews, her dismissive attitude impacted the nature of my interactions and the way in which the participants responded to my questions. As an example, she would sometimes answer her phone in the middle of the interviews and even expressed her annoyance when some research participants were either not being succinct or shared opinions she disagreed with. I used to get particularly frustrated when she would try to take over informal conversations so that she could potentially use the information for her newspaper. These situations not only raised ethical concerns for the research but also demonstrated the clash between her and my approach to how information ought to be gathered in the field.

The foregoing example of my experience with the female research assistant illustrates two critical points. First, it reveals that researchers, particularly those who are not local, may experience "reverse power relations" during fieldwork. This may include situations where the researchers face guarded responses or patronizing attitudes from the respondents or the research participants simply refuse to participate in the interviews (see Sultana 2007: 379). Second, it shows how my research assistant's identity and her actions had a significant impact on my research. This is particularly because "the interpreter may in fact come from another ethnic, religious, cultural or political group that may hold views opposite to the respondents" (Chester 2001: 165). Interestingly Briony Jones and Lisa Ficklin (2012:110) have argued that the research assistant's positionality can even challenge what is sometimes seen as the researcher's exclusive hold on agency and power. In my particular case, the power that my research assistant held was not only cultural and regional knowledge but also linguistic abilities that she possessed that I did not.

Besides my female research assistant, there were also influences that my other research assistants brought to my field research and my interactions with the respondents, particularly an educated male assistant who belonged to an upper caste group. For example, once when I asked for his suggestions on my interview schedule, he was certain that the victims, most of whom he deemed "poor simple people" were unable to understand questions like "what does justice mean to you?"; he was adamant that the respondents would not comprehend or have the vocabulary or capacity to engage with these types of questions. This was a position I did not share with him,

in fact, I felt that any response or lack thereof from the research participants was rich and valuable. I believed that individuals, regardless of their education, economic and social positions, and ethnicity, would still hold opinions on matters that were important to them, based on their lived experiences, and all of their responses were valid. So even though there was a difference of opinion, I retained those questions in my interview schedule, while I was wary of how my research assistant would interpret them while speaking to the respondents, particularly those with different education and social statuses. In the end, I recall that there were very few occasions when the research participants paused or were unable to answer these types of questions. In fact, the responses by victim-survivors are what I argue in my research should be at the core of how TJ mechanisms are designed and implemented, rather definitions and understandings of justice by elites.

Understanding Gender and Emotions

In this section, we examine how our identity as women impacted our relationships and interactions with the research participants and how we dealt with our emotions, including the feeling of guilt toward the "researched".

Many researchers in post-conflict contexts and beyond have grappled with the difficulties associated with showing emotion when dealing with difficult subject matters and speaking with victims of serious human rights violations (Darling 2014). Researchers are often reluctant to talk about emotions and many question whether showing emotion is acceptable, fearing that their work may be seen as too subjective, impacting their reputation as researchers and limiting their findings (Simic 2016: 153). Through a study of researchers who work in the TJ field, Simic (2016: 146) found that it is not uncommon for traumatic stories to have an impact on the researcher and argues that rather than ignoring these emotions, a way to ensure that emotions do not affect research results is for the researcher to be reflexive about the impact emotions have on collected data. Some researchers have even found that acknowledging emotional responses improved their practices; one researcher who spoke with Simic said that being emotional enabled them to be a more sensitive researcher (2016: 152). Like Veena Das states, when writing about pain, "if I cannot claim to know the pain of the other . . . what is it to relate to such pain? The absence of any standing languages of pain is perhaps symptomatic of the fact that I cannot separate my pain from my expression for it" (2006: 39). Further, Ian Burkitt (2014) has argued that conceptual discussions about emotion should be extended and placed in broader social relations and contexts.

Acknowledging and displaying empathy can also assist in creating more ethical relationships between the researcher and subjects (Selim 2018: 30). Furthermore, empathy and the emotions felt by a researcher can provide an additional site for data collection and analysis (ibid.). Sara Kindon and Julie Cupples (2003) also note the importance of acknowledging the emotions associated with leaving the field when completing the research. They note the complex web of emotions that can occur including guilt and sadness (Kindon and Cupples 2003: 7–11). They note that in negotiating these emotions, a researcher should acknowledge the impact that leaving the field will have on the subjects and ensure that these emotions do not impact the ability to leave the field in an ethical way (Kindon and Cupples 2003). Similarly, Kimberly Theidon (2013) argues that men and women, when doing research and while writing on violence, may have gendered lenses. She says, "women, in general, are more likely to acknowledge their emotional responses and are given more 'social space' to do so, in part because of gender norms. Indeed, those same gender norms probably influence how we engage with our 'informants'" (Theidon 2013: 5). We explore these dilemmas here.

Adopting constructivist and critical ethnographic points of view allowed me (Varsha Gyawali) to be aware of my own positionality and biases, particularly along gender lines and dealing with my emotions, such as guilt. Having personal experiences as well as a societal understanding of the deep-seated discrimination and exclusion faced by women and marginalized communities in the Nepali society, I have always been empathic toward these groups. During my fieldwork, I had experiences of a deep sense of guilt on several fronts, particularly on how there were asymmetries in the power relations between the research participants and myself, no matter how much I tried to maintain any balance. My gains as a researcher will always be disproportionate to that of my research participants; after all, the contributions of my work had an academic orientation that was mostly irrelevant to the participants themselves. As Judith Stacey (1988) has argued, ethnography, in particular, while on the surface offers conditions for a more collaborative and empathetic relationship with participants, can also be guilty of exasperating unequal relations by camouflaging intimacy for mutuality. Further, by exploring research topics that were deeply sensitive to the research participants, I was aware that I was putting myself in a powerful position while rendering the research participants' role weaker and more vulnerable, at least emotionally. Revealing such personal experiences also meant that it led to the reopening of past wounds and reliving of painful memories, which invariably distressed the research participants. But more importantly, my sense of guilt stemmed from not being able to serve the community with whom I lived and learned from in the field. Being a researcher, for example, I was unable to offer any form of financial assistance to my research participants who mostly lived in abject poverty and were struggling to make ends meet. Expressing solidarity with their voices was, therefore, the only way I could manage to redeem myself of my dilemmas and contradictions (Robins 2009).

Being a woman and having had direct experiences of the Nepali patriarchal society, I was more invested in women's narratives of victimhood and justice in comparison to men. I was more drawn to empathizing with stories coming from women and mothers, both identities being integral to my own identity. It was naturally easier for me to build rapport with them because we somehow managed to understand each other as women living under a patriarchal culture, no matter where we came from. This can be attributed to the perceived sense of comfort and belonging, as research participants recognized a sense of solidarity and felt comfortable entrusting me with their life experiences (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). There was a familiarity in our conversations and as a result, I felt that many women had started seeing me as someone who they could tell their stories to and who was somehow invested in their wellbeing. As Janet Finch explains: "When the interviewer is also a woman both parties share a subordinate structural position by virtue of their gender. This creates the possibility that a particular kind of identification will develop" (1984: 76). This was reflected in my thesis writing process, where I discussed and analyzed issues relevant to women more than men. Such dynamism of invisible and unspoken solidarity, however, sometimes made it challenging for me to manage the dilemmas of my competing interests: trying to manage between my ethical assertions as a researcher and my emotional involvement in the women's stories, being a woman myself.

The power relations between the male research participants and myself, however, was slightly different. The interactions were more formal and I had to learn to lead my discussions differently. For example, some men who were interviewed in Bardiya, when sharing their views on victimhood, spoke about the larger political context and refrained from talking about their personal challenges. Their stories mirrored a monologue and any attempts by me to question or clarify their answers were not appreciated. In these interviews, I felt that the men were trying to exercise their patriarchal control and expected that they ought to be listened to when they spoke. In comparison to women, they did not seem very comfortable with or trusting of my

intentions; however, these assertions were mostly hidden and unspoken, often coming out in passing in informal spaces. My gender, as a woman, perhaps impacted their presuppositions of what my position should be in the researcher–researched relationship, based on their social and cultural experiences and the general interplay of power relations between both genders in a patriarchal society. In this situation, it was interesting to note that my gender identity, therefore, took precedence over my other sub-identities, even the important ones like caste and class took a backseat.

Being a female researcher, I (Yvette Selim) felt that my gender identity helped me gather and elicit information on gender discrimination and some of the personal concerns of my female research participants, that perhaps would not have been shared if I was a male researcher. One example particularly comes to mind when I interviewed a female ex-combatant. She explained:

> Yes, I do consider myself a victim. We live in a paternalistic society so if men were victimized by conflict and lost energy and time to the PLA [People's Liberation Army] it would be different. The conflict didn't give a bright future. Generally, the conflict and Nepali society hinders the progress of women. Sometimes I have the desire to do something, to work, but I can't as much as I'd like because society does not want women to move about freely in the society.[5]

Throughout the interview and after, I wondered if my gender was a factor that perhaps helped her to share her ideas more openly on gender or would she have openly shared these anyway? In another example a female research participant, who was the coordinator of a Local Peace Committee and member of a political party shared that as a woman, I was brave to have traveled all the way to Nepal to conduct research, and that as a woman, I should speak up and return to Nepal to share my work, and provide advice and suggestions. In a sense, I felt she was saying that although I might have been an outsider, I, like her, should use my voice as a woman to contribute to the TJ process in Nepal.

Before commencing my fieldwork in Nepal, I had started to reflect on the inequalities, injustices and power dynamics between the people I would research and myself (also see Madge 1993: 297). I had "developed an emotional response to what I thought I would find there" (see Jones and Ficklin 2012: 106) and was worried that I would display emotions in my interviews with the victims of conflict. I was also concerned that the victims would also show their emotions when telling their stories to me (see Jones and Ficklin 2012: 110). Interestingly, during the interviews, very few research participants showed any outward signs of emotion.

In one of the interviews, a male respondent shared that he was tortured, widowed and that his daughter had gone missing after she left for a potential employment opportunity in India (a problem that often arises in the cases of human trafficking). Toward the end of the interview, the respondent started to get emotional. At that point, my male research assistant later told me that he felt that the respondent was trying to play on my emotions, possibly in an effort to receive some financial or other form of support. This example illustrates how gender impacts the notions of victimhood and how their claims of victimhood can be questioned or discounted by other people. It also demonstrates how researchers and research assistants can have difficulties in distancing their presumptions from their work. The class division between the research assistants and research participants was beyond my control, but witnessing the tension between the two during the interview helped shape my understanding of what transpired between them. It assisted me to contextualize some of the barriers that the victims experienced when they had to use interpreters and speak through research assistants (e.g., at consultations, meetings, interviews).

During my fieldwork in Nepal, in most situations, I tried to maintain a balance between being empathic and "professional"; however, there were few instances where I offered emotional

responses toward my research participants' stories. In my interview with a widow who was associated with a single women's group and another single woman who was evicted from her home, both by her in-laws and her own parents, I told them that their determination and courage had greatly moved me.

I was aware that by speaking to victims, I was asking them to share their personal life events and experiences, which often I did not feel entitled to hear and carried a deep sense of (anticipatory and actual) guilt about. I also found these feelings of undeservedness and guilt difficult to navigate given my positionality from the Global North. While participatory research approaches are a means to reduce the "divide" between researchers and participants, I also reflected that this approach is not a silver bullet for researcher–participant conundrums.

Conclusion

Reflecting on our experiences in the "field," we make three key observations. First, we found that the dichotomy of being an insider or an outsider lacks the acknowledgment that all social identities are relational and often situational, which manifests itself differently within different social, economic, cultural, and political constructs. We cannot permanently locate individuals according to a single status, instead, we occupy a set of social identities in a way that one individual can occupy an insider status in one moment and an outsider status in another (Merton 1972: 24). While our narratives of either being an insider or an outsider were never linear or static, they were embedded in the multiple understandings of who we were and how we were seen by others within a particular construct. As Laura Shepherd (2016: 10) encapsulates, "I am read through my gender, my race, my nationality, my class and these readings position me differently in relation to my multiple others depending on the context in which I am encountered."

We contend that whether positioned inside or outside the research, it is essential for researchers to critically engage in ongoing reflexivity and self-evaluation (see Acker 2000; Dwyer and Buckle 2009; Mullings 1999; Naveed et al. 2017: 786; Sultana 2007). To put this in practice, we propose two primary forms of reflexive practices ("transparent reflexivity") as coined by Gillian Rose (1997: 311), that relies on the notions of agency and power (as context). The first practice entails *inward* reflexivity, where researchers critically reflect upon their positionality in relation to the research, employing self-conscious introspection. The second approach necessitates *outward* reflexivity, where researchers explicitly acknowledge their position within the written research, elucidating the contextual circumstances surrounding data collection and analysis, including the fieldwork context. To better enable researchers to conduct these types of reflexivity, education and research institutions could incorporate mandatory/additional coursework that explores these dilemmas. It could also involve providing (formal or informal) opportunities for reflective practice, for example by creating research groups or pairing researchers with a "critical friend" to help researchers continually engage with their identities, notions of power and agency and to find ways to share these components in their writings. These spaces and practices can encourage greater consideration of the fluidity and "in-between-ness" of researchers' roles and identities in relation to their research participants and encourage researchers to include the details of these reflections as part of their research findings.

Second, and relatedly, it was of paramount importance for us to be reflexively aware of how the knowledge was derived and interpreted during our fieldwork, and whether we could achieve some degree of rebalancing of power in the researcher–researched relationship and the process of inquiry itself. Sultana has argued that ethical research is conducted using reflexive processes, which are "critical about issues of positionality and power relations at multiple scales" (2007:

375). We were aware that there would invariably be shifts in power positions between us and the research participants because our roles are intertwined in the knowledge production process. Our epistemological and methodological positions helped find a way to create some level of balance amidst the power hierarchies, where a respectful relationship was developed between us and our research participants, based on mutual trust. According to Orit Karnieli-Miller, Roni Strier and Liat Pessach (2009: 286), "the feeling of true participation is based on a message of dignity and acknowledgment of one's equal right to contribute knowledge and experience that matches the message. This message need not imply a simplistic view of symmetric partnership but a genuine respect for individual perceptions and experiences." This form of power relation with our research participants helped enrich the knowledge production processes without limiting our critical independent thinking abilities as a researcher. Turning to our emotions, we take the view that rather than discount empathy, it "can be seen as data and analyzed in order to illuminate the workings of power relationships, identities, and structures which operate in the fieldwork context" (Jones and Ficklin 2012: 110). In fact, "'calculating in' empathy" into the methodological design may "help the researcher to plan productive and ethical encounters" (ibid.: 109).

Third, the research methodologies we adopted allowed us to be aware of our own positionality, particularly our identity as women, and in doing so, helped reflect and present our interpretations in a way that clearly articulated the possible impacts of our biases, vulnerabilities, experiences, and influences on our research. As female researchers in the field, we were also observant of how our gender was perceived by the research participants, particularly men, and what our position was in the researcher–researched relationship, given the power interplay between genders and historical subordination of women in a patriarchal society like Nepal. As Shepherd (2016: 7) explains, "we cannot escape being read through the lens of our gender presentation and our gendered identities are produced through our research practices just as they are produced through any other of the social practices in which we engage. We cannot escape the logic of research as a gendered intervention."

Ultimately, researchers need to move beyond self-awareness and self-consciousness to sit in the complex, liminal space which continually examines and reflects on the changing agency of the researched and the researchers. Through these vignettes and reflections, we hope to have improved our own research practice and contributed to the conversation about researcher–participant relationships, particularly with vulnerable populations in post-conflict contexts.

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NOTES

1. A number of Yvette Selim's vignettes and reflections are referred to in more detail in Selim (2018).
2. Personal interview, 11 October 2012, Kathmandu.
3. Personal interview, 11 October 2012, Kathmandu.
4. Education is traditionally a privilege of the upper classes in Nepal (Bista 2001).
5. Personal interview, 8 September 2012, Rolpa.

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