

# Of Word Limits and World Limits

Andrea Fleschenberg in conversation with Ahsan Kamal



Ahsan Kamal is Lecturer in Pakistan Studies at the Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, teaching courses in research methods, social theory, social movements and water politics. They work with activists and communities on issues of land and water commons in Pakistan. Their PhD dissertation in Sociology was written on the death and defence of the Indus River in Pakistan. One of their most recent publications, co-authored with Christopher Courtheyn, is “Research as Action and Performance. Learning with Activists in Resource Conflicts”, published in 2021 in *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Resource Geography* (edited by Matthew Himley, Elizabeth Havice and Gabriela Valdivia, London: Routledge, pp. 274–284, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429434136>).

**Keywords:** Research ethics, decolonising methods, fieldwork, social movements, scholar activism, action research, reciprocity, positionality, interview

**ANDREA FLESCHENBERG:** *We are in conversation with Ahsan Kamal from Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad, Pakistan. Please tell us a little bit about yourself. How do you define and position yourself as a researcher? What are your research interests and what are you currently working on?*

**AHSAN KAMAL:** Thank you for this opportunity, Andrea. I am excited to have this conversation. I am a lecturer at the National Institute of Pakistan Studies at the Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU) in Islamabad. I have been affiliated with this university for almost a decade though I spent half of this time pursuing a

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The interview was conducted in April 2020 via Skype and transcribed by Marie Wuscher, Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC), Germany. We would like to thank Marie Wuscher for her meticulous transcription efforts and support. The interview transcript has been edited for readability purposes. The full interview is part of a podcast series organised by the Research Ethics Initiative at the Institute for Asian and African Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, co-coordinated by Rosa Castillo, Andrea Fleschenberg and Sarah Holz (<https://www.iaaw.hu-berlin.de/en/region/southeastasia/research/groups/negotiating-research-ethics>).

PhD in Sociology at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, NC, USA. Currently I teach a course on social theory where we try to decolonise and southernise the social theory canon by including insights from the Global South. I was previously involved in policy and advocacy work from 2005 onwards, with a focus on development, disasters and political conflicts. Since 2010, when I started teaching at Quaid-i-Azam, I have been actively engaged with different activist formations and social movements [...] as a member of a socialist party in Pakistan for a few years, as editor of an online magazine, and working with action-research collectives amidst various urban and rural communities in resistance. So, in a way, I locate myself on the border of academia and activism [...] or scholarship and action. My dissertation research was influenced by this positionality. I focused on the politics of water, particularly river control and riverine resistance in Pakistan. I was motivated to understand how academic and theoretical constructs can be grounded in the conversations of left-leaning activists on issues of the enclosure of land and water commons. I examined how the post-colonial state attempts to enclose the river to enclose land, but lacks the capacity to effectively govern the socio-natural systems. The subsequent socio-economic and ecological consequences, or riverine overflows, feed local resistance that can expand in some cases and become movements for the defence of the entire river. Thus my study was an enquiry in political imagination and action, the death and defence of the Sindhu or Indus river in Pakistan.

[...] Right now, I am exploring a couple of things. First, my research on river control and resistance raises the question: what does it take for the state and development actors to enclose an entity that is not land? The river by its very nature is a difficult entity to enclose. So, I am trying to think through what type of institutions of governance are needed even to attempt such a thing, and the limitations these institutional forms pose on the state's capacity to deal with riverine overflows. The river's geography does not map onto the administrative boundaries of modern states, and the overflows travel through time and space to have widespread and lengthy duration impacts – not only on ecology, but on state-society relations. The same problem exists in the case of mining, air pollution and even climate change. These problems scale differently than how organised politics scales in the state and interstate arena. And then, of course, my main focus is always on social movements and activism, so we can ask: what do relatively small social movements teach us about these big problems and what are the imaginations of resistance? How do we begin to imagine defending the river, air, land and the planet through movements that have limited resources, capacities and outreach? These are the kinds of questions I am interested in right now.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: *You are part of a Global South-South network of researchers. Can you tell us a little bit about it?*

AHSAN KAMAL: This network is a very slow moving, unstructured and informal agglomeration of people. It emerged out of a conversation and engagement with activists in Pakistan when I started teaching at QAU and working with various activist formations. The idea of learning from other social movements, other activists, in Pakistan, South Asia and elsewhere in the world always resonated with us. We sought collaborations with activists and academics, primarily involving people who straddle that divide, who have this hybrid energy. I think a key moment for me was in 2016 when I was in the USA and we held a convergence of grad students, junior faculty, activists from Pakistan and several black, brown, queer, anarchist and left-leaning activists from the US south. So, we just came together to brainstorm about issues of action research and how to learn with social movements. This network has a very slow-moving existence. Everyone has their own battles but we try to come together to collaborate, organise events. We have done this informally in what I would call social movement spaces as well as in mainstream academic conferences. We framed this, at the time, as crossing borders between academy and activism, different disciplines and area studies, the Global North and the Global South. We investigate how ideas travel and transform, and how collective thought and practice can help us cross those borders. This is, in some sense, a meditation on the possibility of solidarity in action across differences that we embody, particularly of imperially shaped citizenship and nationality.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: *Any key lessons learned or pointers or approaches that you found particularly interesting from the collaborations and the exchanges that you had so far? Or is it still very fluid – as you call it, “slow-moving”?*

AHSAN KAMAL: Yes, we have had several very fruitful conversations, like thinking about river activists in Pakistan and how they relate to their lifeworlds, and what activists and communities in resistance are doing elsewhere, for example in Colombia. What comes to my mind right now is not new, but important to emphasise. The first lesson is on the different uses of theoretical-political concepts by academics and activists – theory and practice often use the same signifiers, such as ethnicity, indigeneity, class, nationalism, but convey different meanings. Academics often conflate the trends in theorising reflected in various academic “turns” with actual changes on the ground. Second, the comparative conversations help us identify which processes to focus on in our projects

of decolonisation. What colonialism means in the “new world” and the “old world”, settler or non-settler contexts, direct or indirect forms of rule [cf. Mamdani 1996], is different. [...] Similar differences exist in later waves of imperialism, during the Cold War, neoliberal globalisation, the War on Terror, etc. [cf. Rivera Cusicanqui 2012, Chen 2010]. Such differences leave deep imprints on contemporary conflicts and issues of redistribution and recognition. So while pragmatic politics is aware of these different types of decolonisation struggles, the translation of these practices into theoretical language is fraught with challenges.

*ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: You classify your own methodology as action research that draws on defiant mystical traditions, Marxist politics and decolonial praxis when studying social movement organisations in Pakistan specifically, as you already mentioned, and how ideas of struggle, resistance and re-existence travel, are transformed and translated into what you call “develop[ing] new praxes in conversation with local cultures” [Courtheyn / Kamal 2021: 275]. You argue that a decolonial critical approach to research is linked to certain commitments. What do you understand by decolonial, indigenous approaches to knowledge production? What are key concerns, issues and challenges for research and teaching?*

*AHSAN KAMAL: Well, there is a long-standing tradition of what I call action research, of resistance and refusal that I came to know, unwittingly at first, through the poetry and praxis of Sufi mystics of the Indus valley. Later refinements came through the study of Marxist, decolonial/postcolonial and critical feminist activists and thinkers. We know that the contemporary university and “research” have a deep imprint of colonial imperialism [Smith 2012]. We also now know the criticism: for about four decades, critics of modern/colonial knowledge production have had a firm foothold in the academy itself [...] what Arif Dirlik calls the conquest of academy by “Third World” intellectuals such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall and others. The resulting decolonial/postcolonial project challenges the idea of Eurocentric modernity as the primary form of learning and analysis, but this is always already coupled with coloniality. So, we learn that the modern processes are not necessarily evil but are tightly coupled with the violence of coloniality. And decolonisation is a political project focused both on the interstate order and knowledge production, both linked to the question of self-representation of the colonised peoples. A critical decolonisation project highlights the coupling of modernity/coloniality, seeks to decentre Euro-American hegemony and also locates alternative imaginaries, anticolonial, decolonial, etc., that emerge in this context.*

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: *So, what does that mean in terms of our research? What kind of insights does that lead to?*

AHSAN KAMAL: I think, first of all, we take insights from feminist and critical theories about positionality and reflexivity. The researcher is already located somewhere in institutionalised practices of knowledge production, which is modern and colonial. Therefore, awareness of one's own position and location is very important. And the second thing, particularly for me, is to identify strands of decoloniality that emerge from the Global South. So, while theoretically orthodox Marxism is Eurocentric, as it only focuses on modernity and not on coloniality, Marxist politics across much of the world has had to deal more directly with colonial processes – it cannot help but do so [cf. Chen 2010]. Similarly, the defiant mystical traditions in South Asia may be pre-colonial in the teleology of European colonialism, but were responses to prior forms of imperial and colonial rules [...] these were rebellions against oppressions supported by institutionalised and authorised forms of knowledge. Finally, it is critical not to reinforce the dichotomies between East-West and North-South, as we are never fully outside the realm of modernity/coloniality. The response to Orientalism, as a form of imperial Othering through cultural production, cannot be Occidentalism or Orientalism-in-reverse [Al-Azm 2010], but rather a weakening of these dichotomies, borders and boundaries. Yet, we must acknowledge that such borders are very real in their impact on our lives, enabling some, limiting most others. And that takes me back to what I was talking about, thinking about how to cross the borders and boundaries that have been established, locating that intersection, that in-between, while trying to travel to a different side.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: *You say that boundary crossing, boundary challenging can be seen also as an act of resistance and speaking back, thinking back?*

AHSAN KAMAL: Yes, precisely to sort of take these boundaries, these borders both as a metaphor and history. Consider the nation-state borders that operate on our bodies discriminatingly. This has a profound impact on lives and on ideas of social and geographic mobility, depending on which side of the border you legally belong on. We can similarly think of borders between activism and academia, North and South, that are held up by the particular political economy of knowledge that is imperialist and colonial, and works in tandem with nation-state borders. Studying these borders, not simply as things we inhabit in our being and identity as individuals, but their impact on us collectively and how this influences the very notion of collectivity, is precisely what leads us to speak about crossing borders, through subversion or by navigation

of the relevant bureaucracies. So, you know, we have always based the world of knowledge, human knowledge, on the exchange of ideas, cultures and materials, the crossing of borders. Not just in the current stage of fast-paced globalisation, but historically this has been the source of the flourishing of human civilisation and cultures in diverse ways.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: *In your 2021 co-authored publication with Chris Courtheyn, titled “Research as Action and Performance: Learning with Activists in Resource Conflicts”, you ask how conflicts involving nature and resources influence our attempts to learn about them, and you point towards ethical commitment and the experience of working with activists and communities in the Global South in sites of knowledge production with diverse epistemological approaches and towards the need to unveil different realities or differing realities. In this publication, the two of you enter into a dialogue and converse about the tension between academic and activist spaces. What is research ethics for you? How would you define research ethics? What is part and parcel of it? What needs to be negotiated?*

AHSAN KAMAL: The starting point of the idea of research ethics is that we, as researchers, are never fully objective and never fully capable of having no impact on the sites and locations where we conduct research. Just by the mere fact of entering the field, by our presence, by our bodies, we have an influence and impact. And then, of course, in the classical sense, academic institutions have a long history of colonial forms of research, which includes horrible, horrible, experimentation on humans. As we evolved better ways of dealing with human subjects, we developed certain protocols of do-no-harm: to obtain consent from the researched, to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, and to give them the right to participate or withdraw from research. These are all standard protocols of research ethics and a mere starting point that recognises that research can be harmful. But in my experience, while there is immense value in these basic research ethics, they tend to ignore one aspect, which is a very central one. They ignore the fact that by using certain conceptual and theoretical lenses – which have a deep colonial imprint – by focusing on certain groups, say a social movement, through these lenses, we are interpreting and representing them in ways that do not align with or do justice to their self-representations. When we go out in the field, we are already implicated in two forms of representation. One is this analytical representation of reality. The other is the representation in the political sense, representation of the people in the political realm. These two things directly intersect. So, for Chris and me, when we wrote the article, we started with the idea that research ethics need to explicitly engage with this dual problem of representation. And when we look at it in this



way, we can think of research as a performance in knowledge production. Research is sanctioned by certain institutions, by academic institutions, by grant-giving institutions, by editors, publishers. [...] We are sanctioned to produce knowledge in certain ways and then we perform knowledge in ways that are authorised and institutionally recognised. And, in order for us to behave ethically towards the researched – a term which I feel better represents them than “subjects” – [...] for us to fully represent them we have to attend to their needs, their desires, their own analyses of our location in this sort of knowledge production paradigm.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: ... *if I can jump in here ... this also implies moving beyond what you call in your article, “beyond standard research design practices” [...]. There are certain standard sentences we include, and I always ask in PhD funding or application procedures: “But what does this really mean? How do you see that? What is your plan A, B, C? What are your strategies? What are your approaches?” – which is not just something related to the planning stage or that you just negotiate when you are in the field. It is a very long-term commitment in a sense that does not end there, and it is nothing that is checklist-based. It is rather very complex and challenging, I would think, also for early career researchers. In your co-authored article you speak about this dual responsibility to “know-act” and “act-know” – knowing through and for action as well as acting with and for knowledge. I think this links quite nicely to what you just explained. These sites of concern and negotiation for you are linked to questions of – and you mentioned this already – self-reflexivity, positionality, trust, access and reciprocity when moving beyond such standard research design practices and avoiding charges of, what I would introduce now as another terminology, “academic or data colonialism”. And here, it can also be an internal colonialism, right? It does not need to be just a colonialism from the Global North / South perspective. We have many societies where we have to deal with internal colonialisms. Can you explain this a bit more? What does this dual responsibility mean and can you perhaps give an example of how you negotiate this in very concrete terms?*

AHSAN KAMAL: The basic idea behind this dual responsibility is simple: when we produce knowledge, when we think of knowledge as something being produced by scholars in large university settings, then these institutions decide what counts as knowledge. But when you are out in the field and work with activists, in particular, and in my case, activists in conflict zones or around issues of resource conflicts, they also have certain ideas about what constitutes valuable knowledge and what does not. So, one of the key distinctions – and this may sound like a dichotomy and it can be – is that the knowledge needs

of activists and communities-in-resistance are mostly very pragmatic and action-oriented. The guiding question is: what can we learn that actually helps us move forward with our particular goals? Knowledge is driven by demands for action, but action is guided by what we know. We call this approach action research or performative research, realising that our role in the production of knowledge is not just a performance in the university but is also part of a broader performance of knowledge in the fields of action, the field sites, the sites of conflicts. We then have to come to grips with a responsibility to orient our knowing towards action that is relevant for the people we work with. To ask: what do the peoples or the communities that we are investigating want to know, because they do want to know in order to act.

For them, the divide between action and learning is not that big. The divide, or border, is created through the performances of academia with idealised notions of research as autonomous, both from the researched in the field sites and the “knowledge community” in academic institutions. While many academics think of themselves as action oriented [...] – they investigate and would like to influence policy directly or indirectly, even get involved in some implementation projects – they don’t necessarily attend to the demands of those being investigated. When you research on conflicts around nature, you are already in the field of action, responding to conflicts that are underway, and you are already responding to their effects. For instance, when asking questions about ecological crises, we learn about powerful actors like the state and global investors and how they control resources, we learn about the socio-ecological problems in the charged field of political action. And as we learn we are also learning to identify allies and enemies, to formulate a strategy, to get up and act. To use a phrase from the Zapatistas, the famous social movement from Chiapas, Mexico: “caminar preguntando!” and “preguntamos caminando!” – “asking, we walk” and “walking, we ask”. So, as you are in the act of walking down a path, you are enquiring about the challenges, and as we ask, we are compelled to walk certain paths. You can neither stop walking nor stop asking because you are already in fields of action and enquiry.

We think that action research demands reflection on two or three matters. The first is reflection on our commitments. When you are in the field of action in a typical case of a resource conflict, there might be a conflict between, let’s say, a powerful actor like the state and certain fishing or peasant communities. In that field of action, your investigation is not neutral, it is already layered with a certain political programme. So, it is important to first ask whether your position is allied with the activists and communities on the ground or with the state programme. Many critical scholars assume that we are already producing knowledge that is useful for these social movements but there is very little conversation, very little engagement and dialogue with the researched, because as



you rightly pointed out, this requires a long-term commitment, this requires a deep engagement. We have that sort of deep engagement with academia, with our committees and peers. But in academia there is no training, no incentives, no real drive to establish these deep relationships that hold us and our knowledge production accountable to the activists and communities that we research. Since whatever we produce has real consequences, a first step is to self-reflexively identify our position in that conflict and then leverage that position to further the cause of the people and the movements.

The second concern is around trust and access. We all write interview scripts to introduce ourselves and our research, but most often we are not trained to build relationships or identify relationships that we can build in the field. You need people to help you make sense of what is going on in their worlds [...]. It is really important in politically charged situations of conflict around resources, or other forms of conflict, that you establish deep trust, which comes with answering the basic question that is posed again and again to researchers by communities in resistance: “What is your commitment to our cause?” This question might be asked explicitly or implicitly. Depending on your answer to that question and how you navigate that situation, you will be able to establish trust, which will give you insights into the inner workings of these movements.

I can give you an example from my own experience. Once we helped organise a people’s tribunal in Lahore, the provincial capital of Punjab, for activists from rural Balochistan. What had happened: people had lost their land due to floods linked to a large dam, part of a mega-infrastructure project to build a new seaport with strategic and economic importance for China and Pakistan. These rural activists were demanding compensation and restitution for the loss of their cultural heritage; they wanted the state, corporations and investors to take responsibility for their violent actions. These activists belonged to a marginalised group and had always adopted nonviolent means, in the broader context of a provincial separatist movement, viewed by the Pakistani state as terrorism and as a national liberation movement by many in Balochistan and elsewhere. These activists had to travel through conflict zones for days to reach the capital of Punjab, seen by many as part of the colonising structure in Pakistan, since the relevant bureaucracy had its headquarters there.

So they had to hold this tribunal in the very centre of power, where resources and power had been accumulated, generating long-standing grievances that led to the emergence of an ethnic conflict of sorts. They gave testimonies of their loss in front of students, researchers, journalists and other activists from Punjab province, mostly of Punjabi ethnicity. On hearing their stories, some of the audience members began to criticise the state with a “revolutionary” fervour, spoke about their support for the Baloch insurgency and even encouraged the nonviolent actors to pick up arms against the state. All this in the presence of

mainstream and social media. But such shows of “solidarity” were putting the lives of these nonviolent Baloch activists in danger.

This incident shows a rather wider phenomenon in our understanding of solidarity and commitments, even if it doesn’t play out in such an obvious manner. Even when we believe we are ethically aligned with certain groups, our commitment is not to their cause but to our understanding, to the representation of their cause. We can only deepen our understanding by sitting with these activists, if they trust us and give us access to their spaces, their rationalities and their knowledges. They are often the best judge of what *can* be shared and what *cannot* be shared publicly. So, in the example above, the issue was not simply about the data they shared and we collected, because they were sharing the data of loss, but of our already formulated interpretation of that data, in activist and academic spaces alike.

What I am trying to explain here is the following: when we establish deep trust to learn more about the movements, we already move away from ideas of extracting data and imposing our concepts and interpretation on it. [...] This applies to interpretations and classifications/labels, for instance, when you think about writing a monograph on these movements and calling them “anti-state” or calling them “colonised” – terms they are not comfortable with using in public. For example, if your whole analytical framework is about colonialism and capitalism and you want to use that lens for how the state is operating, then this can lead to problems and challenges for these communities. But, at the same time, one can work out what language to use in conversation. For instance, should we use the phrase “state violence” in this context? While I can use this term in the “comfort zones” of academia, it’s not always kosher to use such language in the conflict zones of action. This is my first big point around trust and access: what is it that we are accessing and how are we interpreting it? What are we putting out in the world? These are really difficult questions because when we are studying conflicts, a lot of our emphasis is on the idea of “speaking truth to power” – a very powerful motive during research but, at the same time, you have to get into a deep trustful relationship with the people who are actually going to face the consequences of what could be made public.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: *Can I cut in here, Ahsan? I would like to zoom in a little bit more. I think there is another, I do not know if it is an ethical dilemma, but it is definitely an ethical challenge linked to this, that appears also in texts and in other conversations that we will have and that I have already had with fellow researchers and fellow travellers. It is the issue of veiled research: so, we might veil ourselves. Veiled ethnography, veiled research, in particular when researching in hostile environments or with hostile actors or so-called spoilers. And also the challenge of, and I think you alluded to this a little bit,*

*the issue of concealed knowledge. We might have to conceal knowledge, out of solidarity, out of a do-no-harm approach, for our own risk and safety and that of the whole [team]. I mean, most of the time we are not doing research alone, right? We are doing research in a team, in a participatory, interactive way. So, risk and safety apply to many, many people. These might all be factors that lead to sort of concealing knowledge or veiling ourselves in the research.*

AHSAN KAMAL: That's actually a really good way of articulating what I was trying to say, as the example I gave calls for concealing knowledge. For instance, after the incident I just mentioned, we had a long conversation around what kind of language to use and how to classify state atrocities in a public statement, what to put out and what *not* to put out. Again, this is kind of a very common form of, as you're saying, concealed knowledge. Another instance comes to my mind. Many social movements face internal asymmetries, power asymmetries along lines of gender, class, religion and so on. Often when you are in a deep trustful relationship with a movement, you can witness internal conflicts, the disputes and the so-called dirty laundry. In a way, these insights can make for a juicy account – an interesting incident that can make our writing more appealing to the reader, that shows that movements are not homogeneous and must not be romanticised. That might be so, but it also poses ethical dilemmas. Like any groups, social movements and activists care about how they are presented to the world, and highlighting internal fissures can have harmful consequences for the movement. The issue isn't to shy away from complexities and show only a "good" image of activists, but whether making such information public could help resolve the internal conflicts or make the situation worse.

The way I navigate this ethical dilemma is to come back to the questions that I started with. If I were to honestly tell the researched that my research looks at internal power dynamics, for instance, or that I am interested in whether the organisation has an effective voice or representation of, let's say, women or another marginalised group, I can resolve this ethical dilemma by asking these specific questions explicitly. But if you claim to conduct research to document state atrocities, then to discuss the internal fissures or power asymmetries within the movement, is ethically questionable. So what I am trying to say is that many issues come up that could harm a movement – violence, torture and disappearances are explicit forms of repression, but the seemingly simpler things can negatively impact social movements as well, immensely.

I am not saying that activists and social movements should not be criticised. In fact, many activists and movements that I have been working with are eager to find out how to resolve these challenges of internal dynamics and power asymmetries. It is just a question of whether your knowledge, your research is primarily geared towards taking that information and putting it out for some other

public, for the state or for the university or for the world, or if your research is geared towards producing knowledge that is useful for the movement without creating harm. It is a fine line, a difficult task, but it speaks to this idea of concealed knowledge. And, this actually takes me towards the final point that I wanted to refer to in terms of issues and concerns, which is the issue of reciprocity.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: *Maybe we'll keep reciprocity on hold for a little while. I just wanted to present you with another challenge that you faced in your own research that you also mentioned in the conversation with Chris. Because I think we might have a coping strategy, even multiple ones, by being flexible, responsive, self-reflective. We might have creative approaches to methods and theoretical frameworks, but we might hit a wall. There might be limitations that we face and challenges that we cannot constructively engage with and bring to – allow me the word – to a good end, right? So, there might be blind spots that we have in our research. And there might be challenges in knowledge production where we do not have adequate coping strategies. And one thing that Chris and you discuss is the gendered nature of research, and you mentioned the challenge you had in accessing and visualising understandings of rural women activists in your own research in the particular context of Pakistan and the gender ideology and how it plays out there. Could you explain, maybe in concrete terms, how you deal with this challenge, this blind spot or this limitation that you faced?*

AHSAN KAMAL: Gender, as you are familiar with in the Pakistani context, is often a decisive factor in the public realm, especially in rural areas. Generally, women are not allowed presence in public spaces or voice in public matters. It is difficult for them to occupy political spaces but it is particularly difficult for them to command substantive leadership roles. And I am speaking of movements that have gender equality as part of their agenda. So, while there are widespread issues of sexism, harassment and limited representation in Pakistan, in rural areas this problem is more pronounced. However, this does not mean that women are absent from the political arena. They are often central to resistance and activism. As a researcher and an activist, I establish deep trust and access based on some form of friendship with male interlocutors; travelling with them, walking with them, even working with them. Establishing this trust allows me to see their world from their eyes. But I cannot form the same type of friendship or access with women, particularly in rural areas. With only a few exceptions, I cannot even walk or converse with them. My conversations with female rural activists are almost always in the presence of other men and you can sense the power dynamic that is at play. There is a

kind of gender barrier that in my personal experience I was not able to overcome individually. And my access to women's thoughts and views in these particular communities cannot match the deep access that is based on this kind of relationship with male activists.

Perhaps a collaborative project could resolve this issue, with a team of male and female investigators. If I ask women questions about power asymmetries, or why it is that most of the leadership and the decision making is in the hands of men, or what steps can be taken to improve the situation, they will obviously respond differently to me than to a woman asking these questions. I have tried to overcome this problem by enlisting certain female helpers, but while they can conduct interviews, it is not the same type of conversation and this approach has limitations. So yes, there are certain blind spots and we can become aware of these – going back to the ideas of reflexivity and positionality, what it is that we are signalling through our gender performance [...] – this is very front and centre. And, similarly, we are also performing other positionalities: we are performing class, race, citizenship in some ways. These impact the kind of knowledge we can access. And you are right, we often cannot overcome these, especially as individuals. The task then is an honest reflection of what limits they impose on our research claims. In this way, my findings about rural activism in Pakistan, for instance, cannot overcome these gendered limitations, so I have to think about the ways in which this limits my analysis and claims. The fix isn't to meet a gender quota, or, as I said, even to enlist helpers. Some colleagues, who have done research with rural women, are going to have better answers about some of these questions that my research cannot unveil.

*ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: Moving towards the final part of our conversation, I think you have outlined through the course of this discussion a lot of do's and don'ts in research ethics with a decolonial, indigenous approach to knowledge production that should be taken into consideration by students and researchers alike. Moving now towards the final aspect that you wanted to highlight: reciprocity. This is also a very complex issue and challenge. What is your take on it?*

AHSAN KAMAL: In academia we follow the standard scholarly paradigm where the idea of purity of knowledge is tied to an idea of “generalised reciprocity”. By this I mean that academics go out to find knowledge and hope that the knowledge will help us move forward with our understanding of what we wish to investigate. We aspire to “make things better” through enhancing our general understanding of the problems that we study. In other words, social science and humanities academia takes the position that the facts and information we gather, once subjected to our analyses, concepts and interpretations, will contribute to the general body of knowledge about human societies. Let's say in the case of

conflicts involving nature – knowing how nature is transformed into a resource, who controls it, what are the contours of conflicts, and the perspective of communities in resistance – all this knowledge helps us learn something about the general cases of conflicts involving nature. While general reciprocity assumes and often results in action, it does not assume any responsibility on giving back to the communities that we research.

The other model is that of “immediate reciprocity”. When we do interviews, we demand people’s time, and often material and emotional energy. But while the interviewees don’t receive anything in return, academics do – through publications we build ourselves academic careers. We can often benefit directly by winning grants, awards, recognition and the formalised peer approval that is key to career advancement. These are things we receive in a more direct and immediate sense, notwithstanding any joy that [some] academics may derive from the pure pursuit of knowledge. Thinking about it within a [research] ethical realm, where it is not just about contributing to knowledge in general or responding to your academic peers, but where it is also about communities and activists, then what is it that you give back in an immediate sense? What can you give back?

There are a lot of different models available for those interested in answering these questions: some have talked about participatory and collaborative research, where you actually sit down with the researched groups and ask them what questions are relevant for them and whether you can conduct research collaboratively. That may not always be possible and I don’t think that it should be the ethical requirement for every research project. But at least there should be an effort to do so; this is where we must begin to decolonise research methods. We must give some time to that ethical enquiry at the outset. Another model of reciprocity, which I have hinted at previously, is to walk with activists and movements. Many academics have research and writing skills that are extremely useful for activists. If we have training in collecting data, we can include questions that are important for movement insiders. We can translate and amplify voices, as my collaborator Chris would say, and rather than speaking for them, serve as a conduit for them. A number of concrete actions can be taken.

No matter what the model, reciprocity demands the establishment of a relationship with the communities and activists that we study. Further, we can’t conceive of “our” contribution as an ego project, where we want to be the good action researcher or engaged scholar, make some contribution. Instead, we really, really need to have a conversation and a dialogue, and tune into whether what we produce is useful for the people. And in my experience, actually, this is tricky, it is difficult because sometimes what communities and activists need in the moment is beyond your skill or energy levels [...]. You can be resourceful, maybe activate wider networks of support, but it is often very difficult to immediately reciprocate.



One of the challenges, a central difficulty, is that academia perpetuates the myth of an individual researcher: we all have our own projects that can help build a resume with strong authorship claims, and even collaboration can be filtered through this lens. The myth is ritualised when students are trained, for instance in selecting dissertation projects. And so emerges the myth of an individual researcher who goes out in the world to investigate, to produce something they can put their names on. From an action research approach, this is not possible. Thought and action are not isolated but guided by some notion of group and collectivity. Individual contributions that are recognised by ownership may not be desirable, or even possible in collective struggles. When we wrestle with issues of how we can contribute to a larger group or community, as an insider or outsider but guided by the desires and demands of that group, we can go beyond notions of generalised reciprocity and the myth of individual scholars.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: *Thank you so much, Ahsan, for your insights and for your thoughts and reflections. I would also like to thank the birds singing for us throughout the recording, in the back of your office.*

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