Chapter 12
Open Inquiry: Fielding the Field

Zahra Hussain

Abstract This chapter explores what it means to work in the field. Its contours, textures, and often-unruly behaviour that holds the capacity to shape and mould the researchers' mode of engagement as well as affect the kinds of materials that can be produced whilst doing the fieldwork. It argues that within an open inquiry framework, the field cannot remain within spatial and temporal bounds but rather it slips away. The field also unsettles one's positionality as a mere researcher and demands and obligates certain modes of conduct which require the researcher to assume more than one position, stay with the mess and somehow never really be able to leave the field behind. This chapter begins with discussing how a field may be understood and what it means to conduct an open inquiry in the field. It goes on to mention three stories from fieldwork conducted in a post-disaster landscape in Northern Pakistan. These stories pronounce my attempt at fielding the field; assuming positions and adapting methods in response to the field in order to be able to produce more engaged accounts from the field.

Keywords Open inquiry · Temporality · Spatiality · The field · Positionalities

12.1   Introduction

Defining the boundaries of the field is not an easy task. No matter how much one tries, the field always seems to slip away, seep in, expand, and transgress the spatial and temporal bounds in which we attempt to contain it. A researcher too often encounters the same dilemma; one cannot just be a researcher in the field, being in the field requires establishing certain relations and these often do not fit neatly into the category of a researcher. I faced such a dilemma when carrying out fieldwork in a post-disaster landscape in order to understand how local actors and communities re-built their lives and landscapes in the aftermath. Conducting the fieldwork with multiple communities in different geographic locations in five affected villages and

Z. Hussain (✉)
Laajverd, Islamabad, Pakistan

two shelter sites became a journey in learning how to embrace the field and its complex temporality and spatialities, and come to terms with the messiness of my own presence and positionality in the field. In this chapter, I discuss my experience of conducting the fieldwork in Northern Pakistan where a landslide disaster that occurred in 2010 displaced 400 households and partially inundated three villages. In particular, I discuss modes of negotiations in the field as it never seemed to stay passive in the background. The field somehow managed to disrupt, unsettle and challenge my forms of engagement in the field as well as the methods I used for generating materials for my research.

12.2 The Field

It is important to understand what the field is and what it consists of; is it the physical location that we visit or also the spatial imaginary in which we place it? Can it really stay within the bounds of temporal frames, which could make our analysis somewhat easier and less complex? Massey (2003: 84) discusses these concerns and explains that establishing a relation to the field has consequences for how we frame the material generated from the field, what kind of power relations are involved or what position is taken by the researcher. She explains that often in the process of research, the field is thought to be a 'bounded space separated from the academy' (Ibid.: 84), on the other hand she quotes Katz (1994: 72) who writes about the difficulty of separating the field from the other ongoings of life, arguing that she 'is always, everywhere, in "the field"' (cited in Massey 2003: 84). Massey (2003) explains that imagination of the field is significant in articulation of the relationship between the anthropologist and the people being studied. We do not just encounter the field but we construct it imaginatively. The field is encountered and constructed 'open and porous, and connected by a chain of practices' (Ibid: 84). The imagination of field surpasses any temporal bounds; it does not begin or end with our physical being in the field. The field leaves impressions and triggers emotions, which come to bear upon how we negotiate our engagements in the field and how we reflect upon, remember and reconstruct the field in our research analysis and writing.

For the purpose of this research, the field must not only be understood as sites visited during the fieldwork or locations on the map, but also the overall experience of imagining, remembering, being in and reflecting upon the field. An important idea to stay with is using an open inquiry framework, which allows us to approach and understand the field as a dynamic entity rather than a static background for activities and encounters to take place. Hence, the field is not a passive entity that is waiting to be read and discerned by the researcher; rather, it has the power to affect what materials or data that we are able to generate from the field (Whatmore 2003). This dynamic aspect and the 'everywhere-ness' of the field can also be approached from Ingold's (2002: 229–230) concept of 'wayfaring' as knowledge production through movement along paths and trails, which he explains as a 'way of knowing ... a path of movement through the world'. The rest of this chapter discusses how the

field features in an open inquiry framework and how that shapes the researcher's encounters. It argues that the field plays a crucial role with reference to the kinds of materials that are possible to generate from the field elaborating the deeply entangled nature of research and engagement in the field.

12.3   An Open Inquiry and the Field

My fieldwork entailed engaging with communities affected by a landslide disaster in Northern Pakistan. One of the objectives of the research was exploring the reconstruction of a post-disaster landscape. This was a daunting task as post-disaster landscapes are imbued with ambiguity where I could not know for certain, at what levels, and which actors were involved in the re-organisations of the disaster-stricken landscape. This required deeper engagement to explore the 'situatedness' of the field; to take things as they are, not as they may seem to appear, but find links as to how they have come to be, and what they tend to become through the relations and processes that constitute them. The task was to try and capture the linkages between actors, things, realms and formations from as many angles as possible in order to create a some-what sense of the 'multiplicity' of the field (Simone and Pieterse 2018) to conceptualise how resilience, displacement and rehabilitation emerge and play out in the post-disaster landscape. To engage with how communities affected by a disaster continued to respond to the disaster event required loosening up the established norms around traditional ethnographic methods (such as surveys or interviews generally used with communities affected by disasters) and opening up to the field and local contextualities. It required an approach that could sense the different ways in which the disaster event was dealt with by the different actors and stakeholders in practice, policy and everyday life.

An open inquiry desires openness yet requires some fielding to achieve some sense of coherence. Whilst following calls for an open inquiry and engagement with the field, I also realised that it was practically impossible to take account of all actors' entities within the post-disaster landscape. An open inquiry demands a particular kind of openness, to allow the situation you confront to 'move' you and open you up to the possibilities that situation may present (Clark 2003). Openness means to be moved or affected by the field, and to open up to the possibilities of how things emerge, without aligning or reducing it to our framework of inquiry. An open inquiry calls for a practice of engagement that is susceptible to asking questions and embarking upon conversations that may not fall under its domain but seem relevant. Thus, an open inquiry is about opening up the territories of our research investigations, rather than closing them off through particular disciplinary frameworks and methodologies. This means, staying open to the idea that our methods and modes of engagement in the field may not always be welcomed or appropriate for the situations we confront. What helps proceed with such an approach is to delve deeper into how these situations come to be, who is involved, how are they linked, and so on. One way of doing this is by asking 'how' rather than 'why', which allowed

this research to explore ways in which engagement in the field could be re-arranged and retrofitted. Investigating the 'how' meant exploring processes of engagement, attachment, resentment, fragmentation and fragility that displaced communities encountered in the aftermath of the disaster. Here varying methods of research and engagement were required in different contexts and situations in order to be able to stay in the midst of things. Mitchell (2010: 51) eloquently describes the quality of openness as,

> not to be open at a point and closed off at another, it is to be open through and through, so much so that everything about oneself is destabilized, translated, emergent. […] Openness means existence in the midst of things.

Openness in research requires different modes of conduct. It means to remain open to the tools and practices of engagement with the entities and the field in order to begin recognisings entities, networks and processes. Alongside this, it requires attending to the environment, context and situation one confronts, which means the researcher might have to tread divergent paths on unknown terrain in search of the possible forms that things may assume. Here, the researcher must be reminded that the field is active and dynamic, and things must be seen in their entangled relations with surroundings as opposed to the controlled and bounded environment of the laboratory (Stengers 2011). Massey (2003: 75) echoes Stengers' approach that 'being there' in the field is about 'doing […] one's science in the field itself' in order to capture the continual movements of the world. She explains that this claim to knowledge production is radically different from the 'objectivity (supposedly) lent by distance' (Ibid.: 75). Stengers (2008: 44) suggests that upon entering the field, the researcher must question and deliberate on 'which kind of attention, concern and care are required'. The fieldwork is the researcher creating a particular understanding of the world, and it would rather be contextually situated and grounded — an engaged version of reality (Law 2004) that surfaces the relations that make up the worlds we are exploring.

For example, within the post-disaster landscape, issues of displacement were not only tied to physical displacement from one's home and land, but also to the different ways in which affected communities experienced displacement within everyday interactions, memories and relations with their landscape. This meant paying closer attention to the relational as well as temporal aspects of how contexts and situations were encountered and observed in the field. As I entered the field and began to engage with its contexts and dynamics in more depth, certain kinds of relations and negotiations were required as I proceeded to gather research materials. My presence and mode of engagement had to be negotiated as every encounter produced a particular set of materials and eventually became a lens through which a narrative could be constructed. For the purpose of this chapter, the field must not only be understood as these locations on the map but the overall experience of being in a place and conducting research. Various research methods such as participatory mapping, drawings and semi-structured focus groups were employed, adapted, and discarded during the period of the field research to create a condition of engagement that was favourable for conducting an open inquiry, subsequently allowing research

participants to lead the process of sharing their accounts of the disaster event. Whilst conducting the fieldwork, moments of hesitation, estrangement, confusion or realisation led to a continuous process of method adaption in response to what the field/context/situation required. These were also valuable for engaging with questions that were aimed at understanding how disaster event became present and lived on in the everyday lives of affected communities. Critical questions were explored. For example, how does a person want to, or not want to talk about, describe or demonstrate, attach importance to the event? In order to address these questions, research methods were adopted, transformed, adapted and fused in response to the field dynamics and context. This process mimicked what Law (2004: 143) calls the 'method assemblage', 'a continuous process of crafting and enacting necessary boundaries between presence, manifest absence and Otherness'. Law (2004) does not support the idea that methods are a set of procedures that report or represent a given reality, but that they are performative and help to produce realities.

Hence, an open inquiry is performed through two commitments, first, that the field is open and porous and not a passive and bounded entity that exists, rather it occurs (Ingold 2008) through relations (Massey 2005) and practices (Cresswell 2004). Second, that the field does not stay within the confines of space or time, rather it stays with the researcher allowing her to re-configure and re-write the field in different ways. The following section discusses how the dynamics in the field shaped my engagement with the research materials, and my persistent attempts at fielding the field to get some semblance of a coherent fieldwork plan. Fielding the field means curating our response in relation to what the field demands in order to be able to produce more engaged accounts of reality.

12.4   The Field, Sites and Stories

One aspect of my research with disaster-affected communities was to understand their imagination and understanding of home, displacement and rehabilitation, as experienced, negotiated and narrated by locals themselves in response to the disaster event. I employed community mapping (Kitchin 1994; Grasseni 2012) to investigate local inhabitants' (displaced or affected by the disaster event) ideas, 'sense of place' and notions of dwelling, interpretation and moving about in a landscape, which they have acquired through their association with their landscapes.

I began engaging with communities through collective spatial mapping exercises (a daily circuit), and to capture the relations between communities and their landscapes, performed through practices of everyday life, expressed in the spatial arrangements of houses and objects of belonging and association in a shelter site. For example, in the daily and weekly circuits of some displaced communities living in shelters showed that they divided their time between the shelter and lands in ways that might not always fit the harvest calendar (growing and harvest times spent at land and winters in shelters). So, what else was happening (migrations for jobs/study/exploring other livelihood options) and how might that relate to processes of

rehabilitation and resettlement? The task was to surface these practices and processes that were made present and absent (Law 2004), as each method brought a certain reality to the fore. But more than the method, it was my position in each situation that enabled the production of research materials. On several occasions, open inquiry challenged my position as a researcher and I had to negotiate between different positions to generate relevant materials.

When I arrived at the disaster-stricken landscape close to Hunza Valley in Northern Pakistan, it was just after the tourist season (summer months when people from the south visit northern areas in Pakistan). The local people were busy in preparation for the winter season; collecting grass and wood, and digging pits to store vegetables. In terms of the mapping exercise, I actively resisted the idea of having pre-planned conversations or focus group sessions. This meant that I wasn't going to set any time or place for the mapping exercise; instead, I would capture their narratives by entering their environments; homes and the fields, walking by the lake, or encountering local people at the market or van station. In the spirit of ethnographic practice, and staying committed to the idea that nothing comes without its world (Bellacasa 2012), I tried to avoid any extractive behaviour and let the field guide me through the process in order to create an engaged version of the reality of the post-disaster landscape. I conducted mapping exercises with the communities and most of them were pretty straightforward, lending breadth and depth to the issues I wished to explore. However, there were certain instances where the field and the relations with it seemed to disrupt and challenge my mode of engagement as a researcher. I discuss three instances below to give an insight to how an open inquiry was deployed in the field, the methods used, and the kind of challenges encountered.

1. In the village of Shishket, closer to the Attabad Lake, I started the mapping exercise with a group of eight middle-aged women. As we gathered around the blank A0 paper, one of them commented, "we own a lot of land, it won't fit this paper'. I had not expected this response and felt that the exercise was challenged. She continued, 'we need four times more paper than this even if we make a tiny house'. My immediate response was to save the method and add more sheets. With four sheets neatly pasted together, I invited them to draw their houses and mark their daily circuits. They made a few circuits and proposed to have tea instead. There was more to be done on the map — I would rather have had tea later. But I took a moment to remind myself about the control over the research process and of staying open, hence accepted their proposition. The tea session became a very interesting mode of engagement to explore how territories were produced and negotiated in the field. During the tea session, I became a guest in their territory and they set out the conversation for me to feel welcomed; however, on the map sheet, I was the host inviting them to tread in an unknown territory.

2. It is a long walk uphill to reach Attabad Bala, if you're from down areas, it can take you 4 h they say. Luckily a jeep gave us a ride mid-way. Upon reaching the village, I was reluctantly invited to sit in a house. I seated myself by the only window in the dark room and looked out to see a panorama of the valley. A few women came in and sat around me. After introducing my research, I asked about the disaster incident and there was no response; I assumed there was a language

barrier until a woman told me to drink tea. So, I asked them again, to tell me the story, they murmured something and told me to drink tea. It was absolutely quiet; there was a strange silence in the air, perhaps due to the height of this village. In my head, I was telling myself to be patient, and slow down and try to match my temporal rhythm to theirs; perhaps people who lived on top of mountains were very patient, and I abandoned the thought — telling myself I shouldn't be presuming. So, I sipped more tea, looked around the relatively dark room, saw the women looking at me... and then giving them a smile, I asked again, 'so what happened that day'. Pause. While no one was rude, there was just no way were they ready to say anything. After about 45 min of awkward silence, three cups of tea and my occasional insistence, an older man began to narrate the event. There was silence again. The silence was filled with an undertone of displeasure or even resentment. I could strongly sense it was time for me to leave, and the departure wasn't so easy — although I wanted to disappear immediately, it took some time to get up, gather my stuff, say goodbye to each woman and make my way to the door where I had to put my shoes on. I picked up my shoes and went outside and found a spot to wear them. I felt relieved to be out of there, but at the same time I was confused because either my presence made them uncomfortable or their obvious silence made me uncomfortable. I couldn't exactly guess what had gone wrong and how a tea session, which was meant to be warm and welcoming, could become so awkward and hostile.

3. I walked down the main road from Attabad Bala and reached a pathway going towards Attabad Payeen. After taking a quick rest at the crossroads, I cross roads, I walked down the path and saw two women at the end of the road who enquired about our presence. I briefly introduced my research about the landslide disaster and tried to establish a comfort zone — 'we can sit and talk about this over tea if you like', I offered. But there was no mention of tea, they started talking to each other in *Burushiski* language and I could sense some urgency, and we started walking towards the village where we met more women who were asked to join us. By now, I was expecting to sit down and rest a while after the 2-h long hike; I was looking forward to a tea session. But as I followed them, crossing a stream, entering a vicinity of houses and moving beyond that, my thoughts of a tea session diminished as we passed the houses and entered the fields, and walked for a good 7 min until we approached a barren area, 'this is it', the woman said pointing to the ground beneath us. A man who accompanied us, started narrating the event. I was looking at the landslide debris, which was visible due to the land formation, silt and clay hues and the absence of any cultivation or trees. I was overwhelmed, being present and standing on the site of the landslide. With the increasing sound of the river flowing beneath, it was hard to focus on what the man was saying. Fuzz. His wife added on to this, 'there was dust and a very bad smell… smell of gas… I was thrown to another side of the village, but I am alive… it became dark, we were all covered with dust'. I struggled to listen to these stories; there was this man telling his story and there were my thoughts about the debris, the location where the wrath unfolded and blocked an entire river. I was immersed in the sheer presence of the debris and its surrounds.

12.5   The Full Field: Negotiating Modes of Engagement

Each story is embedded in its field with a set of relations that could not be untangled, or extracted, and they demanded a particular obligation that I was to follow. The field required me to take up multiple identities whilst conducting research especially with reference to guest-host relations (discussed in the next section). An open inquiry not only enabled an engagement in the field, but also allowed the non-human and material entities to partake in the research. These entities emerged through observations, conversations and drawings. While walking in the barren silt scape and listening to the creaking dead trees, and when the landslide debris would not let me listen to the old man's story, or when tea would stage conversations around it. Research was carried out by following these actors; the shelters, abandoned boats, submerged houses, dead trees, silt, rocks, debris experienced through observing, listening, smelling and feeling, by being present in the field.

In-depth engagement with communities required embracing their environment: not pinning them down in a frame or context, but to get to know them through their practices, stories and aspirations. This entailed observation of how practices of everyday life were adapted to make do and live in constrained environments (such as shelters). Such an engagement required considerable delays to the daily research schedule and detours from the planned research enquiry. Producing circuit and season maps gave an insight to their sense of place, identity and belonging and enabled me to follow actors through their daily and seasonal routines. In certain instances, listening became a form of following actors through tone, pitch and plot of their stories and conversations. Other times, the voice in my head deafened me to their stories (recall the old man at the landslide debris site). However, an open inquiry is not an absolute openness; it operates within conditions of power relations (how it is distributed within research engagements), silences and lapses (of not getting access). Whilst mapping allowed more freedom to respondents in identifying their practices, routines and sense of place, I had not realised that the methods I used could be adapted and transformed in such different ways, to the point of getting discarded. Points of transition in the method were exciting and I felt as if I was treading on the peripheries of my method and staying open, but when the mapping exercise was discarded, I felt I had lost an important ground since mapping was anchoring the research in different sites. This sense of anxiety, loss and uncertainty accompanied me while I adapted the method, until I began to get comfortable with the idea that 'tea sessions' worked and they usually came to the rescue during engagements in the field. Yet again, I was taken out of my comfort zone when a tea session couldn't have been more awkward (recall the Attabad Bala story). As a researcher, I would crave a certain amount of semblance and certainty; but to conduct an open inquiry, constant negotiation is required to genuinely attend to the situations we confront.

12.5.1 Taking More Than One Position; The Fielding the Field

Host-guest relations played an important role in my research. This hospitality allowed me to go into houses and communicate with the local people. However, a deeper insight elaborates how these engagements were laden with emotions, power and cultural and social norms that subtly dictated the methods. This is evident in my encounter in Shishket when I was burdened with the hosting women's hospitality and had to discard my mapping exercise to embrace a tea session. I was treated with great respect in terms of my identity as a 'guest' in their house; however, my identity as a 'researcher' was completely undermined as the locals silently refused to engage in any conversation related to my research enquiry. This entailed a difficult negotiation; being a guest and a researcher, between the three cups of tea and failed conversations. In Attabad Bala, for example, I recognised my responsibility as a guest; it was not the 45 odd minutes of silence, but rather the three cups of tea burdened with their hospitality, which signaled me to disengage and move on to the next site without having gathered any material for my research enquiry. Moreover, I could also relate to my position as a 'host' whilst conducting the mapping exercise by inviting local women and children to take part and share their stories. I became a listener too, as I listened to many stories that did not have much to do with my research, but ethical conduct required that no conversation was cut-short. In this sense, an open inquiry in a host-guest context offers unique challenges; ethics of hospitality in Northern Pakistan allowed me to go into houses and communicate with the local people but the open inquiry depended on following cues of the hosts. So, while the researcher may get access, there is no guarantee you will acquire the material from the field site. An open inquiry requires the researcher to assume different positions that can be multiple, even conflicting, therefore careful negotiation is required in keeping in view the demands of the situation we confront.

My field engagements show that uncertainty is not only tied to our research questions but also to the ethics of encounter. The ethical relation was activated when one chose to welcome or not and to what degree into one's home (Diken et al. 2005). Encounters moderated by hospitality can be uncertain as they operate within certain constraints and 'remains forever torn between complete openness and degree of closure' (Ibid.: 188–189) for the host as well as the guest. Within a research environment, the notion of hospitality lends power to both parties in a particular way and a constant negotiation occurs between being a guest/researcher and the host; to deal with what is sought, offered, accepted and followed. Therefore, an open inquiry operates within certain constraints where we embrace strangers in our encounters through particular methods, and there is no guarantee that they will bring what we seek (Bulley 2015). Within this context, the researcher must look for which methods of engagement are on offer by the host, and adopt these rather than forcing their own methods. As such, the researcher's identity and modes of engagement are malleable entities in an open inquiry and must assume a form in response to the contextual conditions of the field.

12.6 Conclusion

When I reflect upon my fieldwork, I would describe it as a series of pinhole cameras installed in different situations to slowly capture and expose scenes from the post-disaster landscape, illuminating the obvious and evident as well as the subtle and discreet. Slow exposure enabled capturing movement, dislocation and disturbance (however blurred) in a scene lending 'depth of the field' to the image (or narrative) produced. In this, a camera's lens focuses on a single point, there are areas that stretch in front and behind it — this zone is the depth of the field. An open inquiry too, may focus on specific points but it ventures forth to capture the depth of the field in order to understand the relations that constitute a particular condition. One cannot be entirely open to the situations they confront; there are always certain positions one has to assume. Alongside this, an open inquiry also depends on the openness of the actors and entities being researched with, as they might not want to talk, share or have anything to say to the research. The difficulty of 'letting go' always accompanies one in the field; hence, the encounters in an open inquiry are defined by these negotiations. In this sense, I was neither able to fully capture the field nor dis-associate from it completely. Through reflections upon my own positionality and re-working the research materials, the field remained with me, although I had supposedly left it to write up my PhD. I realised that even before entering the field physically, it was there in my head, I had imagined it, and whilst I was physically in the field, I wasn't entirely there, and when I left the field, I couldn't really leave the field behind. The field stayed with me in different ways; through the people I engaged with daily and who continued to stay in touch with me. More than anything, the field with all its nuances stayed with me and troubles me from time to time especially with reference to power relations and guest-host relations within fieldwork. What the field continues to remind me is that no field, no context and no relations can be assumed, taken-for-granted or remain stable. The field produced through our relations is unstable and continues to assemble certain kinds of power relations that a researcher needs to be vigilant and careful about. Every field requires a vigorous response and an open inquiry is one way of achieving that.

References

Bellacasa MP (2012) 'Nothing comes without its world': thinking with care. Sociol Rev 60(2):197–216

Bulley D (2015) Ethics, power and space: international hospitality beyond Derrida. Hospitality Society 5:185–201

Clark N (2003) The play of the world. In: Using social theory: thinking through research. SAGE, London, pp 28–46

Cresswell T (2004) Place: a short introduction. Blackwell, Malden, MA

Diken B, Laustsen CB, Laustsen CB (2005) The culture of exception: sociology facing the camp. Routledge, London

Grasseni C (2012) Community mapping as auto-ethno-cartography. In: Advances in visual methodology. SAGE, London, pp 97–112

Ingold T (2002) The perception of the environment: essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill. Routledge, London

Ingold T (2008) Bindings against boundaries: entanglements of life in an open world. Environ Plann A 40(8):1796–1810. https://doi.org/10.1068/a40156

Katz C (1994) Playing the field: questions of fieldwork in geography. The Prof Geogr 46:67–72. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0033-0124.1994.00067.x

Kitchin RM (1994) Cognitive maps: what are they and why study them? J Environ Psychol 14:1–19

Law J (2004) After method: mess in social science research. Routledge, London

Massey D (2003) Imagining the field. In: Using social theory. SAGE, London, pp 72–88

Massey DB (2005) For space. SAGE, London; Thousand Oaks, CA

Mitchell A (2010) Heidegger among the sculptors: body, space, and the art of dwelling. Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA

Simone A, Pieterse E (2018) New urban worlds: inhabiting dissonant times. Wiley, Hoboken, NJ

Stengers I (2008) Experimenting with refrains: subjectivity and the challenge of escaping modern dualism. Subjectivity 22:38–59

Stengers I (2011) Cosmopolitics II. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN

Whatmore S (2003) Generating materials. In: Using social theory: thinking through research. SAGE, London, pp 89–104