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‘Being’ with research participants: Experiences of doing narrative research in the Covid-19 pandemic

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‘Being’ with research participants: Experiences of doing narrative research in the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The global Covid-19 pandemic has severely hit the lives of the people of Nepal. The country witnessed two phases of lockdown over 10 months from March 2020 until August 2021. I completed my PhD data collection in Nepal through February to April 2021, when the pandemic’s risk was naturally lowered. My research explores local value systems of communities involved in school governance in Lalitpur, Nepal. Accordingly, my participants included schools’ stakeholders: parents, teachers, locals, Education Officers and elected representatives. The Covid-19 situation in Nepal requires social distancing and mask wearing while talking with others. In my experience these health protocols disrupted my aims to develop rapport and build close, trusting relationships with my research participants. In this article, I reflect on ways I sought to build relationships of trust with my participants before conducting interviews amid Covid-19 regulations. I narrate my experiences as a Nepalese citizen and researcher in uncertain times. This research might be useful to researchers in establishing a relationship with participants, applying face to face interviews in unfavourable situations such as a pandemic.

Keywords

Covid-19 pandemic; fieldwork; narrative inquiry; Nepal

The prologue of my research journey

This is my research voyage as a novice researcher from the foot of the Himalayas, Nepal to Aotearoa. Nepali societies are dominantly embedded by Hindu-Buddhist cosmology which reflects eastern cultural identity, social connectivity and spirituality as a part of the larger Eastern philosophy (Harrison, 2019; Johnstone et al., 2016). My PhD research is around exploring the value systems of communities in managing the public-school governance in Lalitpur, Nepal. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic started globally in the middle of my research journey. I believe that a health pandemic such as Covid-19, which keeps people apart, is not helpful for qualitative researchers.



Methodologically, I have chosen the narrative inquiry and the social constructionist theoretical lenses, which insist on the exploration of subjective realities that prevail in our societies (Klostermann & Forstadt, 2016; McAlpine, 2016). The Covid-19 situation requires social distancing, which is followed by face masking, vaccine injection, contact tracing and testing. As a qualitative researcher, I need to develop closeness with participants and the cosmos they live in to unveil their lived experiences. This contrasting situation was induced due to Covid-19 and was the unexpected terrain in my research journey; however, I was able to conduct my research in the field. This paper presents how I developed a closeness with my participants amid the threats and precautions of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Field work: Is it the journey that is important or the destination?

After the Covid-19 pandemic affected the world in 2019, there were academic recommendations that field movements had to be reduced and interviews could be done through virtual means (Archibald et al., 2019; Cowie & Khalil, 2020; Jones & Abdelfattah, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021). I opined that online data collection is pinned to the data instead of the process of carrying out research. The process includes building closeness, trust, observations, taking account of subjective feelings and sustaining deep engagements of the researcher and researched, which are the essential components of inductive research (Barrett & Twycross, 2018; Bearman, 2019). Besides, learning is said to be earned from a research journey or a process that we adopt during the research (Harris & Walling, 2017). Additionally, many people in Nepal lack good mobile technologies, internet facilities and smartphones (Nepal National Planning Commission, 2020), which obviously would hinder the online data collection process from a distance. Thus, I found in-person interactions with participants as the best option for academic qualitative research and especially in the least developed countries, such as Nepal. So, amid the health pandemic situation, I travelled back to Nepal to do my research in January 2021.

My lens towards the pandemic and the unexpected terrains

In Nepal, the schools were closed for several months, starting from March 2020. Nepal's Government had issued strict restrictions for free public movements. My participants could feel unsafe and anxious to talk with an outsider researcher and they might not be in the mood to talk with me about the school issues in which they were engaged. I took into consideration all these social realities, adopted all health protocols issued by my government, and received consent from my participants to conduct the data collection. I interacted with more than 30 participants from three schools in Nepal and situated myself in their life stories.

The Covid-19 pandemic severely affected Nepal's social, economic, cultural, and educational sectors. As of February 28, 2022 data from the Nepal Ministry of Health, the first waveⁱ, the second waveⁱⁱ, and the third waveⁱⁱⁱ of the pandemic claimed over 11,000 lives in the country (Nepal Ministry of Health and Population, 2021). Many of my people innocently died because the country had run out of oxygen supply, beds in the hospital, and ventilators (Amnesty International, 2021; Sharma et al., 2021). In this regard, as a humanist researcher, I have deep sympathy for every precious life who left this planet due to Covid-19 and the havoc the virus has caused.

My soothing research journey

There are several underlying features, which eased my research journey amid Covid-19 fears. These include the resilience of the Nepali people, my research methodology and social capital, my cosmological awareness and picking the narrative ingredients from the field. I have discussed these features under the following headings.

Living with Covid-19

I conducted this research from February 2021 to mid-April and finished as the Covid-19 cases were again surging due to the second wave in Nepal. Early in this period, the impact of the pandemic was lowered, as the Covid-19 cases were gradually reducing (Khadgi, 2021), and life was deemed to have returned to normal in Nepali communities. People in Nepal are resilient because they are experienced with managing suffering, disaster, disease and conflict (Nepal National Planning Commission, 2020; Posch et al., 2019). The resilience of my people slightly eased my field movement and allowed me to be close with them.

My research pathway and social capital

Before conducting the fieldwork, I had foreseen that the Covid-19 pandemic would disrupt my data collection. Nonetheless, I was surprised that my participants were very enthusiastic to talk with me. Their response towards me could be due to my positionalities as a former public-school teacher, a local and (intending to be) an educational researcher in Nepal. I acknowledge I might benefit from all of these positions that I have acquired in a Nepali community that has enriched me to develop a degree of status and social capital through which many people trusted me (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009; Claridge, 2018).

Further, I was aware that the social realities that prevail in Nepali societies are hard to express and understand in binary digits, such as used in quantitative research. I found people wanted to express their feelings and sentiments in a detailed manner so that they were able to be conceptually clear, and narrative inquiry was a good option for me (Clandinin & Caine, 2012; Smith, 2013). A socio-constructionist worldview enabled me to perceive that social realities are co-created or socially created (Galbin, 2014). The Covid-19 pandemic was one of the subjective happenings in Nepali societies and becoming a part of the broader narratives in my research. So I navigated unexpected terrains due to Covid-19 in the lives of my participants as challenging to my research.

Covid-19 scenes at schools and my research

I conducted research in three schools in urban, semi-urban and rural areas in Lalitpur, Nepal. The schools were physically opened with few students after 10 months of closure due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Local governments were authorised by the central government to open the schools through consultation with parents, teachers, school management committees and local politicians. Local governments were providing computer-related training to teachers to prepare them for running online classes. I saw students were very happy to be back in school. In the urban school, students and teachers were wearing face masks. In order to reduce the crowd of students, two schools had rescheduled the study shift of students in morning and day hours. In all three schools, the school building works were ongoing in an undistruptive manner through the active engagement of communities. These scenarios revealed to me the making of Nepali societies, power relationships amongst governments, engagement of communities in school affairs, political influence in school decisions, and happy and beautiful souls when they were back in their classes. Ultimately these happenings in and around the lives of my participants were contributing to the central thesis of my research, which is to explore the value systems of locals in school governance.

Our cosmological awareness: Just listen

“In your silence, when there are no words, no language, nobody else is present, you are getting in tune with existence.” Osho: An Eastern Philosopher

One can see the beautiful and knowledgeable words of this epigraph on a wall in Osho, Tapoban, a meditation center in the Nagarjuna hills in Nepal. I was unsuccessful in finding a reference related to this quotation as there are many unrecorded narratives of Eastern societies. Many spiritual gurus in Nepal believe that “noble silence is defined as the silence of body, speech, and mind” (Inwongsakul, 2015, pp. 153–154). Silence could be helpful for a researcher to get submerged in the life stories of research participants and explore some meanings.

Silence as a mantra can amalgam Eastern philosophy with the philosophies of the rest of the world while conducting academic research. Hassan and Jamaludin (2010) have also stressed the importance of both Eastern and Western philosophies in education. I tried this nothingness value of silence in my field research, which enabled me to observe, feel and live with the words and feelings of my participants. I became ready to listen to the stories of my participants so carefully with a curious and smiling face as if those stories were my own, our bodily vibes were the same, and we were “in the process of becoming” one (Caine et al., 2018, p. 141). The “becoming” here reflects living in the moment and has a deep engagement with the lives of participants whom I am researching, which is essential for an outsider researcher (Chambers, 2014). Thereby, silence helped me become closer with my research participants and build their trust. Afterwards, I gradually probed their life experiences to get deeply immersed in their words and construct narrative meanings.

Narrative-ness: Sociality, temporality and spatiality

There is a dominant trend of framing narrative stories in the thread of sociality, temporality and place (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). While in the field, I was aware of these three narrative elements. I prioritised interactions with my participants, reflected their stories with my life experiences (Barkhuizen, 2018) and crafted the different storied situations into a common thread. I was aware that I should not be absent from narrative research (Clandinin & Caine, 2012; Pace, 2021).

Likewise, unpacking the past, present and future un/lived experiences of my participants was very important for me to become immersed in their lives. Experience of tragedy was recent. In 2015, the devastating earthquake in Nepal damaged over 7,000 schools in the country (Nepal National Reconstruction Authority, 2020), and I found that many schools were under construction during my field visit. In 2020 and onwards, the harsh Covid-19 situation claimed the lives of thousands of our beloved ones. The education sector was largely affected due to the prolonged closure of schools (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021).

Similarly, the space dimension revealed to me the socio-cultural settings, the geography and the livelihood of my participants, which could shape their values to manage personal and social lives. I acknowledged the power dynamics of my participants and tried to act as a neutral researcher. There is a top-down hierarchy among *Palikas* (local governments), education officers (bureaucracy), head teachers, teachers and school staff in schools in Nepal. These positions are always under the influence of politics (Hamal, 2020; Sharma, 2008). Thus, I gathered my participants’ experiences in these three domains. As a Nepali citizen, I could feel the impacts of Covid-19 on my people. This common shared experience helped me to be a part of my participants’ stories and enriched my narrative discussions.

My understanding

Amid the fear induced by the Covid-19 pandemic, I was able to develop a bonding of trust with my research participants. I chose the field-based research, which was suitable in the context of Nepal, as many people in the country do not have access to good internet facilities. I believed that my research journey in the real-world enriched my procedural knowledge towards interpretation and discussion of my narrative findings. Besides, the resilient living of my people warmly welcomed my presence as a researcher.

My choice of narrative inquiry and social constructionism as theoretical and methodological lenses drove my decision to go to the field and helped me to perceive and reflect on the multiple realities that present in the lives of my participants. I could see local school stakeholders were at the forefront in actions to handle Covid-19's impact on education. Interactions with them helped me to reveal their values to support a school, which is the central query of my research. Our cosmological awareness – the silence – helped me to get unconditionally immersed in the telling of stories by my participants. Sociality, temporality and spatiality guided me to gather information about my participants through multiple lenses. I found my participants became happy to share their experiences without hesitation because I was amongst them and ready to listen to them, but not argue with them or do advocacy work for them. I received a heartfelt welcome because I was then a part of their life stories. Overall, I can conclude that “being in a narrative inquiry” for a researcher at any time (expected or unexpected such as the Covid-19 pandemic) requires an unconditional attachment with participants.

Postscript

Due to Covid-19, my stay in Nepal lasted 15 months. I was able to return to New Zealand in April, 2022. There were worries about my overstaying in Nepal and to the subsequent delays in the progress in my PhD study, losing many of my beloved ones due to the pandemic, and departing from my family at this moment of uncertainty. However, I must accept that things will not be the same forever as we see a bright day always follows a night. I am hopeful to complete my study by early 2023 and return to work with and for my people.

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ⁱ March to September 2020

ⁱⁱ Delta variant: April to August 2021

ⁱⁱⁱ Omicron variant: January to February 2022