The Problems and Practicalities of Conducting Research on Libraries in a Conflict Zone

Rebecca L. Miller, MA, MLS, PhD

Library Consultant, BiblioDev, LLC

Abstract: Conducting research in a conflict zone poses its own particular set of problems to overcome. This paper presents the experience of the author in conducting a survey of librirares in Afghanistan. Challenges such as translation of the survey, identifying and reaching participants, and other practical matters in the cultural context of Afghanistan are discussed. Based on this study and previous research experience in Afghanistan, suggestions are offered for managing future research endeavors on libraries and access to information in Afghanistan, including the feasibility of random selection. Finally, these challenges and suggestions are brought into the larger picture of research conducted in conflict zones more generally.

1. Introduction

Conducting empirical research is challenging work, even in the best of situations. Conducting research in a conflict zone such as Afghanistan, however, has an extra layer of challenges. This paper will present the primary challenges I encountered while conducting a survey of libraries in Afghanistan. There is a dearth of information about libraries in Afghanistan, and little is known about their current status, including information about their collections, their staffing levels, usage… even how many there actually are. A snapshot of the libraries' current status was needed, and the author conducted a baseline study of libraries in Afghanistan in May-July 2016. This paper describes the methodological challenges faced in accessing participants and securing their input, as well as managing data collection.

2. Research Assistant

As I am not fluent in either Dari or Pashto (the two national languages of Afghanistan), I could not conduct the research myself and a research assistant was required. This is often a need when conducting research as a foreigner.

Selecting a research assistant was difficult, as it needed to be someone who was fluent in both languages, familiar with research methods, and capable of convincing people to participate. Research methods are not commonly taught in Afghan university curricula and the notion of research as being key to understanding issues is nascent. I therefore had to train a research assistant in the fundamentals of research methods, including the need to be methodical and precise in the work and keeping meticulous records. This added a layer of complication to the work itself, but was ultimately rewarding to observe the assistant's skills improve over time.

The issue of gender needed attention when selecting an assistant: as a male-dominated society, the majority of workers in Afghanistan is male and the likelihood of them responding to a female surveyor required a sensitive approach. In the end, the research assistant was a young man who was fluent in Dari and Pashto, had a very good command of English, and was motivated to learn about research methods, as well as interested in libraries in general.

3. Instrument

Since there had never been a survey of libraries in Afghanistan and little is actually known about them, I was curious about all aspects of how libraries function in Afghanistan. The instrument had over 50 questions, separated into sections on basic information (location, quality of physical building, etc.); collection (size, topics, acquisition, cataloging); computer and Internet (availability, quality, etc.); patrons (frequency and type of use of the library, number of visitors/day, services offered); library staff (number, educational background, professional training, etc.); and challenges faced. Being quite long, the research assistant had to be trained in how to encourage participants to continue with the survey.

After I had written the survey instrument, it had to be translated into Dari and Pashto. The translation was done by the assistant, and was double checked and corrected by a third party (an Afghan working in a library) to ensure the language was correct. Multiple iterations of the instrument were needed as we worked to simplify the language and reduce jargon that was too cumbersome to translate. One must also bear in mind that librarianship is not a profession in Afghanistan, and library staff are not formally trained, so a common understanding of key library terms is lacking in general. Concepts such as "online public access catalog" do not exist, and terms such as "cataloging" or "reference" had to be reworded in order to find an acceptable equivalent in Dari and Pashto. Ultimately, the research assistant and I agreed on definitions of these terms that he could use during the survey to explain to participants in a standardized manner the concepts being queried.

4. Accessing Participants

Gaining access to the participants for the survey posed the greatest challenge in this research. Identifying libraries to target for the survey was difficult to start,

as a directory of libraries simply does not exist in Afghanistan. I constructed a first list based on a list of university libraries provided by the Ministry of Higher Education and a list of community libraries provided by the US Embassy (their Lincoln Learning Centers), as well as personal contacts I had gathered over three years of living in Kabul. Although I requested multiple times for a list of public libraries from the Ministry of Culture and Information, it was never provided and I suspect this is due to their own lack of contact information. The contact lists from two participating NGOs also proved crucial to expanding the number of possible contacts. From these lists, the assistant used the snowball sampling technique to identify further libraries in the course of the survey interview. In the end, we had built a list of over 300 libraries throughout Afghanistan. However, I know there are many, many more of both "official" libraries and personal libraries that function as community libraries. More fieldwork is needed to continue the snowball and reach these libraries.

Perhaps one reason directories of any sort are rare in Afghanistan is that general phone lines related to a given organization are non-existent. In order to reach someone at a given organization, you must know a particular individual's phone number – it is not possible to call a central number and reach an operator inside an organization. In addition, as a measure of security, phone numbers are not frequently published on an organization's website (if there is even one of those). A more common method of contacting an organization is to send a message via email or even Facebook, as organizations will in general tend to have these available. Furthermore, phone numbers tend to change frequently, due to loss of a phone, better offers from a competing mobile service, or harassment (this is especially true for women). It was common for over 50% of phone numbers provided in contact lists to be disconnected.

The most common method of contact is simply knowing someone who knows someone else – the traditional means of networking. By starting with the lists of libraries I personally knew, the assistant was able to establish contact and authenticate the validity of the study with the participant (referring to my connection), and then receive contact information for other libraries. Afghanistan is still very much a "who you know" type of environment, and having personal references and introductions was crucial to getting the study off the ground.

The survey was conducted by phone, both as a cost-savings and security measure. It was more efficient and safer for the assistant to conduct the survey over the phone than to go to the libraries and conduct it in person. Also, the phone was the only way to reach the libraries, as many of the people working in the libraries did not have email or even access to the Internet in any way. A questionnaire on Facebook might have been feasible, but issues with contact would have been greater and given the lack of a research culture the likelihood of people responding to a survey online (especially one of this length) would

have been smaller. Conducting the survey as an interview over the phone proved to be the best means for obtaining answers to the survey.

When feasible, I would send out emails to alert the libraries to the upcoming call from the assistant, and asked those organizations that supplied lists of contacts to alert their constituencies, but the assistant did most of the calls "cold." Often people are wary of answering an unknown number, and if they do, they are also quite suspicious of responding to requests to participate in a survey. Not only does the lack of a strong culture of research in Afghanistan contribute to this wariness, but also the general reluctance to communicate with strangers, especially strangers that are asking questions about your work place. The assistant had to quickly perfect a strong opening line to gain the respondent's interest and engagement right away, including telling the respondent how he got the number (activating the "who you know" networking aspect of Afghan culture).

5. Practical Matters

Besides the difficulties in obtaining contact information and connecting with the potential participants, other issues posed problems for the study.

There is a strong culture of hierarchy in Afghan work spaces. Sometimes the person contacted at a library would not be the "most important" even though he or she would be quite capable of responding to the survey. While it was helpful to have the most senior staff member respond to the survey, given his or her likely better understanding of the library overall, on occasion this proved to be a hindrance. Sometimes a staff member would only say that the director had to respond, but then would not provide the individual's contact information. In schools in particular, a contact would refer the researcher to "the boss," i.e. the principal. On the rare occasions this person would be reachable and participate in the survey, he (it was always men) would not know anything about the library. Fortunately, these cases were few.

Another practical matter that affected the survey was the timing of the fieldwork in relation to Ramadan. It turned out that Ramadan started approximately one-half of the way through the fieldwork. While there was a slight downturn in productivity (number of surveys completed per day), the assistant was still able to maintain consistent progress. It is important to monitor the major holidays and plan for any potential impact on progress during those periods. While Ramadan changes timing every year, the month of September is consistently full of holidays in Afghanistan, and fieldwork plans must accommodate them.

Finally, being a foreign researcher provided its own set of practical issues. For example, not speaking the language was an important hindrance. In particular, being a foreign woman in a country such as Afghanistan during these last few years has been challenging, with the increasing risk of kidnapping and attacks. I was restricted in my movements and could not leave the compound, as is

typically the case now for foreign researchers in Afghanistan. Fortunately, I had a helpful assistant, but this "gap" caused by a lack of direct contact with participants ought to be recognized for the layers of interpretation subsequently caused. Also, the reliance on another party to carry out the research competently, which is not always the case. Conducting monitoring checks when possible is always a good idea.

It is also impossible to generalize from the survey I conducted, given the lack of information about the larger "population." This is clear for the case of Afghan libraries, but this also applies to Afghanistan in general. There has never been a true census in Afghanistan, and population figures used in today's research are based on extrapolations from 1970s data. Given the unstable nature of security, it is doubtful any census will be able to take place any time soon. Therefore, research in Afghanistan must always clearly state how the sampling frame was established, and then results taken with a grain of salt.

6. Ethical Matters

During the course of the fieldwork, the assistant experienced many instances where the participants requested assistance directly from him, such as donated books or money. This is a common circumstance in conflict zones when citizens have become habituated to donations, and is compounded by the general lack of understanding of the purpose of research. The research assistant and I formulated a way to deflect the requests while maintaining participation until completion of the survey. The assistant had to explain numerous times the purpose of the survey and that he was unable to offer any direct assistance.

Dealing with these requests raised the issue of the role of research on this topic in this environment, and the point of action research. Much research in conflict zones is on understanding the experiences of people living the conflict, and perhaps not necessarily with any action outcomes; the research in and of itself is the point. The researcher must then weigh the importance of the research versus the impact on the participants. However, in some cases research is action-oriented and geared to improving the lives of the participants. My own research straddled both basic research and action research, as it was designed to collect general data about the current status of libraries, and about the challenges faced by the libraries in order to design ways to address them. Not only did my assistant and I have to devise ways to mitigate the expectations of the participants, but I also had to give serious consideration to how I would use the output of the research.

7. The Bigger Picture

My experiences with research in Afghanistan align with other discussions about research in conflict zones. Following is a small selection of relevant publications about research in conflict zones and my own experience in relation to them.

Romano (2006) described the need for flexibility and allowing more time than you may initially expect to do research in conflict zones. Building in a buffer of time to allow for unanticipated events that impact fieldwork (such as impromptu cancellations due to security threats or incidents, bureaucratic hold-ups on permissions, or making needed personal connections with gatekeepers) can make research a bit easier. His recommendation to assess one's own personal comfort level with threat before embarking on planning research in such areas is also important.

Cohen and Arieli (2011) explained the importance of snowball sampling in conflict zones as a key means for gaining access. This technique is widely recognized as the best way (often the only way) to gain access to informants in conflict zones, based on personal trust and vouching. As I described above, it is often impossible to obtain the contact information for participants, whether qualitative informants or quantitative samples, without access to a network.

Haer and Becher (2012) discussed in detail the particular issues related to survey research in conflict zones. They encouraged probabilistic quantitative research even in conflict zones, drawing on as precise population data as possible. They recommend randomization procedures where feasible, but in my experience, a stranger does not want to randomly knock on doors in Afghanistan. Security must trump all aspects of research design. In addition, in my research, randomization was simply impossible, since there was no way to estimate the number of libraries. Haer and Becher also discuss the potential influence of the interviewer in surveys that are conducted in person, and recommend careful consideration of any unintended bias introduced by the interviewer. I agree with this assessment and spent quite some time in selecting my research assistant.

Wood (2006) and Wessells (2013) wrote about the ethical pressures faced by researchers in conflict zones when participants request assistance. It is indeed a struggle when as a professional you must maintain a certain degree of objectivity, but as a human being interested in the activities of other human beings you want to help. This is particularly difficult when you are a qualitative researcher and focusing on sharing the stories of the participants in your research. Even with quantitative research, there comes a measure of first doing no harm, including not leading participants to believe that you can provide any sort of assistance; a sometimes difficult notion for participants to accept. A researcher does not want to inadvertently contribute to participants' feelings of frustration, abandonment or resentment, and must walk carefully the line between encouraging participation and moderating expectations.

In summary, my research experience in Afghanistan mirrors the experiences shared in other publications on research in conflict zones. Issues of ethics, access, sampling, and time needed to accomplish entry and execution of the fieldwork are common to all research done in conflict zones.

8.   Conclusion

In this paper I described my experience with conducting a survey of libraries in Afghanistan. I encountered several methodological issues that required consideration and thoughtful responses. These issues included the selection of a research assistant to conduct the field work, given my outsider status as a foreign woman unable to speak the local languages; the translation and preparation of the instrument; obtaining contact information for potential participants and gaining their participation for a telephone survey; the timing of fieldwork in relation to important holidays; and ethical matters when gathering data from individuals in difficult situations. My experiences were quite similar to those discussed by other researchers, as illustrated by the selection of published research included in the paper.

Research in conflict zones has its own set of complications overlaying the usual considerations required by researchers when planning and executing fieldwork. This is true regardless of the topic, and should be borne in mind by any researchers interested in conducting fieldwork on libraries in conflict zones.

References

Cohen, N. and Areli, T. (2011). Field research in conflict environments: Methodological challenges and snowball sampling. *Journal of Peace Research, 48*(4), 423-435.

Haer, R. and Becher, I. (2012, January). A methodological note on quantitative field research in conflict zones: Get your hands dirty. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 15*(1), 1-13.

Romano, D. (2006, July). Conducting research in the Middle East's conflict zones. *PS, Political Science & Politics, 39*(3), 439-441.

Wassells, M. (2013). Reflections on ethical and practical challenges of conducting research with children in war zones: Toward a grounded approach. In D. Mazurana, K. Jacobsen and L. Gale (Eds.), *Research Methods in Conflict Settings: A View from Below* (pp. 81-105). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wood, E. J. (2006). The ethical challenges of field research in conflict zones. *Qualitative Sociology, 29*(3), 373-386