

Challenges & Dilemmas in Conducting Conflict Research during Armed Violence: Lessons Learnt from Fieldwork in Nepal

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My Background

- Started career as schoolteacher initially and became lecturer in Health Education at government university in Nepal
- Got a scholarship to study PhD at University of Aberdeen, Scotland, UK
- Chose a PhD topic looking at the Nepal's Maoist health workers, amidst an active conflict
- A student of Public Health, motivated in conflict research without understanding of conflict theories
- Research fieldwork on a politically charged, revolutionary and violent context, a challenge

Research Context in Nepal

- Maoist rebellion was ongoing (1995-2006) leading to 14,000+ deaths, 1,000+ destroyed health posts, and forcing health workers to migrate or leave their jobs.
- About 1/3 of health centres in rural Nepal operated without health workers
- Maoist recruited their own health workers to treat combatants (Bandage) and provide limited services to the communities under their control
- No systematic information on numbers, their abilities/skills, experience and career motivations and their integration strategies(in the peace process)

Challenges/Issues Conducting Credible Research I

- Quality & reliability of data collected in conflict zone is a subject of substantial controversy
- Little research in politically charged, violent environment, health services research is neglected (WHO, 2008)
- Many logistical & methodological issues/challenges

Safety and security:

- People sandwiched between fires- risks involved to both the investigator and the research participants
- Absence of trust, and insecurity on both sides
- Safety of the research participants and the researcher
- Scanning even deletion of photographs

Challenges/Issues Conducting Credible Research II

Access to research area & participants:

- Accessing research area & participants-keep changing names & mobile phones), establishing relationship, complicity, representation and repelling from contact
- *Whose side? Us or Them*

A government Spy or a Maoist sympathiser? Is the researcher a 'genuine' person and would not write against us?

Methodological Challenges/Issues:

- Sources of information could easily be biased either deliberately (as propaganda at time) or more subtly based on respondents' perspectives.

Challenges/Issues in Conducting Credible Research III

- Lack of precise methods/tools valid and reliable to investigate in the politically violent and crisis environment-QLY or QTY??
- Interruptions in interviews, recording interviews and field-notes
- Change in perspectives vis-à-vis winning or losing the war or a win-win situation
- Maintaining ethics and keeping a right balance between research, humanity/ sense of justice
- Balancing scholar objectivity/integrity with researcher's personal affinities or relationships

Challenges/Issues in Conducting Credible Research IV

Researcher related factors:

- Undertaking a cross-disciplinary research on a conflict-related topic in a violent context by a researcher with background in allied field
 - knowledge of conflict theories
 - applying conflict theories to another discipline
- ‘Outsider or insider’, escaping (western/local) affiliation??
- What to do when the participants ask to write in their favors? Ask donations?
- Dealing with emotional situations-war stories

How Did I Address/Minimize the Challenges? I

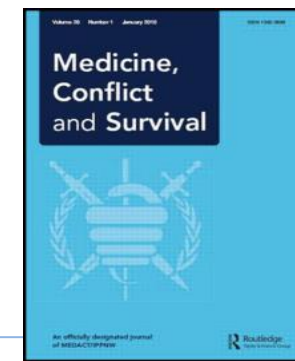
- Used simultaneous mixed methods in context of war on research paradigm (QLY +QTY), flexibility in research methods
- Snowball sampling (Macrae *et al.*, 1996) to identify Maoist health workers in communities - few seed contacts available but reluctant to disclose their identity
- Employed 'theoretical sampling' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) continued interviews until reached saturation
- Selection of different types of participants for collecting reliable data- triangulation
- Ethical approval Nepal Health Research Council (NHRC)

How Did I Address/Minimize the Challenges? II

- Used letters from University of Aberdeen, Tribhuvan University, All Nepal Public Health Workers' Association, a sister wing of Maoist Organization
- My long academic teaching experience, both in highly conflict affected district (Gorkha) & at a government university in Kathmandu, helped establish trust and relationships
- Maintained political neutrality
- Maintained low profile in terms of clothing, eating, conversation and mannerisms
- Spoke local Nepali language

How Did I Address/Minimize the Challenges? III

- Linkage of complicity & relationship
- Privacy/confidentiality in interviews, anonymity and confidentiality of identity and information
- Option not participate or stop interview/questionnaire any time participant would want to
- Conducted few interviews after peace process for data verification as access to hard-to-reach rebel health workers was easier during post negotiation
- Expert consultations- Nepal, UK & other platforms



RESEARCH

Open Access

Understanding effects of armed conflict on health outcomes: the case of Nepal

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Abstract

Objective: There is abundance of literature on adverse effects of conflict on the health. In contrast to this, sporadic data in Nepal claim improvements in most of the health indicators during long armed conflict (1996-2006). However, systematic information to support or reject these claims requires reviews Nepal's key health indicators before and after the violent conflict and explore factors facilitating the progress.

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ARTICLE

Why Did They Join? Exploring the Motivations of Rebel Health Workers in Nepal

Bhimsen Devkota and Edwin van Teijlingen

Submitted: November 2011
Accepted: March 2012
Published: May 2012

Original Articles

Politicians in Apron: Case Study of Rebel Health Services in Nepal

Bhimsen Devkota BA, MEd. and Edwin R. van Teijlingen M.Ed, PhD

This article presents the findings of a systematic review on the health consequences of Nepal's armed conflict waged by the Maoists and the development and trajectory of their health workers. Nepal's decade-long violent conflict resulted in more than 13,000 deaths, the destruction of

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Rebel Health Services in South Asia: Comparing Maoist-led Conflicts in India and Nepal

Gaurang R. Sahay, Bhimsen Devkota and Edwin R. van Teijlingen

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Thank you !!!
Questions / Comments?

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