

Doing Social science in regions of conflict – Snowball sampling in Armenia

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Introduction

This paper is a short introduction to one of the methods, snowballing, which is used by social scientists working in conflict or what is considered ‘hard to reach’ areas. While the method have been used in many other contexts where there is no immediate dangers and uncertainty is low, it has proven useful in mitigating at least the majority of risks that are facing the scientist in these types of environments. The paper takes it outset in the context of Armenia and research into the relationship between mining multinational and local communities. While the example used in this papers does not take its outset from an area in direct conflict e.g. War, it does show how research can be conducted in regions where the threat of conflict is ever present and where sample populations are ‘hard to reach’.

The context

One of the first questions that I’m always asked when doing fieldwork in the Caucasus is about the dangers that one must face in the region. While I do not consider the Caucasus (at least the southern part e.g. Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) a dangerous place I do understand why the question is put forward. Looking at the media and the attention the region gets it is easy to come to the conclusion that one of the first things to pack before your trip is your flak jacket and the trusted steel helmet. Within the last decade or so Georgia has been in a civil war over the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as losing a short-lived fight with Russia in 2008. Armenia being

landlocked and in a continues conflict with Azerbaijan over the region of Nagorny Karabakh, which even today can be characterised as a low-intensity war with over 200 violation of the ceasefire weekly. Despite these very visible signs of trouble, there is much more to the region than geopolitical reminiscences of the Ottoman and Cold war Soviet empires. The Caucasus is, in my mind, also a place where social science research can have real impact on ordinary people, create tangible contributions to science and provide a research environment which is both challenging and personal fulfilling.

I will not disagree that there are risks involved when doing fieldwork in post-socialist regions and especially in the Caucasus but I do not think these risks are worse than the ones one might encounter the so-called western world. The difference is in the perception of what is normal and how one is going about getting good solid data under, sometimes, difficult circumstance. In the “West” we tend to be formal in our approach to collecting data. You (the researcher) try to get in contact with the key people within the organisations you are researching and most of the time you trust the information received. In general you have no or very little personal connection with the people you are in contact with and the perception is that this is not really needed in order to get solid reliable data. While such relationships might develop over time they are at best regarded as a positive side effect and at worst a liability as personal connections might taint your research results.

However, in the Caucasus it is the other way around (and very much so). You get into the organisations through people whom you trust and you trust the information you get from people who you have already made a personal connection with. When looking at trust in the region a recent survey showed that over half of the population lacked trust in their legal system and about one third had little confidence in their own government. As a general rule you cannot totally rely on information gathered through official channels mainly because they can be tainted by political considerations or be plain fabrications (taking you back to the old Soviet annual production reports). So basically you need to build a network of people who you trust and who will help you out verifying the data you collect. Such a network will be able to help with everything from translation to negotiations with government officials and can be a valuable sparring partner in interpreting what you see and hear.

This also means that you need to be a person whom your contacts will trust. It is never a “one-way street” and you will need to be flexible with your time and efforts. Network access is much like a commodity and if you are not careful you might break it, creating havoc on your research and disconnecting you from valuable sources of information. One have to remember that granting you access, is for them like sticking their neck out and in a region where justice sometimes is in short supply they might risk more than you when helping out. So you need to ensure that trust and confidentiality is build, not only with the people in your network but also with the ones who acts as informants. One might think that people in high places have nothing to fear but often they are the ones that stand to loss the most by providing you with accurate data.

The research used as an example is taken from how I approached my fieldwork in Armenian when investigating the risks associated with mining multinational enterprises (MNEs) and their relationship with local communities. Both of which are considered ‘hard to reach’, MNEs because they are often reluctant to talk to what they consider outsiders and local communities because they often distrust people who are associated with the mining industry.

What is snowballing?

As a method have sampling through snowballing been used in many different fields from ethnographic studies, demographics and case studies. Snowball sampling is defined as “a technique for finding research subjects. One subject gives the researcher the name of another subject, who in turn provides the name of a third, and so on.” (Vogt, 1999). In this was is the method a way to take advantage of social networks and the identification of respondents that are in a position to provide empirical evidence central to the research done. In practice the technique consisted of the selecting a sample of “seed” individuals to start the survey, and then asking these “seeds” for additional contacts to reach other individuals in the population of interest (Beauchemin & Gonzalez-Ferrer, 2011; Dixit, 2012).

Snowball sampling has been used in two major ways, firstly, as an informal method to reach a target population where the individual from the outset is unknown to researcher. In this case the research done is primarily explorative, qualitative and descriptive, but provides a practical approach to gaining access through a system of referrals (Hendricks et al., 1992). Secondly, snowballing is used when conducting quantitative research as a formal methodology for making inference about a population who have been difficult to get in contact with using descending methods that is the most common approach (Faugier & Sergant, 1997). In this case I will focus on how it has been used doing explorative qualitative research. A range of advantages have been claimed when sampling data using this method. Firstly, it can provide access to previously hidden or hard to reach populations that the research has little or no direct access to. Members of such populations may be involved in activities that are considered deviant in some way, such as gang activities or being part of a certain closed groups, or they may be vulnerable in some way, such as small communities that are affected by dramatic changes due to mining or other large projects, which makes them reluctant to take part in more formalised studies using traditional research methods. In these cases trust needs to be built through referrals from individuals or institutions that these communities trust and thereby making them to be more willing to participate in a given study. Snowballing is also used to examine changes to a population over time and can in this way provide in-depth results of how outside changes have affected the population. For example, the effect of mining activities is associated with both short and long-term changes to the local population. By using snowballing it is possible to get in contact with key informants that are affected now and use the same individuals when returning to provide referrals later on.

Using snowballing

Despite the challenges of working in Armenian, such as the conflict with Azerbaijan and working with a notorious closed industry, it was possible to visit and interview both mining MNEs and local community members in all parts of the country. The method used to collect data from interviews was based on a Snowballing or “chain-referral”

method, which provided an attractive solution when working in this context. Firstly, it was chosen as it is properly the most effective way to reach hidden or hard reach population where trust is low and where security for both respondents and researcher is a possible concern (Cohen & Ariel, 2011). Secondly, because I as a research was new to the area and it was believed that it would take more than a meeting or two build the necessary trust when doing research on such a sensitive area as mining/community relations. Thirdly, it was unknown how much the conflict with Azerbaijan would influence the respondent' willingness to talk to outsiders particularly given that hostilities were escalating which at one point turned into a short fighting war in Nagorny Karabakh.

The Snowballing approach allowed me to use past ties and the communication with prior research subjects and though these gain access to and cooperation from potential new subjects that can be interviewed. A central factor in this approach is gaining access to and enlisting the cooperation of subjects is trust and thereby legitimacy in the populations being observed. This is especially significant when establishing contact with relatively closed populations such as local communities or mining companies, where outsiders are looked upon with suspicion. While most of Armenia is safe from any kind of conflict there are areas which at times are considered unsafe and where local knowledge is vital for personal security, specifically near the border to Azerbaijan. As it happens were a significant proportion of the mining MNEs and local communities located either near the border or the border was close to the road to them. This meant that there was a need to make informed security decisions and identify those respondents where these types of concern were part of their everyday lives. In parts of the country and to some degree also in Nagorny Karabakh I frequently sensed a certain discomfort among people whenever asked about the frequent violations of the ceasefire or subjects related to their own security. Snowballing was in this case instrumental in keeping both me and the respondent's safe as it was possible to constantly affirm and reaffirm the local security situation either by phone or by asking informants directly. At the same time it was possible to reach a greater part of the sample population as number of referrals increased and information on the ground increasingly became more accurate. The method made it possible to conduct interviews with both local communities and MNE management, at different evolutionary

stages of local mining projects in relative security. This provided insights into how mining projects evolve, but also opportunities to validate evidence collected from other sites as well as interviews civil society organisations and government officials.

Snowballing does entail some limitations as it entails convenience sampling and can result in selection bias as well as challenges when it comes to prove that the sample was valid (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). The risk that selection bias would influence the results were sought minimized by using multiple “seeds”, which included university researchers, government officials as well as representatives from communities of interest, like non-governmental organisations and contacts within the industry. This meant that several contact point had to be obtained for each community and mining MNE, thereby minimising the chance that only one “official” story was conveyed and thereby influenced the findings.

Final remarks

So as a researcher doing fieldwork in the region, at least to me, represents an abundance of interesting data and curious (in the best and worst meaning of the word) behaviour by organisations, companies and politicians. Here you will find the Oligarch that builds golden palaces who created their business based on brute force and their ability to intimate everyone around them. You will find the conning businessman that navigates between the lines (and sometimes over) of politics and business utilizing the most of their connections and networks. But there are also ordinary businessmen and women who are making good money within the “rules of the game” who pays their taxes (at an acceptable level) and live regular lives. There are people who can hardly believe that the soviet times are over and are longing back to the “good old days” when unemployment was 0% and you could find both structure and stability (but not much freedom). On the other hand there are also the ones that take full advantage of globalisation and who dare to dream big, creating start-ups within IT and robotics or who bring in new products that the region has not seen before. Basically you will find all kinds people and organisations that are dealing with an ever more complex world in many different ways. For the scientist it is an abundance of interesting cases and

perspectives on problem solving that can give you valuable insights into human behaviour and how organisations deal with a multifaceted environment under the forces of globalisation. My research into the relationship between mining MNEs and local communities is just one example of how snowballing can be conducted in a safe manor and at the same time produce reliable data.

As Social scientists we deal with people, real people with everyday issues and concerns. It does not matter if it is a poor farmer who are struggling with his health and making ends meet, the CEO of a big multinational company or for that matter a powerful politician, most of the time they are (as most humans) very interested to talk about their own world and how they perceive it. At the same time you are an “operator” who are navigating between different interests that are not always obvious to you but can have consequences for your work. Your job is trying to understand the context that you are placed in, as you best can, and know (and sometime test) the limits of the questions you can ask. If you do that there are simply a wealth of information and ultimately knowledge to be gained from doing your fieldwork in a complex region such as the Caucasus.

Sources

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