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The Challenges Experienced during Data Collection on Pensioners' Time Use in Bahawalpur Division, Pakistan

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Abstract

Collecting data is a crucial part of the research process. In this article we highlight the problems and challenges we encountered while collecting data for the time use of pensioners in Pakistan, a developing country. We faced some anticipated as well as unanticipated problems and challenges while conducting interviews with pensioners for our research. The unforeseen challenges included inappropriate conduct of data providers with a female researcher, lack of funds, time management issues, a decline in response, and security issues in the field. We end the article with the recommendations to overcome those challenges and hence improving the data collection procedure and providing guidelines for societal data collection not only in rural Punjab, Pakistan, but indeed for those working in any underdeveloped and rural society.

Keywords

data collection challenges, time use survey, pensioners, fieldwork, Bahawalpur

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The Challenges Experienced during Data Collection on Pensioners' Time Use in Bahawalpur Division, Pakistan

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Collecting data is a crucial part of the research process. In this article we highlight the problems and challenges we encountered while collecting data for the time use of pensioners in Pakistan, a developing country. We faced some anticipated as well as unanticipated problems and challenges while conducting interviews with pensioners for our research. The unforeseen challenges included inappropriate conduct of data providers with a female researcher, lack of funds, time management issues, a decline in response, and security issues in the field. We end the article with the recommendations to overcome those challenges and hence improving the data collection procedure and providing guidelines for societal data collection not only in rural Punjab, Pakistan, but indeed for those working in any underdeveloped and rural society.

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Introduction

Data collection is the primary and vital part of any research particularly qualitative research. There exist a lot of variation in data collection approaches depending upon the nature of the research. The foremost and essential aim of data collection is the assurance of reliable and high quality data. Researchers may face difficulty acquiring information from respondents as they conduct their study. Rimando et al. (2015) found that many researchers find themselves in unforeseen real-time circumstances that served as challenges despite familiarity with methods, theories, guidelines, challenges of data collection.

Researchers in developing nations face distinct sets of problems for data collection when contrasted with industrialized nations. Unlike developed countries, most developing and underdeveloped countries, such as Pakistan, rely on traditional methods for information gathering (Elahi, 2008). People may have little familiarity and understanding with the practices of social science research. Multiple studies have been conducted to examine the challenges researchers confront collecting data in developing countries. Altshud and Witkin (2000) reported many people are hesitant to participate, due to participants' lack of awareness regarding the significance of data collection as an activity, blended with the common social belief of not giving personal data to unknown persons. Other challenges reported by Altshud and Witkin (2000) include the technical and logistic issues of collecting data in remote and sparsely populated territories. As a result of these and other factors, researchers in developing countries frequently confront different challenges in collecting data of high quality (Lupu & Michelitch, 2018).

I, the first author, Huma Qasim, confronted many challenges as I interviewed and collected time use data for a study investigating the experience of retired civil servants, in Bahawalpur, the biggest division of Punjab, Pakistan. Around 25,000 government employees retire every year in the province of Punjab alone (Hanif, 2019). According to the Government

of Pakistan, the age of superannuation is 60 years for both males and females; however, a person may take retirement before reaching superannuation age. To have a better insight of pensioners and their time use, I used interviews, surveys, and other practices to conduct research in Bahawalpur division. Time use methodologies are related to people's lifestyle (Merz, 2002). The foremost concern of a time use survey is to have a clearer view of how people spend their time. The idea behind this research was to put a spotlight on the lifestyle of retired people and to figure out the amount of time spent by them on different activities.

Researchers face many challenges while interviewing respondents. Similarly, I also faced many issues and challenges while collecting this data and interviewing retired government employees in Bahawalpur, Pakistan for the purpose of my PhD thesis, which are highlighted in this article, and along with those challenges and issues I have presented some suitable solutions for researchers who intend to conduct qualitative research.

Study Design and Sample Selection

A comparative study was done to determine the nature of activities in which retired people of Bahawalpur division were usually involved and how they spent their time. Bahawalpur division is the biggest division of Punjab, Pakistan, surrounded by a vast desert called the Cholistan desert. There are three districts in Bahawalpur Division: District Bahawalpur, District Bahawalnagar, and District Rahimyar Khan.

Figure 1

Map of Bahawalpur Division

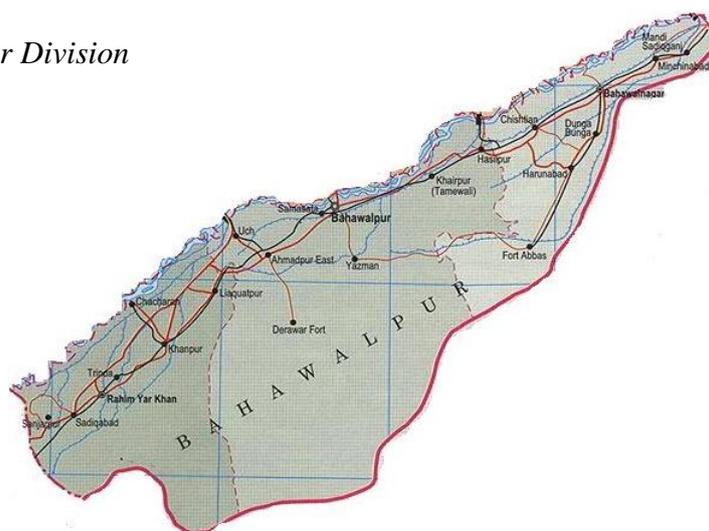


Table 1

Profile of Bahawalpur Division

Bahawalpur Division			
	District Bahawalpur	District Bahawalnagar	District Rahimyar Khan
Tehsils	06	05	04
Population (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2018)	36,68,106	29,81,919	48,14,006
Area	24,830 km ²	8,878 km ²	11,880 km ²
Literacy Rate (Bureau of Statistic, Punjab, 2014)	54.2 %	55 %	56%

To gather data about respondents' activities, I used a variety of instruments. A questionnaire asking for demographic and socio-economic characteristics was used. Information about activities done in a day was collected with the help of a 24-hour diary. The time diary started at midnight and ended at 11.59 pm with an interval of 15 minutes. Direct interviews with retirees were conducted to fill in questionnaires and time-use diaries. The study was conducted in three phases and data from pensioners was collected from February 2015 – January 2016, in phase I, from February 2017 – January 2018, in phase II and from February 2019 – January 2020, in phase III. I collected all basic information about pensioners from District Accounts Offices of Bahawalpur, Rahimyar Khan, and Bahawalnagar. The sample for each phase was selected using stratified random sampling where districts were treated as strata. The sample sizes used to investigate time use of pensioners in division Bahawalpur, Pakistan, were considered to be inadequate for this research because of expected non-response especially from female respondents, as female respondents in South Asian countries including Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh are more reluctant in sharing their information with researchers during interviews. Moreover, some of the persons in the pensioners' list may have moved to other cities or their spouse may be drawing pension because of his/her death. It was therefore decided to take a 10% sample of the population. Sampling units within each stratum were obtained by using systematic random sampling (i.e., selecting every 10th person on the list).

Table 2
Sample Size Distribution

	Phase – I (Year 2016)	Phase – II (Year 2018)	Phase – III (Year 2020)
Total Population	17,448	11,361	10,919
Sample Size	1,745	1,136	1,092
District Bahawalpur	598	347	229
District Bahawalnagar	1010	614	745
District Rahimyar Khan	137	175	118

It was interesting to see that the most populous district, Rahimyar Khan had the lowest number of retired people, whereas area wise the smallest district Bahawalnagar had the largest number of retired people despite having less population as compared to other two districts. I found during interviews that people who originally belonged to district Bahawalnagar were shifted to district Bahawalpur because of greater opportunities for jobs, as district Bahawalpur is the Divisional Headquarter. After retirement they moved back to their home town. Most people of district Bahawalpur are business-oriented. District Rahimyar Khan is a major industrial zone of the country, so people living there have core occupations related to industries, rather than government institutes.

Authors' Roles in the Study

As mentioned above I, the first author, am a PhD candidate and researcher at Department of Statistics, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan, 63100. I also serve in the role of Assistant Statistical Officer in District Health Authority, Bahawalpur. My dissertation topic is "Time Use of Pensioners: A Case Study of the Bahawalpur Division." It was very difficult for me to manage my degree and job simultaneously, however consistency

is the key to success. My activities pertaining to the survey comprised, among other things, developing a questionnaire and a diary involving use of time to be distributed to the participants in the study and to meet with them individually in various cities in the Bahawalpur Division of Pakistan's Punjab province.

Prof. Dr. Syed Shakir Ali Ghazali, the second author, is the person behind the idea of this research. He is supervising my PhD thesis. Muhammad Rajab, Assistant Professor, Department of Statistics, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan and Humera Gul, Associate Professor, helped in me writing and proof reading of this article. All the co-authors also provided their valuable suggestion and solution to my problems when and where needed.

Being the largest division of the province and the most geographically disparate and remote, including sections of desert, the data collection involved unique challenges. As the PhD candidate on the team, I was the stakeholder most invested in the success of the study, and additionally as a native Bahawalpuri, I was determined that it should achieve a utilitarian outcome. On that account, I weathered the various challenges with some suitable solutions. Therefore, I and my co-authors decided to indicate those problems and barriers and their solutions in this article that would also be helpful for many researchers especially novice researchers in developing countries.

Data Collection Challenges

Many researchers in both developed and underdeveloped countries experience unanticipated problems while gathering data for their theses or study reports due to various factors chiefly including lack of knowledge of effective research methods, pressure from the supervisor for maintenance of research integrity, poor communication skills, lack of time management, and provision of sensitive information from respondents (Rimando et al., 2015). These geographical, general, and socioeconomic issues may influence the overall quality of data from the study. It is broadly acknowledged that the researcher must be aware of the inadequacies and challenges faced in their collection of data (Lutabingwa & Nethonzhe, 2006). I have tried to describe how my years of experience collecting data on Punjab, Pakistan enabled me to manage the demand of field work and collect high quality data. This journey of data collection was not based on a month or a year but consisted of 4 years of consecutive hard work and effort accompanying a full time job from 08:00 to 16:00 even through the COVID-19 pandemic.

There were two types of challenges (i.e., anticipated challenges and unforeseen challenges) that I face while collecting data for my research. I noted each and every problem and challenge faced while interviewing respondents since the first day of this data collection journey and categorized those challenges accordingly after discussing them with my co-authors. The anticipated challenges included constructing questionnaires, non-maintenance of online official records, language barriers, and identifying the location of respondents. These are challenges that proficient as well as novice researchers are usually well aware of. The unforeseen challenges are those for which there is no preparation for, usually because they have not been encountered before. We present those unanticipated challenges along with their solutions in this article to benefit researchers, particularly new and developing researchers in developing countries. The challenges are presented below.

Lack of Response and Inappropriate Conduct by Record Providers

I did not compromise in data quality by relying on another person, so I myself travelled to all district accounts offices for purposes of collecting data. Pakistan is one of those Asian countries where patriarchal culture and male chauvinism prevail everywhere, particularly

outside the large metropolitan cities. As a female, it was very difficult to go to these offices because 99% of the positions are occupied by appointed males, but I had the thought in my mind and also it is teachings of my and other religions, that women have to be respected and guarded by men, so without any fear I went to District Accounts Office. However, I was totally astonished by the atmosphere in the office; I was not expecting disrespectful behavior from those educated government officials. Sometimes I had to revisit the office three or four times in a single day. Most of the time, I had to sit the whole day in the accounts' office waiting for the person who would provide the requested data regarding the pensioners. This was a totally unforeseen challenge for me because I thought that educated officials would behave decently, but they proved me wrong. It was not less than risky to sit alone in an office surrounded by unknown males in an unknown city of the country, Pakistan, which ranks 164 out of 167 countries in the peace and security index of women (Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2017). I had to tolerate lame jokes and unethical comments passed by other people in the accounts' office. I was needlessly kept waiting on occasion by the data provider in one such office for no evident reason. He did not want me to complete my task on time, due to the particular mentality of gender bias and the attitude of "why should a female go in field for such a task?" Sometimes his behaviour towards me was extremely annoying. I warned him that if he continued this unprofessional behavior, I would have to report him and file a formal complaint against him. As a matter of fact, women in our society are considered fragile and are not treated well, especially when a woman is alone, that was the major reason I had to take my brother or some male member from my family while visiting these offices. Therefore, I would suggest that female researchers, if they want to go to such offices or settings for collecting information, should be accompanied by a male for their protection, in order to avoid unprofessional behavior, harassment, or misconduct by record providers.

Carrying Out Interviews

One of the major challenges that I faced while conducting this research study was interviewing the respondents. Taking the interviews is particularly worrisome as it is a key component of data collection (Gill et al., 2008). Occasionally, respondents behaved in displeasing ways while giving interview information and I had to tolerate their rude behavior. Some respondents were reluctant to share their personal information especially related to income, expenses, and relationships with other family members. I observed that females were more conscious of and cautious about sharing their personal information as compared to males. The reason for this might be that most of the time, females were not alone while giving interviews; they were accompanied by some of their family members. I also observed that males were more isolated than females and seemed not so involved in family matters. Sometimes a respondent wanted to give me an interview but his or her family did not allow him to do so. Furthermore, the majority of the sample target set was illiterate or only knew how to read. They were not able to fill questionnaires and time use diaries on their own. Conducting interviews was sometimes extremely time-consuming and frustrating. At times, I felt my all energy was drained while explaining each part of questionnaire to respondents and conducting back-to-back interviews. Tiredness could certainly affect the ability of the researcher to manage interviews and focus groups efficiently (Orvik et al., 2013).

The foremost things required to meet this challenge are strong determination, tolerance, and patience on the part of researcher. The interviewer can be offended at any stage of interview and researcher has to be tolerant. The researcher must maintain a friendly atmosphere, so that the interviewer can share their personal information without any hesitation. It is best if the interview is arranged outside their home, so no internal pressure is applied on them while interviewing. Additionally, the researcher must assure the respondents that their data will not

be misused. It is obligatory for researcher to support his/her interviewees for participating anonymously, who are concerned for their privacy. Moreover, the researcher should not overburden him/her by conducting consecutive interviews, rather he/she should take the number of interviews that could be taken in a day easily and without getting tired.

Motivating Respondents for their Engagement in Interviews

To enhance one's research quality, researchers must help respondents remain focused during the interview. During my research, I observed that some respondents left questionnaires half done saying that it was getting boring, and they had other more important work to do. I found that some respondents were easier going as compared to others. Admittedly, respondents having low education and residing in villages were paradoxically or surprisingly less reluctant and took more interest and were more focused while giving interviews. On the contrary, respondents living in cities or having higher education sometimes directly refused to give an interview. When they refused, I had resorted to numerous requests in the hopes of them agreeing to an interview. To help with that I utilized some casual "chit chat" with them. Along with that the researcher must stay motivated throughout the interview and must reflect their own motivation in communicating with respondents. They must create a non-judgmental and friendly environment during interview. In addition to that, sometimes the researcher must try to convince the respondent of the importance of their participation in the research.

Security Issues in Field

Going to unknown places for conducting interviews was often threatening to a female researcher in a patriarchal society such as Pakistan. The majority of people here do not want women to be independent. Being a female researcher and traveling alone to other cities was dangerous. People tried to harass me while traveling on public transport. There are generally more physical threats to female interviewees as compared to male interviewees in the field (Fry, 2013). The presence of stray dogs and donkeys in some places prevented me from gaining access to retirees. Once I was in a village to locate a respondent; I had to park my car (in a suitable place) and locate a footpath to walk on to his address. As I was walking through a field, a donkey appeared from nowhere and started running after me. I had to run and hide in some unknown people's house compound nearby. They were scared as they encountered me in their house and thought that I was some thief who had come to rob or loot them. I related to them the entire story of what happened to me in the field, after which they treated me with hospitality, and also helped me to find the address of the particular respondent I was searching for.

The researcher must conduct interviews where security is assured. Public places are best for conducting interviews. While approaching male respondents, female researchers should have a friend or family member with them, and if that is not possible, they must take proper safety precautions such as having pepper spray or self-defense tasers to be prepared for any unforeseen circumstances. Conversely, a male researcher should think of taking the assistance of a female when dealing with female respondents. The researcher should schedule interviews in daylight and wear flat shoes while going into field. To avoid face-to-face interaction with respondents, the best possible way is to email the questionnaire or have a telephone interview. Above all, universities must introduce courses like safety planning in field for researchers.

Financial Issues and Time Management

I thought that I would be provided funds for conducting this research, so I spent a lot of money on travelling by using my personal vehicle. But soon lack of funds limited my ability to continue to travel by private means of transport. I changed to use traveling by public transport and that was hectic and time-consuming. In addition, the Bahawalpur division is surrounded by a vast desert, with poor roads and infrastructural deficiencies that contributed to travel during the data collection process requiring special 4-wheel drive vehicles (and the cost) to traverse the desert terrain.

Sometimes I had to revisit places because of the non-availability of the respondents. When I returned many respondents were accompanied by their family members at the time of the interview, and because of that, they were hesitant to answer questions or provide accurate information, forcing them to answer in a biased manner. In such situations, I had to ask indirect questions, which took a lot more time than usual. Respondents often reply differently when they feel uncomfortable (Rimando et al., 2015).

Moreover, traveling to other cities even within my own city was difficult for me with a full-time job. I faced a lack of work-life balance, between profession, research, and my private life. Mostly I had to visit respondents in the evening because I had to perform my full-time job in the mornings and like many researchers, time allocated for data collection was affected by work pressures (Munyoro, 2018). Visiting respondents in the evening was not fruitful most of the time, as that was the time intended for them to spend with their families. Unfortunately, I was not financially stable enough to offer monetary incentives to those respondents who showed no interest in filling out questionnaires.

The minimal solution for this problem is that the researcher must find a suitable funder who can support the research financially. The researcher must set target times to complete one interview without wasting extra time. Furthermore, hiring a translator if needed, from the local community to avoid any inconvenience or misunderstanding, may end up adding more cost to the expenses list, but this practice is fruitful and time efficient.

Decline in Response

A decline in the response to the survey was another big challenge (Schmeets, 2010). Often, I was not allowed to enter a female respondent's house when I was accompanied by my brother. In fact, many respondents were reluctant to have me enter their homes to fill out questionnaires as the crime rate had increased rapidly in the past few years. This was justified as it was a practice of some groups to impersonate themselves as representatives of some company to enter houses of people, saying they needed to obtain some critical census information regarding households, and then rob and loot the residents. I had to explain to each of the respondents the purpose of the study and ensure them that I had no such intention of robbing or looting them but only to fill out my questionnaire for research purposes. To alleviate fear, some of my interviews were conducted while standing outside the main gate of a compound, because the respondent was ready to participate, but afraid to allow me inside their home. Once a lady, after several requests, agreed to give me an interview for my research, however on the condition that I stand on the threshold of her house entrance. She did not even offer me a glass of water in the scorching heat. And as soon as the questions related to family began, she refused to answer, having the perception that I was some government agent trying to gather her personal information. Moreover, time use diaries require a sharp memory to recall all the activities performed in past days, so retired people found it a bit challenging to recall all their activities (Seymour et al., 2017).

One of my learnings is that while visiting female respondents, I should not be accompanied by a male to increase the chance for having the respondent agree to the interview, particularly in rural areas and countries in the sub-continent. Having said that, it is best, if the researcher telephones the respondents about the interview and seeks advance permission to visit them. In that way respondents will likely be less suspicious and let the researcher complete the interview without any hurdle or disturbance. Additionally, researchers must be able to think on their feet to respond to any sort of concern a respondent may present before or during an interview.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In the context of the time use survey, the challenges of data collection described in this article provide lessons that may be of importance to other researchers especially working in developing countries. Researchers must keep the length of questionnaires moderate, neither too long nor too short, otherwise data quality will be compromised. Questionnaire design is directly proportional to the accuracy of data being collected. If feasible for the researcher, visiting the respondents personally and interview them is likely to have better results. Although, telephone surveys and emailed questionnaires are time and cost efficient, in my experience, the non-response is higher using those methods as compared to direct interviews in developing countries. Interacting with respondents of different profiles and backgrounds, a researcher gets the chance to learn about new cultures. Equally important, a researcher must study the literacy level of respondents, so that respondents need not feel ashamed or self-conscious. Language barrier is a major drawback, especially in developing countries. In spite of my bilingual questionnaire (English and Urdu), respondents, most specifically in villages, were unable to understand the Urdu language, the national language of my country. It is better to hire a local interpreter when venturing into the field. Hence, special efforts by the researcher must be made to ensure the validity of data and to maximize the response rate and avoiding any unenviable circumstances.

Most importantly, a researcher must show positive attitude towards respondents while interviewing them and be willing to answer every query raised by respondents efficiently. Researchers should stay active and must be observant while conducting interviews, as exhaustion can reduce data quality.

In addition to that, the researcher must have basic knowledge about the respondents as well as the culture and location from where data will be collected. A researcher, especially a female researcher should never go alone to a new locale to ensure greater safety as many female researchers can be threatened by respondents (Fry, 2013). Also, it is best to go by one's personal vehicle rather than public transport. This is especially true for rural areas having scant local infrastructure; while I was conducting my research, there were times I needed to change two three buses when locating a single respondent, and this practice was really tiresome. In addition to that, a researcher must ensure that they have sufficient edible items on their person, and they should never depend on respondents for food or even water. Extreme weather conditions such as heat, cold, wind, or rain are also a big challenge in the field, therefore researchers must dress appropriately.

Given the patriarchal culture, a common thread in more underdeveloped or rural regions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, there were exceptional challenges and risks placed before a female researcher in the field. Pakistan, however, poses special concerns with a plethora of highly educated women in professions and yet both a dearth of female employees and an extremely patriarchal culture in rural areas. As a matter of fact, the patriarchal system acts as hindrance for female researchers. A male dominated society never allows for a female to be independent, so female researchers have to be strong and highly independent, as there are very

few men who support women in chasing their dreams. Only being an independent female researcher is not the solution of this problem. Unless the mindset of people is changed, females cannot go further to chase their dreams. The gender gap is still a major issue in developing countries as females have to face gender inequality even in the 21st century. It hinders the progress and development of females. Governments need to take measures by conducting and supporting seminars and educational programmes regarding gender equality and women empowerment.

From the perspective of this work, the availability of quality information is distinguished as a significant data attribute. Data accuracy, accessibility, and availability are recognized as major issues related to data collection of high quality. Data collection and access control methods should also be taken into account while developing policies and procedures. Evaluation and maintenance of completed records must be done (Cuvo et al., 2008).

Usually in developing countries, state organizations are responsible for data collection because the private sector lacks ability (Elahi, 2008). There is a dire need to work on strategic plans for improving the public and private sector for data collection in collaboration with first world countries. Moreover, workshops must be conducted at state level to educate and facilitate the novice researchers. This could help increase the levels of their confidence as well as enhance the quality of data collection.

Finally, I would like to recommend that while conducting research can be nerve wracking for the novice, researcher must not lose hope and must recall and acknowledge their achievements so far. They must possess a positive attitude towards every situation. They must have proper knowledge regarding research methodologies and pertain the ability to face any unforeseen circumstances. Additionally, a researcher must keep in mind that lack of confidence and low self-esteem makes one less motivated and that ends in affecting data quality.

Though I have not resided in North America, I assume and have heard that some of these factors, such as a contrast in the cultural norms or mistrust of outsiders exist even in the United States or developed countries, especially in rural areas. Therefore, my experiences could even be instructive to novice researchers there, but would especially it will be useful to scholars in developing societies, where many of the same problems and challenges exist if not identically, at least in varying degrees. We hope this article will serve as a guide for societal data collection not only in Pakistan, but indeed for all those working in developing and rural society.

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