



## **Moral Dimensions of Research Ethics: Dilemmas of a Researcher Caught during Communal Riots in Nepal**

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Based on an ethnographic account of conducting research in an environment marred by communal tensions during Nepal's transitional period, my paper will focus on the ethics of carrying out research in an environment of political instability, malgovernance, unaddressed grievances, and poorly enforced rule of law. Drawing on my experience as a researcher who found herself in the midst of communal riots that broke out in the western Tarai district of Nepal in September 2007 between *pahadis* and *Madhesis*,<sup>1</sup> my paper will focus on the ethical dilemmas of presenting oneself as a "neutral observer." I will argue that contrary to the dictates of conventional research ethics, some post-conflict situations make it irresponsible and morally reprehensible for the researcher to remain as a detached and silent observer.

Second, by drawing up on Shahidian's (2001) concept of "tensional loyalties,"<sup>2</sup> I will provide details about how my own identity as a Nepali woman but from a *pahadi* community conditioned the research process. In particular, I will present the difficulties that I faced when seeking entry into different communities, gaining its trust, and obtaining rich and accurate information at a time when individuals' sentiments were generally exaggerated. In addition, I will also present the ways in which I negotiated and resolved these difficulties.

Third, the paper will also speak about "vicarious" or "secondary" trauma that researchers are likely to face while conducting research in post-conflict situations. Post-conflict situations, like the one that I encountered with the outbreak of communal violence, are generally volatile making it difficult for researchers to be fully aware about the range and nature of risks associated with the research. In these situations, I argue, there is a need to prepare researchers with resources such as self-care training which will reduce the severity of damage from the trauma. In conclusion, with the burgeoning interest in conducting research in post-conflict situations, my paper will present experiences that will try to question the dominant principles of research ethics that center on notions of neutrality, confidentiality, consent, and risk/benefit considerations. Instead, I will make a case for the need to shift from the traditional ethical and research codes to a research ethics that also includes principles of humanitarianism and human rights.

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<sup>1</sup> *Pahadi* is a term used for people from the hills of Nepal who have traditionally dominated the Nepali state at the expense of *Madhesis* from the Nepali flatlands also known as the Tarai.

<sup>2</sup> Shahidian uses this term to mark the tensed relationship between him as an "exile sociologist" and "exile community" while conducting research amongst Iranian political activists in exile. See Hamed Shahidian. "To be Recorded in History: Researching Iranian Underground Political Activists in Exile" *Qualitative Sociology*, Volume 24, No. 1, 2001.