From abstract concept to active participants: reflections on a purposive sample

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Abstract

This article draws upon my experience of conceptualizing, identifying and recruiting interviewees for a doctoral study of Bangladeshi citizens working for social change in their own country. Understanding how these key workers negotiate the complex dilemmas and conflicting demands involved in working for social change adds to our understanding how civil society actors both contribute to, and are constituents of, sustainable human development. Methodologically, the study can be described as a psychoanalytically-informed sociological enquiry, drawing on feminist and decolonial perspectives, that used open-ended life-history and event-centred interviews to elicit multiple 'small' personal stories of experience (Phoenix, 2013). From these 'small' stories a number of identifiable 'bigger' stories, or contextualized narratives (Goodson, 2017), emerged which were analyzed both sociologically, using Bourdieusian social theory, and psychoanalytically in the tradition of British object relations.

Introduction

In this article I want to share my experience of moving from thinking about the group of human subjects of my research in an abstracted conceptual way, to the practical business of identifying and inviting a sample of real people to participate in the research interviews. Accounting for how a conceptual entity translated into an empirical sample of real people is also a part of the reflective process this article offers an exploration of the extent to which this transmogrification from an abstract idea or set of ideas, to a material methodological reality both shapes and strengthens to the research.

Methodologically, the study can be described as a psychoanalytically-informed sociological enquiry, drawing on feminist and decolonial perspectives, that used open-ended life-history and event-centred interviews to elicit multiple 'small' personal stories of experience (Phoenix, 2013). From these 'small' stories a number of identifiable 'bigger' stories, or contextualized narratives (Goodson, 2017), emerged which were analyzed both sociologically, using Bourdieusian social theory, and psychoanalytically in the tradition of British object relations. A psychosocial approach like this demands a high degree of reflexive practice on the part of the researcher in order to offer a robust interpretation of the material gathered. Elsewhere, I have offered a detailed account of my use of the notion of 'hyphen spaces' (Beedell, 2016) and reflective research journals to chart and reflect upon my own positionality in the research process (Mellor et al, 2014).

Conceptual beginnings

One of the first challenges Social Science researchers often encounter is pinning down the subjects of their research conceptually – exactly whose lives should one study and why are they significant? My doctoral research was inspired by prior involvement in a study of what were broadly defined as 'development workers' in the UK: people who were involved in community regeneration, youth work, welfare and housing projects (Hogget et al, 2009). The aim of that research was to explore the ethical dilemmas and experiences of people who could be thought of as caught between the top-down initiatives of government and the bottom-up needs of deprived communities. Hoggett et al (2009) drew particular attention to the relationship of these development workers to the state and its approach to social welfare, characterizing them as

working both 'in and against the state'. They were navigating a way forward in terms of social action on behalf of disadvantaged and contested communities whilst also engaged in everyday negotiations with the state apparatus of power and authority.

These occupational conditions were conceptualized by Hoggett as a 'dilemmatic space' derived from Bonnie Honig's idea of a terrain in which there is no clear right or wrong answer, but a number of different options for action, or inaction (Honig, 1994). Dilemmatic space represents a domain that is 'in-between' knowing and not-knowing, a state of certainty and uncertainty, a locus of negotiation and judgment, which acts, in Hoggett's words, as an 'incubator for politics' (Hoggett et al, 2009, p.15).

In dilemmatic space, the quality of options seeming both right and wrong simultaneously might also be described as a metaxic condition, which has been associated with Homi Bhaha's (1984) notion of hybridity in his theorizing of postcolonial identities and combinations of values and modes of operation or governance. Merry (2006) and later Dar (2014) applied the concept of hybridity to ways of being for human rights activists and development workers operating in the global South. They are, Merry contended, 'not fully in one world or the other' (Merry, 2006, p.48), but intermediaries who understand both transnational and local cultural discourses and who can 'can look both ways' (Merry, 2006, p.38). This particular quality of hybridity or in-between-ness has been conceptualized as metaxy (Whelan, 2008, Falconer, 2011), referring to a state of simultaneous connection or belonging to two different autonomous worlds, neither exactly one nor the other, but 'of both' (Linds, 2006).

It is becoming increasingly accepted that development workers globally often occupy a similarly politically fertile, discursive and dilemmatic, liminal space, caught between the demands of donor agencies and governments and the poor communities they purport to serve (Fechter and Hindman, Eyben and Turquet, 2013, Eyben, 2014, Roth, 2015). Roth in particular identified a common quality of liminality – a quality of being at, on or across a boundary or threshold - amongst international development workers, as a notion that signalled both the transitional and experimental nature and circumstances of their work, as well as an existential 'ongoing destabilization and questioning of the self' (Roth, 2015, p.66).

These similarities justified the extension of Hoggett's original psychosocial research design into the realm of international development. Building on Hoggett's original conceptual foundations, this occupational, potentially political, dilemmatic, 'in-between' space, with its implication of hybridities, metaxy and liminality thus became the conceptual terrain of my research and pointed, in theory, to the conditions in which I might find my potential participants.

The leap into the international context, however, threw up another rather unstable but recognisable conception of the space my potential participants might inhabit. 'Aidland' has become a convenient sobriquet to describe the industrial scale of contemporary aid operations and the global nexus of organisations that operate in this half-imagined landscape (Apthorpe, 2005, Eggen, 2012, Mosse, 2011, Shutt, 2012, Roth, 2015). Apthorpe's original description of the idea of Aidland was as 'real enough to those who have to plan, manage and deliver' aid and significantly, those who are subject to it, but which also has a quality 'of something being there and not there. Not a nowhere exactly but inexactly a somewhere with the characteristics of a nowhere'. (Apthorpe, 2013, p.20). Approaching the subject from an anthropological perspective Apthorpe was conscious that Development Studies had largely concentrated on the 'what' and 'how' of policy formation and implementation, to the neglect of comprehensive studies on the personnel of development. Apthorpe asked the provocative question 'who is international aid?'

(Apthorpe, 2011) suggesting that sociological and biographical methodologies could yet yield fruitful answers.

Delving into the literature on the personnel of 'Aidland' reveals fragmented approaches that are limited in scope. Much of the emphasis of past studies on development workers has been from a medicalized or security-management perspective, with numerous studies focussed on the trauma and PTSD experienced by internationally mobile workers from the global North (Nordahl REF) in areas of conflict or post-conflict for instance. Alongside these quantitative management-focussed psychological studies, more recent ethnographic accounts of the experience of workers from the global north have dominated the discussion of development personnel and the challenges they face. There is an acknowledged gap in our understanding of the motivations, stresses and vulnerabilities of national 'impatriate' (as opposed to 'ex-patriate') development workers (Fechter and Hindman 2011, Roth, 2015).

In Bangladesh, the people I was hoping to recruit in order to try fill this gap would reflect a stratum of professionals working for internationally-recognised development goals who occupy an especially metaxic, in-between and dilemmatic position in the social and structural ordering of international development. They would, in theory, be both the relatively well-resourced professionals pursuing national development, and the wider beneficiaries of national development itself. But the practical questions remained – how and where in this complex social space of metaxic identities and dilemmatic conditions would I find a valid sample of research participants?

Guided by my own limitations
The basic feature that potential participants in this study had in common, and the categorization that enabled their identification as a unified object of research, was that they were all Bangladeshi citizens, living and working in Bangladesh and recognisable as development actors – that is, active in trying to achieve normative development goals that address problems of social inequality including for instance, women's empowerment, respect for human rights, and the eradication of extreme poverty.

Perhaps predictably, for an outsider researcher from the UK, I was limited to gathering my data in my mother-tongue, English. The limit of having to use English as a medium of communication dictated that potential participants must have a certain level of language knowledge and fluency. Based on previous visits to Bangladesh, I had a background hypothesis that proficiency in English usually correlates to educational level and socio-economic class. This was confirmed to a large extent by the interview data. Stemming from the privilege of English medium schooling or interaction with foreigners at home or abroad, in Bangladesh this English-medium restriction emerged as a proxy for a kind of cosmopolitan 'middle-class-ness' of the participants. In other contexts, this may not be the case. In Southern Africa for instance, where English is an official state language and where it features strongly in mainstream media and popular culture, the use of English may have different significances as a marker of social position (Botsis, 2018). In Bangladesh, the limits to the medium of communication in the research added a linguistic dimension to the samples' intended characteristic of being in-between and 'of both'.

Logistically I was restricted, at least initially, to interviewing people in Dhaka, the capital city. In late 2013, the risk of crime, terrorism and political unrest in Bangladesh was deemed 'high' by the independent risk assessors used to obtain permission to travel from my university. The conditions of this permission excluded travel to the Chittagong Hills district and the use of regional public transport. Opportunities were pursued to reach a number of development workers in the provinces by accompanying Dhaka-based workers from a large INGO on their

field visits. My original ideal plan was to conduct follow-up interviews with participants some weeks apart, but this ad hoc access to private transport presented insurmountable difficulties in arranging second interviews, meaning that I had to make some judicious decisions about how much of the two separate interview schedules could be covered in one encounter. In the end, only four of the 37 people interviewed over the course of the fieldwork, worked permanently outside Dhaka.

I was conscious that this constraint may have had the effect of steering my study towards a particular segment of the upper and established middle classes: an urban elite that has been further stratified by Swidler and Watkins (2017) as the cosmopolitan elite (internationally travelled, if not always internationally educated) and the national elite (locally educated but often in contact with foreigners, professionally). In a context where power is concentrated and emanates from the capital however, the values and motivations of these elites may prove all the more crucial to future development policy and practice. Being transparent about the limited geographical coverage of the fieldwork adds a specificity to the findings, while a broader outlook on the occupational aspects of the sample, including what I have termed 'social activists', not only those who work for NGOs, extends the applicability the study.

Recruiting the sample
Having defined the sample theoretically and accepted the constraints of language and location, my original intention was to recruit a broad but manageable sample of up to 20 men and women, evenly spread across an age range of 20- 50 years old. In this way I hope that gendered differences might become visible and features of these workers' career trajectories and inter-generational dynamics might be illuminated.

Acknowledging that these local development actors may operate on the outer reaches of 'Aidland', as well as in its heartlands, I purposely sought out development professionals in the NGO and INGO sector as well as those involved with social enterprises, advocacy and philanthropy. Casting a wide net in the recruitment of participants offers the potential for analytic insights into otherwise under-researched groups and can lay the ground for more focused research in future (Kabeer, 2011b, p.330). My broad but purposeful sampling, and recruitment on the basis of informal contacts, snowballing and cold-calling combined with a life history method mirrors Kabeer's attempt to explore the under-researched narratives of citizenship and collective action with a variety of grassroots social movement organisations in Bangladesh (Kabeer, 2011).

The recruitment process was iterative in nature, grounded as much in the possible as in the ideal. To avoid the research being associated with any formal appraisal or monitoring processes that are endemic in parts of the sector, I rejected the idea of making formal approaches through NGOs to recruit research participants. The potentially sensitive and personal nature of the interviews also warranted a more personal approach. I used existing personal, social and opportunistic contacts within international development NGOs and agencies based in Dhaka to recruit participants directly and gain access to civil society networks. I attended a variety of development-related events, conferences, seminars and issue-specific symposia that provided contextual insights as well as opportunities to enlisted interviewees and intermediaries. On these occasions I would often feel like an interloping head-hunter, sometimes relying on the propinquity of a shared table at tea break to approach potential participants in a 'guerilla mode' of engagement (Kapoor, 2004, p.640) that is less easily amenable to positivist research methods.

There was no shortage of events organised by NGOs and civil society organisations at which a variety of foreign and Bangladeshi development actors congregated. The people attending such

meetings varied by overall represented a fairly broad cross section of professional statuses that make up the national and cosmopolitan elites (Swidler and Watkins, 2017). Recruiting participants and snowballing from contacts made at these events proved invaluable and opened up access to a number of research participants who rarely attended such events.

In practice, I conducted a total of 56 interviews with 37 people aged 25 to 69 between December 2013 and July 2014. Given the sheer weight of the data generated, a commonly acknowledged problematic of qualitative research, I had to decide where to focus my enquiry. Looking at the interviewees as a whole, they fell fairly easily into two categories, those who were still building careers and expected to continue working for another decade or two and those who were nearing or had reached retirement. I selected the cohort of 24 younger individuals – those born after independence in 1971 – with whom I had recorded 39 separate interviews: 22 interviews with 12 women and 17 interviews with 12 men. The oldest of this group of participants was aged 44, meaning that this younger cohort of participants were part of a post-Liberation-War generation that corresponds, demographically and politically, to the so-called 'free-born' generations in South Africa and Zimbabwe, although perhaps tellingly, this is not a term that has been applied to the younger generation of Bangladeshis. This younger cohort offered the chance to consider and address the contemporaneous situation of the participants, whereas the 'elders', many of whom had personal memories of the Liberation War, offered on the face of it, a more politicised and historicized perspective on Bangladesh's development progress. Their evidence may support claims of a generational de-politicization of development work but the inclusion of the testimony of these elders was beyond the scope of a single doctoral thesis, and reluctantly, I decided to limit my analysis to the younger cohort of participants. Giving up the urge to attempt to do justice to all the generously shared data was a learning process in itself. I was convinced, eventually, that is was better to do a small sample justice than to skim the surface of such a large and complex reservoir of stories.

Nonetheless, the accounts of the elders provided a valuable historical backdrop to the younger participants' experiences that helped to inform my understanding of the political, social and institutional context in which the research took place. Throwing a wide net was beneficial in enabling the capture of a smaller, more tightly defined sample and provided additional familiarisation with the context, but at the same time the strategy consumed a substantial amount of time and energy.

The majority of participants (19 of the youngest 24) were current or past colleagues of intermediaries who included three 'elder' interviewees and two white Europeans. Five of these participants had worked, at different times, with one particular organisation and were contacted through a European peer-level former colleague. Another five participants were accessed through a European intermediary who had professional seniority and indirect contact with them through their different organisational employers. Two elders and four participants were recruited directly by the researcher. One directly recruited participant (Piya[1], participant 10 in Fig 1.) introduced me to six less senior colleagues and one other worker I may otherwise have found difficult to access, opening up and enriching the sample substantially. This 'cluster' in the research sample provided insights into the operations and relationships within one particular organisation that added significantly to the findings as I will detail below.
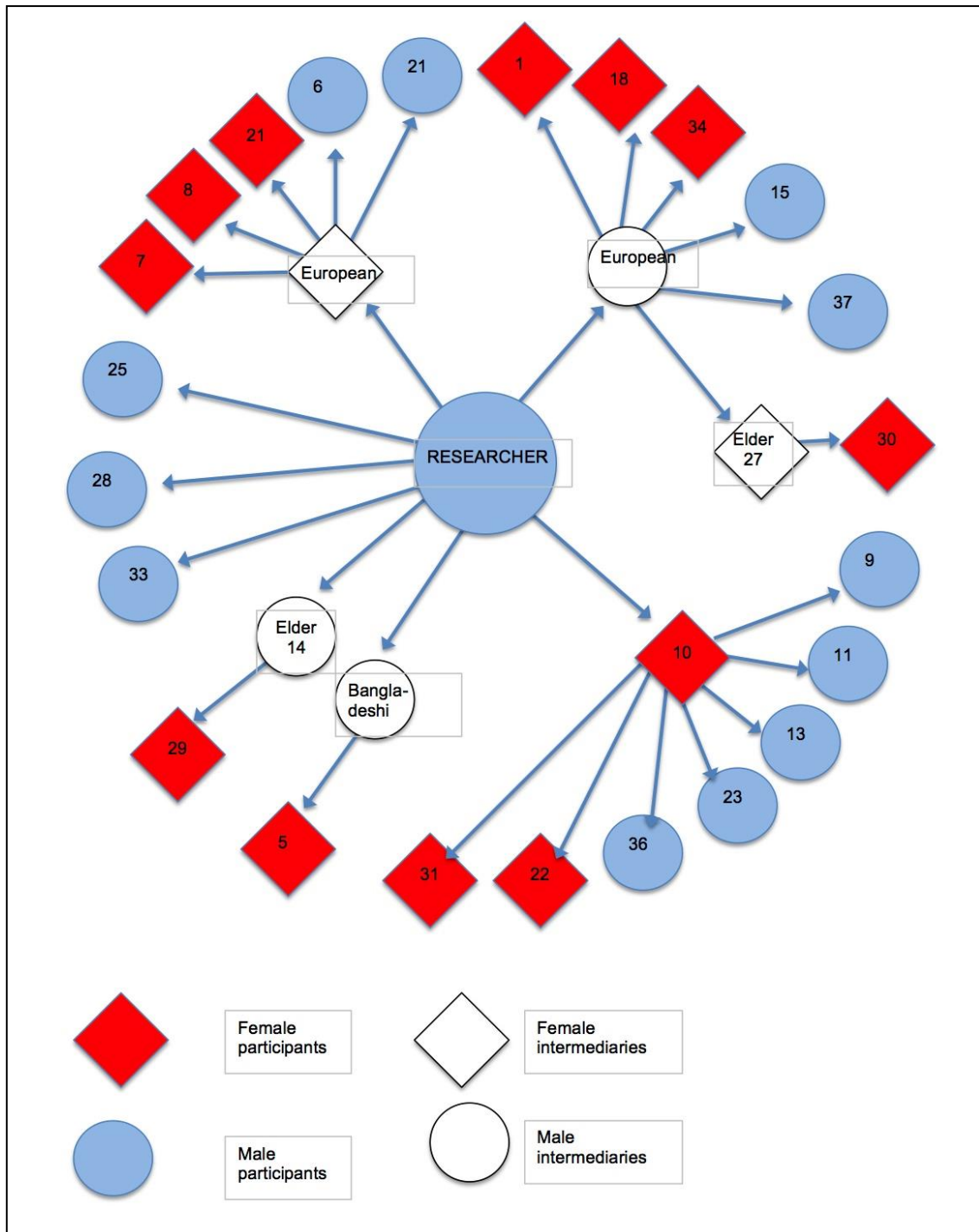
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[1] A pseudonym

Figure 1: Map of access to participants. Numbers indicate the participants place in the sequence of first interviews. The full cohort of 'elders' is not shown

Figure 1 maps the connections made in enlisting participants and illustrates the organic nature of the process. Illuminated by this diagram and in hindsight, the fact that all intermediaries were privileged by age, gender and/or whiteness is indicative of the persistence of the hierarchical and patron-client structure of social relations in Bangladesh (Devine, 1999, Wood, 2000, Wood, 2011) and reiterates the necessity to reflect on naturalised taken-for-granted processes at work across the research.

Participants were self-selecting and limited by the time they were able to contribute to the research. The majority of participants were very interested in the research and motivated to take

part while a handful seemed slightly less engaged, but willing to assist. I did not face any explicit obstacles in the recruitment of participants although one or two people declined my invitations. My enquiries were generally met with interest and enthusiasm and the challenge was rather to limit the number of people recruited via a particular route or shared social space.

Research subjects as active participants
The social, cultural and physical terrain of this research was relatively unfamiliar to me compared with my substantial experience of living and working in Southern Africa. This knowledge deficit made me particularly curious and conscious of how the participants might be agentic in positioning me and the research I was pursuing. The research context and the response to my invitations to participate left an impression upon me as well as on the data, most notably in my interactions with one particular participant, Piya.

At the time of the interviews, the Rana Plaza building collapse had occurred less than a year before, killing over 1,100 people including garment workers. The response of the government, private business and development agencies was in the spotlight at it was at a diversely attended round-table seminar to discuss further action that I met Piya. This contact generated a cluster of participants employed by an award-winning European-based development consultancy, specializing in labour rights and ethical trade in the ready-made garment (RMG) sector across more than ten countries. I the time, funding from bilateral government and corporate donors for remedial development activity in the RMG sector had increased suddenly and substantially and as a direct consequence the organisation Piya and her colleagues worked for had increased the scope and scale of their activities in Bangladesh exponentially. In the course of my fieldwork, I interviewed six of the eight professional-level workers, three men and three women, between January and July 2014, including Piya, the Country Director in Bangladesh.

This clutch of interviews began with a focus on each individual's biography and experience of development work or social action and grew into a stream of intertwining stories that seemed to crystallize how dilemmas arising from the contemporary three-sector neoliberal development paradigm, including the rapid expansion of development activities in response to public outcries (Roth, Smirl REFs), that are experienced and managed by local development professionals.

Piya showed a great willingness to contribute to the research and to facilitate my efforts and her account provided a richness and immediacy to the research. Her willingness to support my research encouraged me to critically reassess the balance of power and the politics of the relationship between researcher and researched. Whose needs were being served in the telling of these stories? How might we, together, negotiate this propitious encounter? I found De Jong's (2009) notion of constructive complicity productive and practically applicable to this challenge. It was the force of PIYA's narrative, the sense of an important story needing to be told that aroused my curiosity and inspired an extended interview series with her. The inclusion of PIYA's singular story in the thesis was not just an intellectual endeavour, nor I hope, an indulgence. It was in some small way a political act that, in Fine's words, 'makes legible the underbelly' of practices that sustain the current development project (Fine, 2016, p.347). It is a story that elucidates both the affective dimensions of negotiating development and the more undesirable practices of Aidland.

Piya's story, which was supported by much of the other data, illustrated how: the affects of classed orientations; shifts in the discourse of mainstream development; processes of identity formation; subject positions; and the misalignment of organisational rhetoric with organisational practices can all emerge from the account of a single individual, with significant consequences for an organisation involved in ostensibly 'ethical' development.

Despite periods of doubt and uncomfortable moments of uncertainty throughout the fieldwork and spilling into the analysis, I was reassured in my endeavours by the interest and enthusiasm for this topic shown by so many participants, local contacts and potential recruits willing to actively contribute to the study. My initial anxieties about complicity in exploitative social and intellectual processes heightened my awareness of 'self' and 'other' and the dynamics of power. This, I believe, contributed to a reflexive research practice that enabled participants to become active agents in the telling of their stories. Following Smith (2012) and the paths taken by Yarrow (2008, 2011), Arvidson (2008, 2013), McNamara & Morse (2004) and Goetz (1996, 2002, 2007) before me, my stance is empathetic as well as critical. As I begin to share the completed thesis with participants individually, I hope they find much that is recognisable and resonant in my interpretation of their stories; and that the conceptual context, findings and discussion are as elucidating for them as much as for academics, development policy-makers and other readers.

This article has explored how the pursuit of an abstract idea or set of ideas about a particular group of people, morphed into a sample of active participants, contributing to and shaping the research. It demonstrates that while our intellectual consideration of the scope and conditions of our research subjects may emerge as relatively clear, predictable obstacles such as language, location and time will impose limitations that can narrow our focus. The unpredictability of recruiting a sample through personal contact and snowballing however, offers complementary opportunities to venture down avenues that lead the research into territory that is both insightful and relevant. Being limited by circumstance is just one of the challenges of any doctoral research, yet taking intellectual risks, being responsive and open to the uncertainty and unpredictable opportunities that arise in the process of data gathering, can enrich the project beyond our initial imagination.

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