

Navigating Positionality in Transnational Research

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Navigating Positionality in Transnational Research: The Researcher's Dilemma of Being an Insider and Outsider

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the researcher's positionality in transnational research, with a specific focus on the political economy of the notion of honour. This concept is examined in the context of its uses as a pretext for violence, abuse, and killings of women and girls in the transnational context. Further, the chapter provides a reflective account of this positionality, highlighting the importance of reflexivity in understanding the influence of one's own identity, background, and perspectives on the research process and outcomes. It also addresses the challenges of researching a sensitive topic, establishing trust, upholding ethical standards, and maintaining a balance between objectivity and empathy. Furthermore, it examines the methodological implications of insider-outsider dynamics, including access to participants, data interpretation, and the impact on participants in the context of researching a politically charged and highly sensitive topic. The chapter offers the readers valuable insights through field experiences and vignettes to describe the ways to address issues around conducting transnational research on sensitive topics, empowering them with a more reflective and contextually aware approach.

Introduction

This chapter discusses the intricate process of navigating positionality in transnational ethnographic research, with a specific focus on the researcher's dual role as an insider and an outsider. It also shines a spotlight on the challenges and subtleties involved in conducting sensitive research on the political economy of the notion of honour and its role in justifying violence, abuse, and killings of women and girls across national and cultural boundaries. Drawing from my personal experiences as a doctoral researcher, I reflect on how my identity, background, and positioning influenced the research process and outcomes, offering valuable insights for others dealing with similar dynamics.

Positionality is a central concept in social research, in particular the qualitative tradition, representing how a researcher's identity—shaped by ethnicity, gender, nationality, and life experiences—affects the inquiry process (Rowe, 2014). It encompasses the researcher's worldview and standpoint in relation to the research's ontological, epistemological, and methodological frameworks (Holmes, 2020). While positionality is often declared in a “positionality statement” (see example in box 1) at the beginning of a study, it extends far beyond initial declarations. It involves the ongoing interplay between the researcher's self-perception and the roles ascribed by participants—whether as an insider, outsider, or both. This fluidity has significant implications for accessing participants, interpreting data, and navigating the social spaces where knowledge is constructed and contested.

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Box 1: Example of a positionality statement

I position myself as a 40-year-old married male British Pakistani. I was born and brought up in Sindh, Pakistan, and lived in the UK for 14 years. I have travelled and worked extensively within Pakistan, the UK and overseas, including visiting 12 countries in Europe, the Middle East, North America, and Southeast Asia. This has given me insight into diverse cultural perspectives on the subject under study. I have been working as a researcher for twelve years in academic institutions in the UK. I also worked in Pakistan for two and a half years at a university and a development organisation. My first language is Sindhi (a regional language in Pakistan). I am fluent in English, Urdu and Hindi and understand Punjabi, Balochi, and Seraiki (regional languages of Pakistan). My theoretical standpoint and research approach combine critical theory (feminist and race), social practice theory, and a critical realist social constructionism framework. I use a critical ethnographic approach for my study. The participants in the UK and Pakistan viewed me both as an ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ to the respective cultures because of my ethnic background (Sindhi) and social class (foreign education, working in a university and living in the UK) (Bhanbhro, 2021, p. 21).

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A researcher's main job is to produce and co-produce knowledge about the participants, their culture, experiences and lives. The production of knowledge processes has consequences (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) for the research participants and the data. Among other things, the disclosure of one's positionality and being reflective are vital to acknowledge any

assumptions, power, privilege, and biases (Madison, 2011) to minimise their impact on research processes and findings.

Researching any subject, but especially a sensitive topic such as honour-based violence, requires a careful balance of objectivity and empathy while navigating power dynamics, ethical considerations, and trust-building with participants. Reflexivity, a key element in addressing positionality, involves continuous self-awareness of how one's presence, identity, and biases shape the research process (Shaw, 2010). Reflexivity is not only about reflecting on the research retrospectively; it is about being critically self-aware throughout the entire process—questioning one's assumptions, methods, and ethical obligations (Willig, 2013; Lazard & McAvoy, 2020). This approach ensures that the research remains transparent, ethical, and responsive to the cultural and social contexts of the communities involved.

Scholars often debate whether a researcher's status as an insider, outsider or a blend of both produces bias (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009); however, there is not much discussion about navigating into the social spaces (SSs) in the place of research (PoR) and their impact on facilitating or hindering access to participants and culturally sensitive information (Lusambili, Bhanbhro & Muchanga, 2020). SS is defined as micro-contexts within the broader PoR, where participants engage with the researcher, positionality is negotiated, and knowledge is co-constructed (Bourdieu, 1990). The insider-outsider dichotomy is particularly pronounced in transnational research, such as my study on politically charged topics like honour and honour killings of women and girls. A researcher's perceived position within SSs can shift depending on identity markers such as gender, ethnicity, or social status, which participants use to determine the researcher's access and trustworthiness.

Importantly, there is no inherently superior positionality in research—whether as an insider, outsider, or both. What matters is the researcher's openness to critically reflect on how they are perceived and how they position themselves in the field. For instance, a researcher may be considered an insider based on gender or ethnicity yet still be an outsider to cultural sub-groups within that community. Similarly, an outsider can bring fresh perspectives but may face challenges like language barriers or misunderstandings of local customs. Both positions come with advantages and disadvantages, and the key lies in how researchers negotiate and balance their roles within the specific research context.

In transnational research, especially on a topic as sensitive as honour-based violence, positionality involves constant negotiation of identity and roles. Reflexivity becomes essential to mitigate biases, uphold ethical standards, and produce nuanced, contextually grounded insights.

This chapter will discuss strategies for navigating these insider-outsider dynamics, including reflexive practices, ethical considerations, and trust-building. By critically examining positionality, researchers can foster more rigorous, ethical, and culturally sensitive research.

Research context: Honour crimes

The notion of honour, a central concept across many societies, is not a monolithic entity. Its conception, configuration, use, and consequence are historically and culturally variable (Bhanbhro, 2023a). While the notion of honour has *prima facie* positive connotations and characteristics, its connection to crime, violence, and killings makes it contentious, creating a new category of violent crime known as honour-based abuse (HBA) or honour crime.

Despite the universality of honour and its defence using violence, which has been a historical and cross-cultural phenomenon, honour crimes are mainly associated with specific cultures and communities (Bhanbhro, 2023b). It is widely recognised that honour crimes occur in various countries, cultures, communities and religions. The social, cultural, and political factors that contribute to honour crimes (HBA and honour killings) are diverse, intersectional and not specific to any culture or religion. It is important to emphasise that despite the use of labels such as honour crimes, honour-based abuse, honour-based violence, and honour killings, there is no honour in abuse, violence, or murder. When religion or culture is misused to exert power or control over others, especially women and girls, and justify violence, it is a distortion of those cultural, religious, and traditional practices. Therefore, I have chosen to use the term honour crimes in this chapter to avoid unnecessary cultural specifications and to underscore that regardless of the pretext or justification, abuse, violence, and killings are crimes and human rights violations.

Honour crimes is an umbrella term that includes violence, abuse, and murder committed by people who want to defend or restore the honour of an individual or a social group, which can

be a family, clan, class, caste, community, kinship or tribe. This crime may affect men, boys, lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people, but honour crimes are more prevalent against women and girls. In some cases, both men and women are killed together in honour killings. However, when a woman is murdered in an honour killing, she is killed by her family. In contrast, male victims are killed by the family or relatives of the woman with whom he was accused of inflicting dishonour to the family, for example, by having a pre-or extra-marital affair or eloping with the woman for marriage (Bhanbhro, 2021).

Honour crimes, particularly honour killings of women and girls, are highly sensitive and politically charged issues. As a result, researching such topics requires a careful balance of maintaining cultural sensitivity, objectivity, and ethical responsibility. Therefore, reflexivity and positionality become crucial, especially when the researcher shares a similar cultural background with the participants while also having Western academic training. Maintaining the necessary critical distance for objective analysis becomes essential for the researcher to navigate through these complex issues.

Being an insider and outsider

From the start, I was nervous about introducing the research topic, considering its sensitive and politically charged nature, when gaining access to the participants, negotiating access, and achieving the chosen sample size. So, I approached the topic of study and the research site in my country of origin as an insider because I was born, grew up and educated there, and it was where I belonged. I knew the languages and the culture of the area. However, when I first went into the field, I realised that most of the research participants, even my gatekeepers, viewed me as an outsider because of studying and living abroad. At the same time, people considered me an insider because of their extended family, who lived in the region where I went to conduct the fieldwork and spoke the native language. The people of my clan are inhabitants of the area, and more importantly, my ancestors were from there.

On reflecting, it was apparent that being perceived as an insider and outsider had both advantages and disadvantages. It created opportunities as well as hindrances in the field. For example, when people considered me an outsider in the field, this created problems in collecting

data from police and district administration sources. However, the same role helped with data collection with people and community members as they were open and did not hesitate to share their stories. Sometimes, people were concerned that the researcher might share their information with the police or newspapers. However, I made it clear that everything they said was for my PhD thesis, and it would be published anonymously from time to time in academic journals. By obtaining oral and written consent, the participants were assured that they would not be identified in any published material.

I was perceived as an outsider (see box 2) by some people because they perceived that after the fieldwork, I would go back to London (for people in the field, London is the country, not a city; they did not know the UK, but Britain (in local language word *Bartania*) was famous after London. It emerged as a dilemma of which position I should emphasise. So, I asked my local gatekeepers for their advice on what I should do. I suggested that given the sensitive nature of the subject, people would be reluctant to share the information; therefore, I should try to be an insider but leave it to the participants how they perceive me. In order to be accepted as an insider, I dress in a local dress, a *shalwar kameez*, like those worn by local men, rather than a t-shirt and jeans. Before going into the field, I had practised and consistently introduced myself as a PhD student living in the UK for more than ten years. Thus, I explained that I did not know much about *karo-kari*¹ (honour killing), especially the nature of the incidents in the area where the fieldwork was conducted for this study. Though I was born, raised, and educated in the region, this was my first visit to this area in my whole life. I emphasised that I appreciated their time and hospitality and was thankful to them for sharing their views, experiences, and relevant information about the subject. This introduction was a strategy to be accepted as someone who did not know much about the topic. During the fieldwork, regular debriefs and informal conversations with local contacts and gatekeepers have been practical strategies for adapting my research conduct to local contexts, minimising influence on participants and the data. Similarly, I adopted a similar approach, which I used to do the fieldwork in Pakistan when conducting the fieldwork in the UK, where I was going to study and engage with my people, considering that I shared language, culture, religion, and country of origin with the potential participants. However, when I recruited the study participants, I learned that what I had in common with them only mattered a little because most participants were of my ethnolinguistic

¹ *Karo-kari* is a Sindhi language term which literally means a blackened man and a blackened woman. It also translates to honour killing. Initially, terms were used for 'adulterer' and 'adulteress', but this term is now used for multiple forms of perceived immoral behaviour. It describes a custom whereby a woman and a man found in, or more often suspected of, an illicit relationship are killed by family members to restore the family honour.

identity, a Sindhi.² By being considered a Sindhi, I found it challenging to access non-Sindhi participants in the UK.

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Box 2: Researcher's dilemma

I, being a doctoral researcher, get on a journey to a rural community in my country of origin to conduct fieldwork on honour crimes, in particular, honour killings of women and girls. Born and raised in my native country but having lived in the UK for over a decade, I prepared myself mentally to approach this sensitive subject. I reflected on my identity—an insider due to my cultural and linguistic roots, yet an outsider because of my Western education and long-term residence abroad. Upon entering the community, I noticed considerable tension: some locals welcomed me warmly, seeing me as one of their own. Others, however, remain sceptical, treating me as an outsider and questioning my motives.

This scenario highlights the challenge of dual positionality and the fluidity of the insider/outsider status in transnational research. The researcher's dilemma serves as a concrete illustration of how researcher identity can shift depending on participants' perspectives. To maintain the balance between two perceived positions to avoid or minimise influences on data and access to participants, strategies involved constant informal conversation with my local contacts and gatekeepers concerning my behaviour in the field and my interactions with the local community. These conversations have been helpful in navigating through the field.

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Being a Sindhi Pakistani

Being a Sindhi had a drawback because the term *karo-kari* is a Sindhi-language expression for honour killings, predominantly used by the media in Pakistan. The overuse of the term *karo-kari* has created the impression that honour killings happen only in the ethnic Sindhi people (Bhanbhro, 2015). Thus, during the fieldwork, the non-Sindhi participants generally assumed

² Sindhi is an ethnolinguistic group of people who speak the Sindhi language and are native to Pakistan's Sindh province.

that being a Sindhi, I knew all about honour killings. Therefore, they assumed they had nothing new to tell me. The impact of this assumption is picked up below.

During my fieldwork in the UK, I found the same perception was common in non-Sindhi-speaking people from Pakistan. For example, one participant said, 'You are from Sindh, isn't it? You know more than me about honour killing because Sindh is the centre of this evil' (Fieldnotes). Another UK-born participant said, 'I had never been to Sindh but have been visiting Punjab annually and sometimes biannually. I have heard that Sindh is a backward area; there is no education and much corruption; therefore, honour killings are more common in Sindh than in other parts of Pakistan'. Moreover, a male participant, who has lived in the UK for 15 years and originally came from the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province of Pakistan, said that 'honour killing is the culture of Sindhis.'

On the other hand, while interviewing Sindhi males living in the UK, there was pressure that, as a Sindhi, I should try to change this misperception that in Pakistan, the practice of karo-kari exists only in Sindhi-speaking people. A male focus group participant, who was born in Sindh, Pakistan and had been living in the UK for the last 16 years, said that 'Violence in the name of honour occurs in all ethnic groups of Pakistan; in fact, in Sindh, it came from Balochistan, and it also happens more in Punjab, but we Sindhis are blamed because of the Urdu media's biased reporting, and some of our Sindhi people have played a role in it. They created TV dramas and documentaries in which Sindhi culture was shown as the reason behind honour crimes. Being considered a British Pakistani while in Pakistan, I encountered other challenges; therefore, it was necessary to establish trust among participants in both research settings.

Being a British Pakistani

While conducting the fieldwork in Pakistan, being a British Pakistani was an obstacle to data collection. For example, when I approached the leader of a religious, political party, who was also the chairperson of the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII), he agreed to give me the interview but on two conditions: first, the venue of the interview was the office of his political party, and second, the interview was conducted in the presence of members of his political party. During the interview, the audience was silent most of the time. At the same time, one of the people

sitting in the room interrupted the discussions on honour killings and challenged me, saying that I was doing this research to defame the Pakistani culture in Western countries. I was surprised when the young man from the audience commented that it looked like I was a foreign agent (see box 3), and that is why I had chosen the topic of honour killings, to defame Pakistan to foreigners and or Westerners. The chairman diffused this situation by supporting me that I was a student who wanted to complete the PhD. Also, I was their guest; therefore, it was their responsibility to respect me. The chairman also said that many others, who are also of Pakistani origin, receive money from America and make films, dramas, and documentaries to malign Pakistan and Muslims.

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Box 3: Establishing Trust Amid Suspicion

During an interview with a religious leader in Pakistan, I was confronted by a young man in the room who accused me of being a foreign agent trying to defame the country by collecting information on such a sensitive issue. The man insinuates that my study on honour killings serves to paint the country in a negative light to the Western world. Taken aback, I reassured the audience that I was simply a student trying to complete my PhD, but internally, I wrestled with feelings of vulnerability. In subsequent interviews, I took extra care to clarify my intentions, navigating these precarious situations by building rapport and leveraging local gatekeepers to establish trust.

This vignette demonstrates the ethical and safety challenges faced by researchers studying politically charged topics, mainly when their positionality raises suspicions among participants. It also underscores the importance of reflexivity in managing such tensions.

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Following the encounter above, as a British Pakistani, I took measures to address concerns about safety and security during the remainder of the fieldwork. I chose to accompany local gatekeepers for the subsequent activities, and before commencing any task, I provided detailed explanations of the study and myself to the participants. This approach proved effective, and I encountered no further issues during the fieldwork. Throughout the fieldwork, I maintained a field diary to document interactions and events, enabling me to maintain reflexivity and minimise any potential impact on the data.

Being a male researcher

Being a man interviewing predominantly men and some women also allowed me to gain in-depth information from male participants, which might be difficult for a female researcher. However, being a male, some of the questions were turned back to me: If your wife or sister does something wrong, like having an affair with someone else, what will you do in that situation? My answer was that I would not kill her but try to speak to her and listen to her problems. My answer astonished the people, and most of them kept silent to show courtesy, as I was considered a guest, and it would have been culturally inappropriate to offend a guest. However, one of the participants did not feel that way and said to me, 'You have become a foreigner, and more education makes people beghairat' (a person with no honour). When I asked him what he meant, he explained that I was more educated than all of them, even educated from London, but it seems to them I did not care about my honour, that is why I did not say that I would kill my spouse if she would sleep with someone else. According to the man, even though they are uneducated, they know how to safeguard their honour. If their womenfolk do that, there is no other option for a man but to kill them to save honour.

I sensed the cultural gap, as the participant insists that honour must be safeguarded through violence, reflecting deeply ingrained patriarchal norms. This encounter illustrates how gender and cultural norms influence research interactions. It reveals the challenges male researchers may face when their progressive views on sensitive issues like honour killings clash with participants' traditional values. The researcher's experience reflects the complex dynamics of masculinity and honour in these cultural contexts.

While being a man, I anticipated friendliness while interacting with male research participants. However, sometimes, I felt anxious to talk to men about specific issues like sexual intercourse due to cultural taboos. For instance, speaking about sexual intercourse was crucial to the research topic, as the women who are killed for honour (according to the participants, genuine honour killings) are mainly accused of having sexual intercourse with men. During my initial interactions with the people in the field, I hesitantly asked people about sexual intercourse when they explained the cases of honour killing, where a man and a woman are caught on the spot for sexual intercourse. One of the participants instructed me that, in their community, they do not utter words such as sexual intercourse or sex openly; instead, they use terms like wrong act or sinful act, etc. Metaphorically, all these terms mean having sexual intercourse. I followed this

advice and used these emic terms confidently, facilitating a more natural conversation. So, being reflexive and adopting from the field is beneficial in generating emic data.

Balancing the position

As I have explained above, my position in the field as one of them (community) had advantages and disadvantages. However, it had more advantages like accessing the participants, obtaining insider views, and being considered a guest from a foreign country; therefore, I chose to maintain this position. This experience was different from that of anthropologists such as Malinowski. In his fieldwork, Malinowski (2010 [1922]) likened himself to a predator spreading his nets in the right place and waiting for what will fall into it. Before going into the field, I reflected on what I knew about honour-based violence and honour killings. Because I was aware that my background knowledge could impact how I interviewed the research participants, I made conscious efforts to approach the data collection process as a researcher who needed to gain more understanding of honour killings.

I employed Gibbs's (1988) Reflective Cycle to make sense of my reflective accounts. The model entailed six criteria that helped me systematically and critically reflect on my research experiences to make more balanced and precise judgments. For example, when I was considered a foreign agent, I felt alone and worried about my security. My evaluation of the experience was that I need to be more trusted because honour killings are a sensitive issue. The environment at the time of my fieldwork, which was two months after the honour killings of Qandeel Baloch, could have been more conducive, especially when interviewing politicians or religious leaders. In such situations, a gatekeeper's availability was applicable; therefore, I took the local gatekeepers every time going into the field.

The reflective approach was crucial because it assisted me in putting my assumptions aside and reflecting on what participants were saying without bias. For example, I had to assess my assumption of 'being one of them' or 'studying my own people' on both sites; I was not perceived the same as I had assumed. Therefore, I decided to be open and listen to the participants about what they had to say about me, like who I was, rather than focusing on a particular identity marker. As Shah (2016) states, 'The field is not a neutral site, a medium or

source of knowledge. It raises questions about outsiders and insiders, power and knowledge, and finally about the anthropologist as a mediator between different worlds of knowledge' (p. 220). It is well established in the literature that various factors, including personal, cultural, emotional, and political variants, impact research somehow.

In the field in Pakistan, I was received as both a local (insider) and a foreigner (outsider). These positionalities impacted the data in different ways. For instance, those who considered me a local should have openly responded to my questions or shared their stories. On the other hand, those who identified me as a foreigner freely shared their stories and provided detailed answers to my questions.

The richness and quality of the data did affect my positions. Being an insider and being conversant with the topic, I realised that I was patronising the respondents. For example, when I listened to a couple of pilot interview recordings, I noticed in one of the interviews that I was trying to instruct the respondent, 'When you people see that *karo-kari* is wrong, why don't you stop doing it'. Later, I made a conscious decision to excavate their views on the issue and put my views aside, which I rehearsed as a mock interview with my family members.

Throughout the research, I continuously engaged with self-reflection, adopting emic approaches and questioning my identities and beliefs through maintaining a field diary for journaling and writing reflective memos, engaging with gatekeepers and participants not only for the data collection but my interactions with them throughout the research process. The informal interactions with participants have helped me acknowledge and address biases openly. Balancing the power relationship in the field is challenging; however, practising reflexivity helped me to actively work to reduce power imbalances with participants, such as allowing them greater control over how their stories are told and interpreted.

Summary

To summarise the chapter using Hall's (1997) words, "the way people are represented, the way they are treated"; therefore, it is the responsibility of a researcher to be attentive to the realistic representation of the study participants, their culture, and stories. Presenting and representing

those you have come to know and those who have given you consent to bring to light their stories through the research process has consequences. Thus, researchers need to embrace sensitivity to “positionality” and “reflexivity” to be explicit about their background, values and stance relating to the research topic, locations, and participants (Madison, 2011). The researcher needs to develop and embrace a process of self-awareness to be critically reflective on one’s thoughts, biases, and experiences and how these have influenced all stages of the research process (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Narayan, 1993). Being attentive to positionality and reflexivity can be beneficial for a) bringing transparency to data and ensuring that knowledge claims are made with an awareness of potential biases, b) minimising power imbalances between the researcher and participants when a researcher is self-aware of their privileged position and takes steps to mitigate its effects, and c) enabling researchers to continuously interrogate their assumptions and be transparent about their positional stance, which can increase trustworthiness and authenticity in qualitative research.

In conclusion, positionality and reflexivity are essential for ensuring ethical, valid, and credible research. They prompt researchers to maintain a critical awareness of their influence on the research process, leading to more robust and ethically sound scholarship. Based on my field experience, I encourage researchers to engage with these concepts by maintaining a field reflective diary, discussions and debriefings with gatekeepers and informal conversations like Geertz’s (1998) idea of systematic “hanging around” with potential participants. This critical engagement should be maintained actively throughout their research journey, paying particular attention to critical issues that may arise in the field, such as being perceived as a foreign agent or spy and other suspicions which can risk researchers' safety and security. It is important to be adaptable and mindful of cultural sensitivities and customs in order to navigate one's position effectively and safely.

Moreover, researchers need to carefully consider ethical responsibilities when engaging with sensitive and controversial topics, such as honour-based violence, to ensure participants' safety, dignity, confidentiality and representation. While doing research in the global south or with ethnic minorities living in the global north, researchers need to consider how they can ensure their work contributes to a nuanced understanding rather than reinforcing problematic narratives and stereotypes. Researchers should have strategies in place that can be employed to moderate the risks of reinforcing stereotypes or perpetuating harm when studying culturally sensitive issues.

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