Mixed Methods in a Complex Overseas Environment: Space, Place, and Identity Politics in Karachi, Pakistan

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**Discipline**

Political Science and International Relations [D8]

**Sub-discipline**

Political Behavior [SD-POLIR-7]

**Academic Level**

Postgraduate

**Contributor Biograp****hy**

**Dr. Julian Richards** gained a PhD in political violence in Pakistan, at Cambridge University, in 1993. He then spent nearly 20 years working in intelligence and security for the British Government, returning to academic life in 2008 by jointly founding the Centre for Security and Intelligence Studies at the University of Buckingham. He is the author of four books, and a number of papers and book chapters on a range of security and intelligence issues. His current research interests include a range of issues concerning global security and security policy; questions of extremism and radicalization; and the development of techniques in intelligence analysis, including a particular regional interest in Pakistan and Afghanistan. He is supervisor for a number of research students, and has tutored seven doctoral students through to successful completion to date.

**Published Articles**

Richards, J. (2017). Extremism, radicalization and security: An identity theory approach. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Richards, J. (2007). *An uncertain voice: The MQM in Pakistan’s political scene* (Brief No. 11). Durham, UK: Pakistan Security Research Unit.

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(2007, May 14). *Pakistan: Karachi unrest weakens Musharraf’s hand* (Briefing paper). Oxford, UK: Oxford Analytica.

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**Abstract**

This case study concerned an analysis of a new militant movement that emerged in the Pakistani city of Karachi in the 1980s, and which mobilized itself around a new conception of local ethnic identity. The aim of the research was to establish how and why this movement had emerged, and what the implications were for our understanding of identity politics both in Pakistan and in other similar “postcolonial” environments. A further focus of the research was on how a movement of this nature relates to space and place, in the sense of how a developing-world “mega-city” such as Karachi has shaped and influenced the rise of identity politics. The study deployed a combination of qualitative data in the shape of interviews and analysis of political documents and narratives, and quantitative data in the form of electoral and demographic data. The research delivered a number of observations on the challenges and opportunities of conducting research in complex overseas environments. These include the need to build-in contingency time in periods of fieldwork, the importance of logistical and linguistic assistance, and the need to properly consider security considerations in the research design.

**Learning Outcomes**

By the end of this case, students should be able to

* Plan periods of fieldwork in complex environments
* Consider how best to apply and use interview methodology against a social science question
* Effectively scope out critical boundaries and limitations to the research plan

**Case Study**

**Project Overview and Context**

This research concerned Pakistan in the 1989–1992 period, when the country was emerging from a long period of military rule under General Zia-ul Haq. Pakistan’s tentative emergence into a period of democracy at this time was characterized by a rapid development and shift within electoral politics, whereby the major nationwide parties found themselves competing with a myriad of religious, regional, and identity-based parties and movements. In the early part of the research, Benazir Bhutto’s Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) held central government but quickly found themselves beleaguered by a welter of competing forces, such that Bhutto found herself in opposition by the end of the research period.

The history and geography of Pakistan are, in many ways, unique and unusual. Pakistan came out of the Partition of India in 1947 as an intellectually “imagined” state (Anderson, 1991) that had no historical precedence in the region. The religion of Islam was the nominal uniting factor across the population, but the reality on the ground comprised a bewildering array of regional communities and identities, many of whom were more than a little ambivalent toward the notion of the Pakistani state.

The first capital of Pakistan was in the city of Karachi, in the southern Sindh Province. This has become a classic developing-world “mega-city” in recent years, growing far quicker and more chaotically than the authorities can manage and drawing-in significant population from rural areas. At the time of the Partition, Karachi was little more than a small fishing village on the Indian Ocean coast, but it swelled very rapidly after Independence with the arrival of a huge number of migrants and refugees from northern India, many of whom were fleeing appalling communal violence.

The migrants in Karachi and neighboring towns came to be known by many as “Muhajirs” or Muslim migrants. They represented a culturally and linguistically distinct community from their immediate hosts, being the only people within the borders of Pakistan to speak the new national language, Urdu. In the early years of Pakistan, the Muhajirs were essentially the most powerful group within the state, holding the capital city, the key government ministries, and many of the country’s major corporations. (The founder of the state, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, was essentially a Muhajir, although he wouldn’t have used that term.) Over time, however, the powerbase of the state shifted northward to the more populous and industrialized Punjab Province (the capital was moved to Rawalpindi in 1958, and then to Islamabad in 1967, both in Punjab Province). Punjab was not only more urbanized than Sindh Province to the south but also the center of gravity of the Pakistani military, which came to dominate power in the state from the early 1950s onward.

In the modern era, Pakistan’s geography could therefore be characterized as having two main centers of power. In the south, the mega-city of Karachi holds a disproportionate share of the entire state’s industry and commerce, and is the only major port in the country. The epicenter of political power, however, is to the north in Punjab Province, from where the army recruits most of its foot soldiers and senior officers, and where the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) is the most powerful political party.

This situation of divergent economic and political power between north and south in the country exploded during the latter part of General Zia’s rule with the emergence of a new identity-based political party centered in Karachi, which took the notion of “Muhajir” identity and cast it as an assertive new subnationality within Pakistan, demanding formal recognition as such. This community, it was claimed, had supposedly been marginalized and edged out of power over the years, and was at risk of extinction. The Muhajir Qaumi Mahaz (MQM; Muhajir National Movement) was launched in Karachi in 1984 and quickly became hugely dominant in the metropolis’s politics. It also became much more than a political party, however, developing the characteristics of a criminal and militant force that held a stranglehold on the city. At the local level, this manifested itself in bitter “ethnic” violence with other competing communities within the city of Karachi and neighboring towns, and in the shape of a frequently exercised ability to call armed militants out on the streets to bring the city to a standstill where it was politically expedient to do so. At the national level, the number of seats that the MQM could take in Karachi meant that it could hold the balance of power by going into coalition with either of the two main national parties, the PPP and PML. During this period, the chief and spiritual leader of the MQM, Altaf Hussain, became known as the Kingmaker of Karachi.

This research looked at how and why the MQM emerged in Pakistan during the 1980s, and the implications of this emergence for our understanding of militant identity politics, not only in Pakistan but across the “postcolonial” world.

**Academic Context**

How was this research contextualized academically? The answer is a multidisciplinary project spanning two main areas. First, this research was heavily concerned with social anthropology. Core questions posed included how and why do communities organize themselves in militant ways that emphasize identity as their primary political mobilization? How do in-groups and out-groups form and interact with one another? Is identity a primordial process of “blood and soil” (Gellner, 1990) or a Foucauldian notion of malleable and circumstantialist social construction (Foucault, 1972)? What, after all, is “ethnicity”?

The second key research area was that concerning space and place; namely geography. This aspect of the research concerned itself with the perhaps more worldly considerations of the city of Karachi itself, hypothesizing that the MQM’s meteoric rise to power was shaped and facilitated by the particular conditions of the sprawling metropolis of Karachi. Specifically, the research was looking at the relationship between place and power within a state. The Muhajirs numerically dominate most of the major commercial enterprises but also the urban and provincial public sector in and around Karachi, to such an extent that the MQM leaders saw the city as “theirs” in many ways to do with as they decreed. This led to the control of order and disorder in Karachi being a key lever to be pulled at times of power contestation with the Punjabis and other groups within Pakistan. There are significant implications here concerning the role of rampant urbanization and mega-cities within weak states.

The conclusions of the research were similarly twofold. First, the form and rapidity of “Muhajir” identity proclamation was indeed found to be a classic example of using identity as a new form of political mobilization to contest the rights of a particular group within society. (Before the 1980s, the families of migrants in the city of Karachi had mostly voted for a religious party, the *Jamaat-I Islami*.) Muhajir identity was consciously constructed in the late 1970s and cloaked in a set of essentially mythical identity attributes, including dubious construction of “shared history” and other factors. Once formed, the out-group rejection of other contesting identities was made easier. More widely, this means that notions of ethnic identity and ethnic conflict may frequently be highly dubious, in the sense that they will often be masking and clouding more deep-seated problems of economic and political power contestation.

Second, the fact that unplanned and loosely managed mega-cities can be a major problem for developing-world states was further emphasized with the example of Karachi. Today, the city has become a highly problematic hub of ethnic, political, religious, criminal, and terrorist movements and factions, whose negative impact on the rest of Pakistan and on the wider region cannot be overestimated. The rise of the MQM and the failure of the state to control it marked the beginning of a new era of urban violence and bitter power contestation that reverberates across the region today.

**Research Design**

Once the key academic contextualization and the central research questions were established, the project was split into a number of core themes, in each of which the objective was to conduct a range of primary and secondary research. In this case, these themes were identified:

* Understanding the historical geography of the state of Pakistan and of the development of the city of Karachi
* Understanding social anthropological theory and debate concerning identity, ethnicity, and nationalism
* Examining how the MQM has used notions of identity in its political narrative
* Examining how the MQM as an organization and the Muhajirs as a community have related to space and places within the particular urban geography of Karachi

It was recognized that the project fell logically into two sections. The first section would be a review of secondary literature on theories and debates concerning the formation of Pakistan and its development since independence, and of theories of identity, ethnicity, and nationalism. This would lay the intellectual groundwork for an examination of the particular case study under review here in the shape of the MQM. The second section would include primary data obtained from the field which would elucidate the case study against the established theoretical framework. Conclusions could then be drawn about the nature of the MQM’s rise and the implications this held for wider work on identity politics in place and space.

With these elements of the project established, it was quickly recognized that both qualitative and quantitative data in combination would be a suitable approach, to achieve the twin objectives of understanding narratives of identity formation, and relating these to the particular geography of the city of Karachi. For the qualitative dimension, two sources of data were targeted. First, it was decided that a set of semi-structured interviews with community and political leaders and representatives in the region would establish the “language” of identity politics and the nature of the narrative. These interviews would also deliver an understanding of events on the ground and how these were perceived by those close to the story. The second element of qualitative data was a review of documents and publications issued by the MQM in which it articulated its notion of Muhajir identity and narratized this for the target community in Karachi.

The quantitative dimension considered how to relate the rise of the MQM to the particular place of Karachi over the relevant time period. For this aspect of the data gathering, data targeted included voting patterns across different districts over time; details of migration into Karachi delineated by sources and potential communities of origin; details of communal recruitment into key institutions in the city such as colleges and universities (both in terms of staff and students); civic bodies such as the city council and its various departments; and political organizations such as local parties and movements. In practical terms, this dimension of the research necessitated gathering of data from electoral and civic bodies where possible, and use of local newspaper archives for details of historical events and how they were reported.

**Research Practicalities**

Once it was established that a period of primary data-gathering in Karachi was appropriate for this research, the main question addressed in this article was raised; namely, how to conduct research in a complex overseas environment. It was quickly recognized that practical assistance on the ground was necessary to facilitate movement, access to key individuals, and assistance with linguistic support. In this case, the researcher was extremely fortunate to be offered assistance by the wider family members of a friend from university who lived and worked in Karachi, and offered both physical and spiritual advice and assistance on the ground. This was absolutely essential in initial orientation and in understanding how to operate effectively in a place and culture that is very different from previous experiences and understandings.

The language factor was also critical in the area of researching political publications by the MQM movement, not least as the Urdu language was taken by the MQM as being the single most important element of Muhajir identity and culture. Thus, understanding how core concepts and assertions were described in the Urdu language was central to the research. The researcher did not have any capability in Urdu prior to the research, so linguistic assistance with the translation of documents was essential. This was achieved both in the field with the assistance of the aforementioned family contacts and back at the base with the assistance of a cooperative Urdu-speaking tutor on the staff at my university.

Safety was a core consideration in the research design and execution. Like many mega-cities, Karachi can be a dangerous place, and unaccompanied travel in and around certain districts at certain times of day is ill-advised. Similarly, traveling out to smaller towns in Sindh Province is an extremely problematic venture, because the incidence of banditry on the main highways it alarmingly high. I had to consider these factors very carefully with the assistance of those described above, and they played a key role in the shaping and design of the fieldwork.

**Method in Action**

For the most part, the core objectives of the data-gathering periods in Pakistan were achieved, although they generally took longer and were more complicated than had been envisaged beforehand. Obtaining and securing candidates for in-depth interviewing can be a slow and frustrating business. Meetings would often be rearranged or canceled at short notice, and it was often clear that speaking to a researcher can be low down the list of priorities for many busy people. On a more positive note, the basic principle of snowballing worked very well. It is definitely the case that, once the researcher is in position in the field and is flexible and persistent in trying to obtain interviews, many opportunities to speak to new people will suddenly present themselves and can be capitalized upon.

Similarly, accessing archival data in the byzantine bureaucratic system of a South Asian country can test the patience of the most saintly person! Establishing the right sorts of data needed and gaining useful access to them can be slow and tedious, and can often necessitate multiple forms to be completed and references to be obtained. But again, if the researcher is in position and is relentless in their pursuit of data, successes will definitely flow.

On interviews, I always asked my respondent whether there were any other people they would recommend me contacting. Sometimes this allowed me to conduct several interviews in quick succession (often two or three on the same day), while other times, formal applications had to be made and time elapsed. I realized quite quickly that interviewing can be quite an exhausting business physically and mentally, so it is important not to try to do too much too quickly. I also found that the interviews came sporadically: Sometimes I would do several over a sort number of days; then there would be lean times when I could not get hold of anyone and could concentrate on other activities.

I also routinely asked everyone whether they had—or could recommend—any documentary or statistical data that might help with my research. This yielded a great deal of books and papers of varying degrees of usefulness, which were always gratefully received. (Remember that original and primary material can be very important to your thesis.) For my particular research, I also made great use of newspaper archives. I was doing this research sufficiently long ago that none of the material was available digitally and I had to spend many, many hours plowing through draws and folders, and looking at microfiche! But the hours were well-spent as some crucial nuggets were uncovered amid the morass of data. Persistence and stamina were the main requirements here.

The language factor was considerably important and proved to be much more difficult than had been envisaged. Learning a completely foreign language (and especially one with completely different roots and structure from the researcher’s own language) to any degree of competence that allows for interpretation of narrative and nuance is an extremely difficult and time-consuming business. Ideally, it would properly necessitate adding a whole extra year at least to the overall time taken. The use of interpreters and assistants largely solved the problem, at least to the level needed for this particular research, but it sometimes necessitated a considerable buy-in from others.

Safety did prove to be a limiting factor in the research, in that it closed-off certain avenues of enquiry that had been planned. It proved impossible, for example, to compare conditions in Karachi with smaller regional cities in Sindh such as Hyderabad, as the security situation at the time of fieldwork was just too poor to allow safe operation. However, these limitations were factored into the overall research design and proved not to be pivotal.

It is worth saying that, for all the problems described, a considerable number of people in the field provided extensive and extraordinarily selfless assistance and cooperation to the researcher, which made the whole thing not only possible but hugely enjoyable. Many of the people with whom the researcher worked in the field were not only colleagues but friends by the end of the period.

**Practical Lessons Learned**

**Build-In Extra Time When Planning Fieldwork**

It is a very common mistake to allow a very short and finite time for data gathering in the field. When you are working in a complex overseas environment, it is almost always the case that data gathering will prove to be harder and more complicated than envisaged. It will be the case that meetings will need to be rearranged quite frequently, and time will be needed to capitalize on every opportunity that arises. Making one single trip to the field is usually problematic unless that trip is reasonably long and has plenty of contingency time built in.

Face-to-face qualitative interviewing usually pivots on establishing trust with the interviewee, so always be as accommodating as you can be, both in the initial arrangement and in the interview itself. On the quantitative front, I found it was invariably a “needles-in-haystacks” process, whereby the core data I used in my thesis were found among mountains of other, less useful data, through which I had to spend many days sifting. But grab hold of as much as you can in the field, and you will find the golden nuggets within, provided you have allowed yourself plenty of time.

**Assistance on the Ground Is Essential**

Working in a complex environment, especially one with which the researcher has not previously been familiar, can be a difficult and disorienting experience. Assistance is strongly advised not only for practical aspects such as getting around or interpreting in a different language but also for gaining a deep understanding of the culture of the place. Understanding what makes a place tick and how you can get the best results from people in an unfamiliar and foreign environment is the most important thing you will learn, and you will learn it most effectively from people who have lived there and know how it all works.

I was very fortunate to be assigned occasional access to a driver (albeit with a motorbike!) through one of my connections, with whom I established a sufficient level of friendship that he was happy to help me interpret Urdu-language documents. If you are not able to establish a similar sort of private arrangement, then universities and colleges are always good places to find willing helpers, and they will understand better than anyone what you are trying to achieve. Generally, ask around if you need help and you will usually find some.

**Do Not Underestimate Language Issues**

English-speaking researchers are very fortunate, as a tremendous number of the world’s population have at least some competence in English, even if it is often derived primarily from American movies! But operating at an advanced level of research in a foreign-language culture—especially if that language is significant to the research itself as was the case in this study—necessitates some serious investment to be made in linguistic support. This can either involve the researcher himself or herself spending a proper amount of time learning the language to a decent level of competence, or investing in some substantial translation support. Either way, this factor can easily be underestimated.

**Take Security Seriously**

There have unfortunately been some cases recently where researchers have suffered physical harm in their work, and, in at least one case, have lost their life. Conducting academic research is generally not worth exposing yourself or others around you to serious risk. It can also lead to serious ethical and reputational problems for your university. Take security seriously in the design of your research and listen very carefully to those who know the territory and will advise you one way or the other. Generally these people know what they are talking about and should be heeded. Life in a complex environment can often be enormously different and less safe than life in a settled country, and it is never worth taking the risk. Where there appear to be risks, then re-shape your research design accordingly.

**Conclusion**

Conducting research in a complex overseas environment can be very difficult and frustrating. As the German military strategist, von Moltke, famously observed, no battle plans survive first contact with the enemy. This is certainly true of fieldwork in complex overseas environments, and it means that tremendous amounts of flexibility, patience, and lateral thinking are needed in the field to respond to the research design going up in flames.

In these sorts of environments and research topics, several very challenging issues emerge from the data gathered. When interviewing people about controversial or contentious topics, the researcher has to think very carefully about what they are hearing and how far the perspectives gained are shaped by the interviewees’ own particular conditions and their position within the picture of power contestations. I personally found that a continual stressing of the fact that I was a researcher with a university and not attached to any sort of government program, was important in establishing trust.

On the empirical front, there will often be big issues with data obtained. In Pakistan, for example, electoral and census data are often unreliable and often rather old, as censuses have not been conducted very regularly. Usually, I found that trying to triangulate official data with that from other sources allowed some sort of approximate picture to be established. Press archives can also be problematic as the press can be rather constrained on occasion through intimidation by the military and security services. This is certainly the case in Pakistan, although the country does have a very vibrant and assertive national press which is often willing to challenge those in authority, sometimes at the risk of exposing its journalists to grave injury. Again, triangulation across sources proved to be important. These data considerations have to be weighed very carefully and will be different in various environments.

At the same time, with proper planning that allows for contingencies and maintains a clear focus on the core research objectives and how they can be achieved, research in these sorts of environments can be enormously rewarding and enjoyable. For the researcher, such ventures can deliver tremendous experience of managing a complex project in a very complex set of circumstances, and much can be learnt in a short space of time.

It is also the case that we should not shy away from research in complex environments of this nature just because they are difficult. A number of very important observations with wide-reaching implications for the development of human society can flow from research in otherwise unexamined environments. If we do not try to get to the bottom of what is happening in these cases, then research will always be based on easier and more predictable environments that run the risk of delivering more simplistic conclusions. Sometimes the voices of people who are difficult to reach need to be heard, if we are truly to enhance our understanding.

**Exercises and Discussion Questions**

Qualitative interviewing

1. How will you sample suitable respondents?
2. How will you factor-in position and status of respondents to the analysis of their interviews?
3. What degree of structure will you introduce to your interviews?

Quantitative data

1. Which potential problems may exist with the age and reliability of your data?
2. How will you mitigate these problems and triangulate data sources where possible?

General questions

1. Which security considerations may shape your research design and how will you factor them in?
2. What plans do you have for contingencies in your fieldwork?
3. How will you tackle language requirements?

**Further Reading**

Gerring, J. (2017). *Case study research: Principles and practices*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Gerring, J., & Christenson, D. (2017). *Applied social science methodology: An introductory guide*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

King, G., Keohane, R. O., & Verba, S. (1994). *Designing social inquiry: Scientific inference in qualitative research*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

**Web Resources**

Research methodology: SAGE: http://methods.sagepub.com/

Pakistan: Pakistan Security Research Unit (PSRU): https://www.dur.ac.uk/psru/reports/

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