Elite ethnography in an insecure place

The methodological implications of "studying up" in Pakistan

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Abstract: Based on ethnographic research conducted with the wealthiest and most powerful business owners and politicians in urban Pakistan from 2013 to 2015, this article examines the particular set of epistemological and interpersonal issues that arise when studying elite actors. In politically unstable contexts like Pakistan, the relationship between the researcher and the elite reveals shifting power dynamics of class, gender, and national background, which are further complicated by the prevalence of rumor and the exceptional ability of elite informants to obscure that which they would prefer remain hidden. Specifically, this article argues that the researcher's positionality, and the inversion of traditional power dynamics between the researcher and the researched, can ameliorate, as well as exacerbate, the challenges of undertaking participant observation with society's most powerful.

Keywords: class, elites, gender, instability, fieldwork, methodology

Ethnographies of the powerful can bring to life social worlds of political and economic privilege that are often hidden, as well as the projects of accumulation pursued by families at the highest reaches of power. They provide a methodologically innovative approach to understanding forms of collectivity and cohesion that bind elites into wider social groupings, and the quotidian spaces in which political and economic crises are made and managed. Yet undertaking ethnography with elites also entails unique and particular challenges of hierarchy and access that are further complicated by the contrasting positionalities of the researcher and those they research. Beyond

class and status, the researcher's gender, age, and nationality intersect with those of their elite subjects through complex, and sometimes conflicting, hierarchies and affinities. The inversion of traditional power dynamics between the researcher and the researched that these positionalities can engender alternately ameliorate and exacerbate the challenges of undertaking participant observation with the most powerful members of society, particularly in contexts of instability.

Elites are often intensely private groups that are difficult for researchers to access (Gilding 2010; Jakubowska 2013; Pina-Cabral and De Lima 2000, Shore 2002; Smith 2013). These challenges are even more pronounced in traditionally closed societies (Abbink and Salverda 2013b) and in contexts riven by distrust and political instability (see Green 1994; Nordstrom and Robben 1995). Though many scholars have noted the challenge of bypassing "gatekeepers" to access the elite, wealthy, or powerful (see, e.g., Gilding 2010), the positionality of the researcher at times may enable them to circumvent gatekeepers entirely. Little research, however, has been undertaken on how the intersection of class, gender, and outsider status affects anthropologists' ability to access the intimate lives of their subjects, assess and contextualize gossip and rumor, and negotiate suspicion and distrust. As I explore in this article, these dynamics shift in very particular ways when the researcher is a woman and the researched are men, entailing both greater access in some domains and greater limitations in others.

A few nights into my fieldwork, I sat in the smoke-filled home of my informants and new friends, Abid and Kaleem Afridi, in the wealthy Lahori neighborhood of the Defense Housing Authority, Pakistan. Introduced by a mutual friend, the brothers had generously insisted on assisting with my research. Together, with their friend Shahid, we sat and brainstormed a list of high-profile business owners I should seek to interview for my research on the Pakistani elite. Abid and Kaleem, in their early and late thirties, respectively, were businessmen from an

economically and politically powerful family in Khyber Paktunkhwa (KP). The brothers divided their time between their family home in KP and their homes in Islamabad and Lahore. Shahid, Kaleem's close friend from university in the United Kingdom, was a member of a prominent Punjabi political family, and the owner of a large manufacturing firm. As the three men chain-smoked and scrolled through the address books on their mobile phones, identifying the friends and acquaintances they could call on to meet with me, I furiously scribbled first one, then two, then five pages of names. Among the three men was an enormous repository of personal social contacts at the highest level of Pakistani business and politics.

Underneath the ease and generosity with which my new friends sought to help me, however, lay a whole suite of assessments about me, as well as my position and status, that informed their willingness to assist and spend time with me. These assessments had a profound impact on my ability to access their lives and those of their peers, and resulted in relationships considerably different from those that anthropologists usually experience when researching poor or marginalized subjects. The inversion of this traditional power dynamic in the research relationship, and the background of political instability in which my research occurred, shaped every aspect of my fieldwork in Pakistan.

Operating amid this inversion of power, how does the status and gender of the anthropologist affect their ability to conduct participant observation among the powerful? More specifically, how does the positionality of the researcher determine access to internalized elite behavioral routines, cultural repertoires, and self-representations that illuminate how elites perpetuate their rule, dominance, or acceptance in the societies in which they live? And what do the routines, repertoires, and representations uncovered through ethnography reveal about the reproduction of wealth and power within unstable and rapidly evolving political contexts? In

seeking to answer these questions, this article contributes to illuminating the ways in which contrasting positionalities—particularly those of class, status, and gender—both open and close avenues of inquiry. The answers to these questions not only illuminate how our own positionalities influence our use of research methodology but also provide insights into how power and wealth are reproduced—both in rapidly evolving political and economic environments like Pakistan, and in other, more stable contexts.

Ethnographically researching elites

Within sociology, geography, and political science—disciplines with a long history of relying on elite informants—it has been widely noted that the construction of power dynamics between the researcher and the researched is rooted in social identities of gender, ethnicity, and class and in the dynamics between them. The literature on researching elites within these disciplines focuses largely on the heavily structured world of formal interviewing (see, e.g., Conti and O'Neal 2007; Elwood and Martin 2000; Gilding 2010; Harvey 2010; Herod 1999; Rogers 2010). Though there is a significant body of research on elites from within sociology, political science, and historical studies (see, e.g., the critical work of Bourdieu (1984) 2013; Mills 1956), and, more recently, the emergence of a popular genre critiquing Western elites (see Freeland 2012; Rothkopf 2008), elites across the world remain understudied using anthropological and ethnographic methods that attempt to understand these groups from within (Abbink and Salverda 2013b).

The long-term nature of ethnographic fieldwork provides critical insights into the reproduction of elite power unavailable through other research methods, as it substantially erodes the ability of informants to present a façade of their life: Discrepancies between what is said and what is observed that emerge as intimacies are shared, and the lives of the researcher

intermingles with the researched. However, a particular set of methodological challenges remains for anthropologists working with elites. The observation of one of Laura Nader's (1972: 307) students regarding the use of participant observation in studying the powerful remains apt:

> To say the researcher is a participant means he is able to interact as a native in the situation studied and is therefore able to use himself as an informant. [. . .] Ideally, the more intimate the acceptance, the less the participant/observer will influence the situation he is observing and the closer he will be to the status of participant . . . the question is to determine the levels of actual participation and the level barred from participation.

Though Nader and her student were specifically concerned with the challenges of studying elites in the United States, the importance of recognizing both "levels of actual participation" and the degree to which the researcher is "barred from participation" remains relevant to the study of elites more broadly. The significant challenge of accessing elites, and overcoming the barriers to participation, prompted Nader to suggest that researchers from elite social classes should study elites, as they were more likely to gain access than researchers from middle- or working-class backgrounds. Yet, with the rise of a nascent group of recent ethnography on powerful groups (see Gilbert 2018, Glucksberg 2018, Osburg 2013, Ho 2009; Hoang 2015; Miyazaki 2013, Sklair 2018), it is apparent that not all anthropological fieldwork now "depend[s] upon a certain power relationship in favor of the anthropologist" (Nader 1972: 289).

Relying on ethnography and participant observation, anthropologists spend a great deal of time and analytical effort in assessing and understanding the behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs of their informants and in interpreting what they reveal about their societies. Beyond noting that it

is critical to develop rapport with our informants, however, we spend much less time examining how our informants evaluate and determine the role we will play in their own lives and how their assessments determine the aspects of their lives to which they permit us access. The issue is especially salient for powerful and elite informants whose influence, networks, and education make them particularly effective in crafting their self-representations, for how they are represented to members of their own and other classes, and in modulating how they portray themselves to a researcher or observer.

One scholar to directly explore these issues is John Osburg in relation to his research among the criminal underworld in China. Osburg noted that anthropology's assumptions about "studying up" often leave anthropologists ill-equipped to handle many of the situations they encounter. He noted that "building rapport is usually portrayed as the anthropologist winning the trust of the reluctant locals and as something the anthropologist does, rather than something that is done to him or her" (2013: 299). His observation echoed much of my own experience of researching powerful men: they often decided the tone and nature of our relationship. Like Osburg, I could encourage or set limits on the terms of this relationship, but rapport could only be built with willing subjects who had made a conscious calculation on whether to entertain the relationship and whether it was worthwhile for them to do so.

Researching elites in Pakistan

My own fieldwork with elites in Pakistan, and my ability to access their social worlds and life histories, relied heavily on my positionality and how it intersected with that of my subjects. From October 2013 to January 2015, I conducted 14 months of participant observation with some of the most successful, powerful, and wealthy families in Pakistan—the economic and political "1

percent"—and informal interviews with more than 90 individuals (see Armytage 2015, 2016). The period in which I conducted this research was a particularly turbulent time in Pakistan characterized by several major terrorist attacks, military blocks and operations, large-scale *jalsas* (demonstrations), and government shutdowns. Yet, in researching wealthy, powerful men in Pakistan within this unstable context, I found my position as a white, middle-class, unmarried Australian woman in her thirties, conducting PhD research, both opened doors into my informants' lives that would not have opened for either a foreign man or a Pakistani counterpart, and closed others as I maneuvered the often-fraught political environment and sometimes-conflicting hierarchies of class, gender, and foreign nationality.

My informants came from families who owned businesses generating at least $100 million in annual revenue, many were politicians (or had close family members who were), and several had close ties with senior military leadership. Most of my male informants had been educated in foreign universities in the United Kingdom, the United States, or Canada. The women in their families were usually also university educated, though more often in one of Pakistan's premier universities. Many traveled frequently to Europe or North America for work or vacations. Consequently, my informants were highly educated and cosmopolitan individuals. My informants were also split between those from "established" elite families whose wealth often had roots in the British Raj, and the "new rich" or *navay raje* (new lords) whose wealth and elite status were more recently acquired. Their varied histories of social mobility were often accompanied by a noticeable divide in social outlook: the elites I came to know from families with more recently acquired wealth, for instance, were often more socially conservative and religious, and tended to hold more traditional views on gender roles, while those from established elite families often expressed highly liberal views. Those from established elite

families also had long, and often complex, family histories of engaging with foreigners through their interactions with the British colonial regime. As a white Australian of British descent, these associations—both positive and negative—undoubtedly also affected my position in the social hierarchy.

Outside my placement in these complicated historical legacies, my position in Pakistani elite society remained bifurcated by the respect widely accorded to guests and scholars, as well as my more marginal status as a middle-class woman. My friend Abid aptly summed up the attitude of many of my informants. Halfway through my fieldwork, by which time he had shared many of the intimate details of his life, including much that was illegal, I asked him why he felt he could be so open with me. Abid answered using the Urdu nickname he had early on translated from my own English nickname:

> *Gulabo* [Rosy], first, I am an excellent judge of character. I know the sort of person you are. Second, you cannot hurt me. If you ever used my name and details, I would deny everything and tell everyone you made it up. I have a big family and many friends here, and you are just by yourself.

Beyond his own sense of impunity, Abid's answer revealed the interlinking power dynamics that determined my ability to access the lives of some of the nation's most powerful business owners and politicians. It also revealed the ways in which several of my informants assessed and evaluated my position within the worlds they dominated. In a few sentences, Abid affirmed his confidence in his own judgment; the extensive networks of elite business owners, politicians, and senior government of which he was a part; and his clear-sighted assessment of my role and

vulnerable position within his society. Abid made it clear: as a foreign, unmarried woman, I had very little power within his world, and my research was possible because he, and others in his extended network, permitted it. Like most of my informants, he was aware of his power and influence—and of my relative lack of it. My informants had assigned me my "proper place in the social order" (Warren et al. 2011: 9), though, as this article explores, my proper place sometimes shifted. Because of this placement, I was able to undertake participant observation and conduct informal interviews with many of Pakistan's uppermost business owners and politicians on the social, marital, and informal business strategies they used to create and protect their power and privilege. I attended my informants' parties, dinners, weddings, and private clubs; socialized with their families, friends, and colleagues; visited their offices and factories; shared their chauffeured commutes to work; and accompanied their drives between Islamabad and Lahore. Several months into my fieldwork, I began to bump into my informants in cafés, restaurants, weddings, and the lobby of my gender-segregated gym. Beyond the large and often lavish social events I attended, much of my best fieldwork was conducted after midnight at small home parties when the mood was at its most relaxed and open, and my continued presence had transformed me into one of the regular guests.

Navigating suspicion, risk, and political instability

My methodological approach and ability to build rapport with my informants was also powerfully informed by the security challenges that differentiate conducting fieldwork in Pakistan from most other sites in Asia. Concerns about the interference and surveillance of foreign governments—most notably, India and the United States—are widely held and are used as a primary rationale for the heavy presence of Pakistan's military and intelligence agencies.

Suspicion about the real motives of foreign researchers in the post-9/11 security context is fairly common, as has been noted by other anthropologists conducting research in Pakistan. Conducting fieldwork in rural Punjab, Nicolas Martin noted that many of his informants were so concerned that he may might have been a spy that his first host found a pretext to ask him to move out (2015: 10, 13).

Similarly, questions, jokes, and uneasy remarks about the "real" nature of my visit in Pakistan were a prominent feature of my first five months in the field. Several US spies had been discovered in Pakistan in the years preceding my fieldwork, and my interest in "hanging out" and asking questions raised several eyebrows. Consequently, a high degree of openness regarding my purpose and objectives in Pakistan was necessary in order to disassociate myself from widespread concerns regarding the presence of foreign spies in Pakistan.

In discussing ethnography as a research method, Gary Alan Fine distinguished between three levels of researcher transparency: "deep cover," where the researcher does not disclose their role or purpose as a researcher; "explicit cover," where they announce their role and research objectives to those they study as fully as possible; and "shallow cover," where the researcher is open about their role and the general objectives of the research but vague about the particular goals of the research. He argued that "the line between being 'informed' and 'uninformed' is not clear. . . and that all research is secret in *some* ways" (1993: 277).

In conducting my own research, I was explicit about my role as an academic researcher without getting into the specifics of my research questions. I identified myself as a researcher not only to my research subjects but to anyone in Pakistan who asked. I explained that I was studying the nation's most successful business families and seeking to understand how they had become so successful. Even if I had wanted to maintain "deep cover" and conceal my position as

a researcher among the broader population, as other anthropologists have done in certain instances (see Hoang 2015), I could not have done so. The rarity of foreigners living in Lahore or Karachi (though more common in Islamabad) meant that the first question I received when meeting someone new inevitably related to my purpose for being in Pakistan. Further, given that the selection criteria for my informant group was their position as elite businesspeople, and not their engagement in illegality or other morally gray areas, there was no need to conceal my research goals more broadly. My informants introduced me to one another variously as "a researcher," a "scholar," and, most often, "a friend from Australia writing a book on business." Many were also careful to highlight what I was not: a journalist, an American, an aid worker, or a diplomat. Each of these negations differentiated me from most other foreigners working in Pakistan and highlighted that I was neither associated with the negative history of US engagement in Pakistan nor seeking to advocate for an aid agency, advance a diplomatic position, or use people's names in a journalistic exposé.

Later in my fieldwork, as consistent themes of inequality, class, privilege, and illegality emerged, I shifted to a more explicit cover. Despite initial trepidation that my focus on these themes would deter some members of the elite from speaking with me, most remained very willing to discuss these issues, to share their own analysis of the contributing factors, and to provide examples from their own lives—or, more often, the lives of their peers—that proved or provided nuance to my hypotheses. In contrast to other scholars (see Mears 2011) who have feared that an explicit cover might compromise their project, my own informants appeared unfazed by the critique embedded in my analysis. The reasons for this lay largely in the assessment of most that responsibility for the inequality from which they benefited lay elsewhere: business owners often noted the corrupt activities of politicians; politicians often

noted the unethical accumulation of wealth by business owners; senior bureaucrats laid the blame on both; and all laid blame on the inefficiency and immorality of a vaguely defined "state."

The hermaphrodite anthropologist?

Critical in my ability to navigate these challenges, and to ameliorate the difficulties of conducting participant observation with elites, was my position as a foreign woman. When I first presented my research plan to my university faculty, an esteemed visiting professor attempted to dissuade me on the grounds that as a woman, I would be unlikely to gain adequate access to the lives of powerful, male informants. If I did, he qualified, I would endanger myself by associating with powerful men used to getting what they wanted—not only in business but also, he implied, sexually. He concluded that I would be better off shifting my focus to elite women. His assessment, though perhaps intuitive, proved incorrect for several methodological reasons that are worth examining more closely.

Being a foreign woman researching Pakistani men shaped my positionality as a researcher in almost all areas of my fieldwork, but not in the ways the visiting professor had anticipated. Male anthropologists have often recounted that they were granted positions of status within the communities in which they resided and were often able to use this newly acquired status to enhance their access to their subjects (cf. Hart 2002). In contrast, as a woman researching men, I was integrated into gender hierarchies that presupposed my junior status in social relations with men as a matter of course, and, consequently, I was able to avoid the critical appraisals of status, power, and social influence that elite men used to identify other men's acceptability and rank in the social hierarchy.

As many female scholars have done before, I embraced my identity as a woman to build rapport with both my male and female informants. Yet, unlike other feminist scholars "studying up" (see, e.g., Allison 2009; Ho 2009; Hoang 2015; Mears 2011), I did not have the option of transforming my bodily self and entering into the life-worlds of my informants "as one of them," nor could I emphasize the similarities between my informants and me to build rapport (cf. Jakubowska 2013; Mazzei and O'Brien 2009). My informants did not "see me as local" (Hoang 2015: 191), nor was I able to "transform" myself into one of my subjects (Mears 2011: 266). Neither did my informants seek to locate me in their own social milieus or hierarchies, as is often the case with native anthropologists conducting research with elite compatriots (cf. Jakubowska 2013; Ashraf 2018). As with researchers occupying the position of interloper or foreigner (see Herod 1999; Herzfeld 2000; De Lima 2000), my outside status enabled me to observe elite affairs in ways my informants would never have permitted their class peers. It was my position as an outsider so deeply different to my informants—female/male, middle-class/elite, academic/business owner or politician, Australian/Pakistani—that eventually granted me access into the elite social circles where much of my research was conducted.

My access to this group was no doubt aided by the novelty of my status as a foreign, female researcher in a place where few foreign researchers conduct long-term fieldwork unrelated to either terrorism or foreign aid. As a foreign, female researcher much younger than most of the men attending the small urban parties that were a mainstay of my fieldwork, I served as an interesting addition to their carefully cultivated guest lists. The cultural capital most of my informants identified with conducting academic research (see also Bourgouin 2013; Harvey 2010; Jakubowska 2013; Mikecz 2012), and the social capital I acquired by being introduced as the friend and guest of several socially and politically prominent individuals facilitated my

entrance into these elite circles. Being outside business and the Pakistani class system and being a woman in a male-dominated business and social universe, I was an unthreatening noncompetitor and an attentive listener to the exploits, strategies, and relationships my informants had developed in order to succeed.

The level of access I was able to achieve as a female researcher is not as surprising as many fellow scholars working in other areas presume. Anthropologists working in many contexts, including Pakistan (see Ashraf 2018), have similarly found that women can gain access to both male and female forums in a way that male researchers cannot (Altorki 1982: 170; Brandes 2008; Mathur 2016: 27; Nader 1972: 114). Stanley Brandes (2008: 146) aptly conveyed this view, stating that female fieldworkers "are transformed during fieldwork into something akin to social hermaphrodites, accepted into the worlds of both men and women." Indeed, the anthropologist Hanna Papanek (1971: 518), working in Pakistan in the 1960s and 1970s, argued, "Paradoxically enough, however, women researchers in societies where indigenous women are secluded often have a much higher degree of 'role flexibility' than do men, and have access to both the men's and women's worlds in varying degrees."

This role flexibility allowed me to engage in strategically "deploying gender" (Mazzei and O'Brien 2009) in various fieldwork contexts. In the small gatherings of politicians and elite business owners to which I was regularly invited, I conformed to the clear gender delineation of assertive elite men and quietly observant upper-middle-class women. In the many political debates and discussions to which I was privy, I was sometimes tempted to demonstrate my own knowledge, before I realized I was not expected to contribute in a substantive way to these discussions—nor was it desirable to my informants that I do so. Rather, it was important that I was generally aware of domestic politics and that I maintained the appearance of an interested

but passive attendee, focused on and deeply interested in whatever was being discussed but content to listen rather than seeking to wrest the limelight from the male conversant. When appropriate, like the other female guests, I was expected to know the right kind of question to prop up the status of the male speakers and ensure that the conversation progressed.

In other social contexts, my membership in alternative status groups prevailed, causing my informants to rapidly reallocate my "proper place in the social order." In visiting the rural family home of one of my closest informants, my identity as a foreigner and a guest trumped the strict gender segregation observed within the family residence. As a woman, I was welcomed into the women's section of the home and introduced to my informant's elderly grandmother and aunt, and as a foreign guest, I was invited to eat with the men of the family in the *hujra* (men's house)—the sole woman. Because I was safely positioned outside their business and social circles, many of my informants felt that they could discuss personal dilemmas with me that would have been too sensitive to discuss frankly with other members of their social networks. Consequently, despite the differences between my informants and me, or rather *because* of these differences, I was able to successfully enter parts of my informants' lives using participant observation.

My position as a female researcher was not, however, always advantageous. Being a woman both facilitated access to the lives of my informants and at times necessitated that I withdraw from them. As my primary role was often to listen attentively while asking seemingly innocuous but often quite personal questions about my informants' marriages, families, and relationships, I found myself in a few instances on the receiving end of offers to engage in a romantic or sexual relationship. In one instance, I was asked to accompany an informant on a business trip to the United Kingdom, with the implicit offer to become a long-term mistress. The

offer, though courteously proffered, involved a power differential beyond our 25-year age gap and his influential position in elite society. In explicit recognition of my inferior economic status, the informant noted that in addition to the enjoyment I would take from his luxurious style of travel, it would give me a chance to visit my mother through a flight he had accurately assessed I could not at that time afford. The offer was not forcefully put and caused very little awkwardness when I politely declined. In another instance, however, after a businessman had made repeated offers for me to "come and party in Dubai," the precariousness of my position as a researcher was brought home to me. Discussing my apprehensions with a close confidante, a business owner well appraised of the dynamics of Lahore's elite social scene, he advised: "Keep your distance from him now. You've got what you need [in terms of introductions], but don't do anything to offend him. One negative word from him and no one in Lahore will meet with you."

As a result, I had to distance myself and decline invitations to events I very much wanted to attend. The doors that my positionality as a younger, unmarried woman had opened required, in this instance, that I diplomatically close them. In these regards, my positionality as a female researcher clearly differs from that of male colleagues who are not usually subject to the same power imbalance when subject to romantic or sexual advances. The power imbalance between my, often older, male informants and me meant that as a younger female I was also more physically vulnerable, especially when conducting interviews in homes or private offices. This vulnerability was, however, substantially ameliorated by the chain of social verification that accompanied my introduction to new informants. Each businessperson felt responsible for the quality of the person to whom I was introduced. As such, I was in effect given their assurance that by meeting alone with a new contact, I was not subjecting myself to undue risk. Ultimately, I concluded that the vulnerability of comparative physical weakness is something that I—and all

women—face in their daily lives in any context and that the same precautions of personal safety employed elsewhere should also be employed in my fieldwork.

Despite the access to elite men's social worlds and workplaces that I was able to achieve, many of my subjects tightly managed (and even prevented) my access to the women in their families. Many of the business owners I came to know well initially promised to introduce me to their wives. Despite multiple reminders on my part and our frequent social interaction, the opportunities rarely materialized. Indeed, my relationship with their husbands precluded my entrance into elite women's lives rather than facilitated it. Knowing of my efforts to meet elite women, several months into my fieldwork, a business professor at the Lahore University of Management Sciences asked cheekily, "Have you met any of their wives yet?" before erupting into mirthful laughter and answering his own question: "No, of course you haven't. And you won't. Their wives are already very insecure, and meeting you would just make it worse." I came to understand why later in my fieldwork: a significant number of the business owners I knew admitted to having relationships outside their marriages. Only a few men—usually an older cohort of more religiously observant patriarchs in their sixties, seventies, and eighties—introduced me to their wives. At the few social gatherings I attended where wives also attended, the wives congregated in separate areas from the men and talked among themselves. Consequently, while I was often introduced to my informant's girlfriends or mistresses, I often found myself entertained, when I was invited into many of these business owner's homes, in the largely male areas, firmly removed from the women's and family area of the home.

The women with whom I most frequently interacted were middle-class girlfriends or upper-middle-class friends of elite men—women outside of the elite class who nonetheless fulfilled an important role within their social circles. Several others were businesswomen in their

own right, and others the highly educated daughters of elite businessmen, several of whom became valued friends. Though the daughters I befriended were almost wholly excluded from decision-making in the family business, the insights they provided on the lives of women within these families were invaluable and helped provide balance to the men who shaped the overarching conclusions drawn during my fieldwork.

Several female scholars have noted the pressure to dress and behave in a manner that mirrored the standards of appropriate dress held by their informants (see Bourgouin 2013; Jakubowska 2013; Rogers 2010), as well as unwelcome critiques on their appearance, as a defining aspect of their fieldwork. For Anne Allison (2009), Kimberly Hoang (2015), and Ashley Mears (2011), their ability to conduct fieldwork as a "local" required them to closely resemble their female informants and to be perceived by their informants as similarly attractive. My own research differed in this regard, as it did not depend on my appearance in any obvious way. Despite this, the men and women I befriended frequently compared my appearance to elite Pakistani women; commented on my body or my clothes; appraised my weight, height, facial features, and skin tone; and (depending on their own positionality) either critiqued my choice of clothing or commended the modesty of my attire. Men I interacted with in social situations felt no qualms in either telling me I was too skinny and needed to eat more, or approvingly looking me up and down and comparing me to their wives who had "let themselves go." Elite women were often more critical.

In a talk on fieldwork, Erving Goffman remarked, "You have to open yourself up in ways you're not in ordinary life. You have to open yourself up to being snubbed" (1989: 128). I grew very familiar with being snubbed by elite Pakistani women. Among women, my clothing initially became the major marker of critique, as well as an indicator that I had failed to accurately

ascertain the difference between wealth and status and to differentiate between groups of elite. Early in my fieldwork, when invited by a young socialite to the garden party of the 24-year-old daughter of one of Lahore's most prestigious old families, I quickly realized that the conservative dress I wore to my interviews was inappropriate in this context. Guests in tight jeans, stilettos, cropped jackets, and short dresses stopped by mini-burger stations and had their glasses of champagne refilled by roving waiters. Despite having switched my usual *shalwar kameez* for black trousers and a long, flowing top, my loose clothing and flat shoes looked shabby and out of place. As the host and her friends had almost exhausted the champagne supply, I found myself in the center of a semicircle of beautifully dressed young women looking me up and down while commenting, "Your clothes are too baggy," "You need to wear something tighter," and "You dress as though you were very old." Perhaps most telling was one young woman's comment that "Lahore isn't a conservative place. You don't need *shalwar kameez* here. *Everyone* wears jeans in Lahore." When I pointed out that I had been attending meetings all week in offices where the few women present wore headscarves or burkas, they openly scoffed and refused to believe me. The interaction had revealed the almost complete incongruence of the social worlds that they occupied with the offices in which their fathers, brothers, and husbands worked.

As I grew more familiar with the various groupings of elite in Pakistan, I altered my self-presentation to better conform to my informants' perceptions of an attractive and cultured woman. This involved highlighting a very specific form of elite femininity both outwardly and in my comportment. Clothes needed to be fashionably tailored or ready to wear from specific stores. Yet, unlike the tight clothing worn by the young women described at the Lahori garden party, my work researching men made it critical that my clothing remained uncompromisingly

modest to reduce possible interpretations that I was sexually available. As I began to be invited to the sought-after elite weddings of Lahore, the girlfriend of a young business friend, herself a member of the established Lahori elite, offered to let me borrow from the stock of ready-made samples at her bespoke wedding wear boutique. This kindness instantly transformed me from hopelessly unfashionable to one of the best-dressed guests at these weddings. Most of these wedding outfits cost around $600 to $1,800 and could not, I was firmly advised, be worn twice among the same crowd. I experienced an instant and noticeable rise in both status and popularity at these events, as demonstrated by the approving smiles and nods that wedding guests now sent in my direction. Most importantly for my research, several guests thereafter demonstrated a much greater interest in my research and willingness to meet with me socially.

Restrictions, gossip, and rumor

Beyond the gendered components of my interactions with informants, a further implication of "studying up" was that my informants sought to control their life narratives, and the aspects of their lives to which I was given access, in multiple ways. At times, this was done without my knowledge; at other times, I was explicitly asked not to delve further into specific issues. One such example was the hearing of a legal battle that involved one of my informants at the Supreme Court of Pakistan. Although I had already found personal contacts at the Supreme Court, enabling me to circumvent restrictions on the attendance of foreigners at public hearings, I was explicitly asked—or rather, politely instructed—not to attend the hearing, missing a potentially valuable source of information on the activities of an informant and a chance to observe their interaction with the state. These restrictions unavoidably shaped my understandings of the lives into which I was given access.

Beyond these exclusions, my main challenge became that of researching money and power in a context in which both were routinely exaggerated, disguised, or hidden entirely. Rumor and gossip circulated continuously among my elite informants and pervaded all political and economic interaction. Consequently, they became an important aspect of my fieldwork. Gossip can be understood as a voluntary, "informal and private transmission of information about one or more persons between two or more other persons" (Hannerz 1967: 36). As such, it provided both my informants and me with information on the partnerships, deals, animosities, conflict, affairs, and marriages of elite peers and competitors. Such information also served as a useful means of assessing current alliances and rivalries in a rapidly shifting political environment. As Ulf Hannerz notes, "gossip is often information which deals with the discrepancies between 'impression' and 'reality' concerning a person" (38) and consequentially provides very valuable information for the ethnographer seeking to go beyond face-value key informant interviews.

The skill of many of my informants in curating their public image meant that I sometimes had difficulty disengaging fact from the art of a good story, self-aggrandizement, or exaggeration. I dealt with this in part by seeking to triangulate and verify or refute the information given to me through other informants, media sources, and official records. The real value of these accounts, however, lay not in my attempts to transform pieces of information into established facts but rather in what these pieces implied about elite group boundary making and about the image my informant group sought to maintain and promote with other elite insiders.

The use of gossip and rumor in boundary maintenance was particularly apparent in the tensions between the "established" elite and *navay raje* families. Established elites often recounted stories of the lack of ethics evident in the behaviors of *navay raje* elites in business,

deriding the scale of their bribery, or their lack of "distinction" (Bourdieu [1984] 2013). These failings were evident, they argued, in a large array of attributed behaviors, from ogling women to speaking English with a regional accent or to being too religiously conservative. One of my *navay raje* informants, a popular and charming man in his thirties, derided the "established" elite and the social snubs he had experienced by showing me the flirtatious messages and photos he had received from "established" elite women on his mobile phone. Despite their pretensions, he boasted, the women of these families—both married and unmarried—frequently pursued him. "These women," he told me with a grin, "talk and act one way in their own circles but talk and act completely differently on their own." In telling others and me these stories, he disparaged the group of elites he felt to have rejected him through circulating counter-gossip of his own.

Conclusion

Late in my fieldwork, a young male informant I had come to know well indicated my *shalwar kameez* with a sweep of his hand and said admiringly, "You look like a proper woman, but you act just like a man." The freedom of movement, independence, and confidence he attributed to me were in his mind very clearly masculine traits. The statement also reflected the shifting deployment of gender traits that my informants routinely assigned me—at times, typically female; at others, much more fluid. Occupying this more fluid social position, I was often able to shift back and forth between the traits that many of my informants associated with women and with men. As simultaneously a woman and an outsider, I was given greater access to elite men's worlds than either a Pakistani woman or a foreign male researcher would have been likely to receive. Yet, while I was occasionally welcomed into women's areas of the home, I was usually kept apart from the homelives men shared with their wives. Consequently, I was variously

treated as a social hermaphrodite and as a threat to the gender division many elite men maintained between the women in their social worlds and their wives.

The forums my informants chose to let me see and participate in, as well as the people in their lives whom they allowed to see them with me, reveals much about how powerful elites shape their personas and reputations. Most often, the inversion of traditional power dynamics between the researcher and the researched to which I was subject ameliorated the challenges of undertaking participant observation with a group of powerful male elites and of conducting research in a political context in which foreigners were often distrusted. Correspondingly, however, my informants determined the forums in which I was included and excluded.

Engaging in long-term participant observation with powerful and at times distrustful informants revealed the ability of powerful elites to deftly maneuver among the varied social, political, and familial roles they occupied—and to effectively shape very different public and private personas. In keeping me away from certain events and familial relationships, the moments of ethnographic insight from which I was excluded revealed the soft underbelly of elite power: the personal weaknesses and relationships they did not want to be scrutinized—or jeopardized. These insights highlighted one of the methodological implications of conducting elite ethnographies: the evaluations and assessments our informants make about us determine the analyses we are able to undertake. Like our informants, we are to some degree able to shape our own self-representations and our informants' perceptions of us. But just as long-term ethnography erodes the façades of our informants, it substantially erodes our own. When researching informants who are themselves astute observers, our own vulnerabilities, weaknesses, and affiliations emerge as clearly to our informants as theirs do to us.

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