NOTES FROM THE FIELD

The Measure of Our Success

By Kami M. Patrizio, Towson University

Being in Barbara's[1] office reminded me of being in my Grandmother's kitchen. It was pleasant, small and warm. There was enough room for three people to sit comfortably, four if someone squeezed into the seat at the computer behind Barbara's desk. Every surface had files, pictures, or office equipment on it. For some reason, which I ascribed to Barbara's general ethos of clear-headed calm, it never felt crowded.

"The delivery man wanted to leave the new stove outside. OUTSIDE. In this neighborhood? I told him, 'I don't think so...'"

My stomach hurt from laughing so hard. Her incredulity and voice were both sincere and hilarious.

"Can't you just see what would happen?" Barbara continued. "There it would be, 10 o'clock tonight, two junkies with a cart, rolling the new church stove down the street after-hours. Puh-lease. So I told him to come back when he had someone to help him move the stove into the building."

I wiped tears from my cheeks and gasped for breath.

"So then, I..."

Here, the desk phone rang. While Barbara was talking, her wireless phone buzzed and she began to respond to a text, pausing only to pull a folder from her desk labeled, "Phone bill assistance".

"We can only help with the last $50 of the bill. How much do you owe?" She finished texting as she listened, eyebrows furrowed. The tone of her voice was rich, assured, and direct. I settled into my chair and gestured, as if to say, "Do you want me to leave?" She waved me to stay seated.

"Oh." Her eyebrows lifted, then furrowed, "I'm sorry. We can't help. Try contacting..."

The intercom that connected to the main door of the rectory buzzed and I took the liberty of opening it. Barbara finished her sentence and hung up the phone.

"We have a bill assistance program," she explained to me," But we can only help with the last $50 of the bill. People call us with $700 balances. We just can't do all of that."

A man walked up to the office door. He was young, maybe in his early twenties, and tall. His khaki pants were streaked with dirt, his braids frayed. The line of his jaw was chiseled and shadowed with stubble. He looked hollow.
"Is Father here?"

The young man's voice was quiet and steady, but teetering on the cusp of desperate. Barbara looked at him.

"I'm sorry; he's not here today. Can I help you?"

"I need him to pray with me. Is there someone that can pray with me?" He slumped his shoulders slightly. "I just need someone to pray with me right now."
His use of the words "right now" held no imperative demand, but rather intoned a need, an immediate need, for comfort. Barbara directed him to another local church. He turned and we heard the door click locked behind him.

"He came in here once before, asked for a sandwich. So, I made him a sandwich and he sat and ate it." Barbara looked at the empty space in her doorway where he had been a few moments before. She didn't say anything else about him. I didn't ask any questions. We were both able to infer that he was troubled and in some sort of dire need. He had required help and she had done the best she could to provide it. It felt like vestiges of his despair lingered where he had been standing. We were quiet for a moment, until the phone rang again. She answered it.

"You need the check?" Barbara shuffled through a pile of manila folders on her desk. "I've got it right here. Come on over when you're ready to pick it up." (Researcher journal, April 2008)[2]

SUPPOSITONS, SUSPICIONS, AND SUSTENANCE

Narratives are more than a sequence of happenings; they illustrate a point, usually one that revolves around some type of dissonance (Ryfe, 2006). There are many "points" one might discern from this snapshot of Barbara's office. As an observer, I am unsure of Barbara's place in this setting. Barbara is always busy, dealing constantly with many demands. She is a resource. People seek her out to provide answers, solace and support. Barbara facilitates the practical and the spiritual for others, with varying degrees of success.

The narrative alludes, too, to the myriad of dilemmas that present themselves in the daily series of events that define Barbara's life as a community leader. Humor, pain, poverty, and resilience wend through the experiential parameters that render her a reliable, grounded constant for mem-

bers of the Prima Valley Community (PVC). It can be inferred, and rightfully so, that Barbara's office was a place where hope grew in the midst of the dire needs of the community.

It became apparent to me early on in my experiences with the PVC that any space Barbara occupied, literally or metaphorically, was infused with the lived realities of PVC residents. She represented these neighborhood voices at each meeting that she attended. When she was not in attendance at a meeting, her name and activities were referenced as almost the default proxy voice for the needs and desires of community members. Indeed, her experiences justified her role: she had grown up in Prima Valley, had given up a lucrative career to combat the crime that had sprung up amidst it during her adulthood. She was active in many community boards and organizations. Her work with one of the neighborhood churches connected her with the spiritual lives of PV's residents, her activism in community trusts, boards and organizations put her in touch with the activities, schools, and politics of the community, city and state.

Barbara was a leader, and a passionate advocate for PVC in the context of the formal community-school-university partnership through which I came to know her. I was conducting research on leadership development in school-community partnerships, and realized that my research methods required sustained contact with the community in a more intimate way that my interviews and surveys did not allow. I instantly felt comfortable around Barbara, and our interactions evolved over time. What began as a collaboration to develop an afterschool program became an intimate dialogue about the history, happenings, dreams, and vision for PV and for us. Our dyad became a safe research space, of the type that has been described as growing:

> from the passions and concerns of community members; they are rarely structured from "above"...They can be designed to restore identities devastated by the larger culture or they may be opportunities to try on identities and community rejected by both mainstream culture and

local ethnic groups. These spaces hold rich and revealing data about the resilience of young adults, without denying the oppression which threatens the borders and interiors of community life amidst urban poverty. (Weis & Fine, 2000, p. 58)

We identified the influences that fueled, challenged and influenced our work in the community through our conversations over time. It was from this dialogical space that I was able to dialectically question my "participatory responsibility to research with and for a more progressive community life" (Weis & Fine, 2000, p. 59). This safe space became one of the key frames through which I began to address many of my own questions about conducting research in the context of community partnerships. What are the dimensions of ethical research design and implementation in community-school-university research? What are the phenomenological dimensions of attending to agency in this context?

This paper addresses these questions by exploring the process of problem framing (Nespor & Groenke, 2009) in research, and considering the ethics of the framing in the context of my dual role as a researcher and educator seeking to engender learning amongst partnership stakeholders. In doing so, I attend to issues of agency in partnership research by providing the situational context of my research and work in the community. I also include excerpts from my research journal. These excerpts describe incidents that raised questions for me about the subtle nuances of research, agency, and common understanding in a community-university partnership.

AGENCY, ETHICS, AND PROBLEM FRAMING

Nespor & Groenke (2009) describe agency as "a product of the way people define or appropriate identities, craft associations and networks, and mobilize other people and resources to participate in and influence processes that begin and end outside their immediate settings" (p. 998). Agency is the result of many facets of community life. All

of these facets, including identity, networks, processes and resources must be taken into consideration throughout the course of research. Attending to these facets requires ethical consideration of participants, as those directly involved in the research and as those connected to the networks that defined the parameters of the research and distribution networks (Nespor & Groenke, 2009). Hence, ethically conducting research with an eye towards agency was inextricably linked to my use, as a researcher, of "cultural tools, artifacts, organizations, and communication systems" (Nespor & Groenke, 2009, p. 998) in community, school and university contexts. The notion of agency-as-product resonated as appropriate for my research, particularly, given my focus on the research process and its relationship to learning in partnership networks.

I attempted to address these questions by consistently revisiting my research problem, and by holding myself to "ethical stances in as much as they shape the implications of the research for the agency of its participants" (Nespor & Groenke, p. 997). The above led to another stream of questions. How did I decide what to study about leadership development? How was I asking my research questions? What were the geographic and temporal parameters of my considerations? Where was I allocating the locus of agency in the research process: with community, school, or university participants?

Conceptualizing the link between research and agency through this heuristic of problem framing made me sensitive to the idea of maintaining "responsibility at a distance" (Nespor & Groenke, 2009, p. 998), which surfaced a number of additional questions throughout the research process. Elements of these considerations, as the following journal excerpts demonstrate, were centered in the safe space that I had created with Barbara. Did my research methods adequately attend to the manner in which the experiences of the people in Prima Valley were "constitutive of lives and events elsewhere" (Nespor & Groenke, 2009, p.998)? Would my research help those in Prima Valley and beyond to criti-

cally consider and reform the learning processes in their community? Was I incorporating enough participants into my considerations to allow for agency by demystifying the power dynamics inherent in collaborative partnerships? Was I, "dishonest or disruptive", favoring "some participants over others" or infringing on "the privacy of the people depicted?" (Nespor & Groenke, 2009, p. 999)   All of these questions helped to improve my understanding of the relationship between research and agency in community partnerships. In the next section of the paper, I describe the manner in which the history, demographics and participants of PVC informed my investigation.

THE PRIMA VALLEY INITIATIVE: PARTNERSHIP AND SELF CONTEXT

Prima Valley is adjacent to a large city on east coast. The community sat on the southern edge of the city limits and was bordered by green spaces and waterfront. Major companies and a well known, international real estate developer had expressed interest in developing Prima Valley. Barbara advocated for the rights of community members in her role as the Executive Director of the Prima Valley Trust. Her efforts resulted in some financial resources being brought back to the neighborhood in the form of community programs.

The Prima Valley Partnership

As the introductory narrative suggests, Prima Valley was in need of resources. Almost 70% of the households in the community were families and the median household income for the community was about $18,000 (Prima Valley Master Plan, 2007). Prima Valley was a small community of approximately 7,500 residents, approximately 96% of whom were Black. Four of the five K-8 schools in the neighborhood were in corrective action for failing test scores just around the time the Prima Valley partnership began to take root in 2005. High turnover among teachers and administrative personnel plagued the schools, as did the effects of poverty, violence and drug use that pervaded the community.

Prima Valley had been taken advantage of by previous partnerships, and as a result, community members were now leery of such relationships. Many community residents were afraid that the university was only interested in working in Prima Valley because big name developers wanted to gentrify the community and change its racial and socio-economic profile. The Prima Valley community members inferred that the university only cared about their schools because "rich" children, potentially, would soon be attending them. It was for these reasons that it took two years of relational work to gain community support for the partnership.

The purpose for the Prima Valley Initiative (PVI), according to its website, is "to build upon the strengths of Prima Valley to meet its needs and nurture its potential in areas related to economic, community and educational development." (PVI website, retrieved February 12, 2010[3]). The manner of this development remains unarticulated in PVI. Over the course of the initiative, "development" has happened in the form of grant acquisition, professional development for schools and community organizations, the formation of advisory boards, and the delivery of programs for children and residents.

Multiple Roles, Intersecting Identities

I have had many roles in the PVI since I was first introduced to the community more than two years ago. My work began as a university faculty consultant for a middle school renewal initiative. As part of this project, I became a member of the PVI Principal's group, acted as a professional developer for school parent groups, and became a member of the PVI decision-making body, the Community Advisory Board. Working with teachers, parents and principals from each of the PVI schools helped me to understand the rich and complex history, relationships, challenges, and political issues that impacted the PVC. I came to know people during meetings, classrooms, after-school football games, community celebrations and their homes. My participation in each of these groups has continued to this day.

During the second year of my work, I began to connect with other faculty from the university who were interested in providing programs and services through the PVI. This presented me with occasion to consider the manner in which my university colleagues approached collaborative work with urban communities, reinforcing my beliefs in the value and potential of university-community partnerships. I began to work on two research projects in the PVC during this second year. The first was a participatory community health initiative that sought to address issues of adolescent pregnancy in the community. The second project investigated the development of leadership in community-university partnerships.

My understanding changed over time, and much of this was influenced by my involvement in community-based health and economic development activities in PVI. It became apparent that developing agency through research meant considering agency through the lens of all community residents, and not just residents involved in PVI's schools. It also meant considering how university faculty and administrators approached partnership learning through programs and research processes. I had to reframe my problems once again to include an extended network of participants as I considered leadership development through the lens of interdisciplinary partnership networks. Engaging in two research projects, one focused on leadership development and one focused on community health issues, ultimately enriched my understanding of framing research problems and nurturing learning in partnerships.

RESEARCH PROCESS

The following three journal excerpts illustrate the manner in which my experiences with PVI participants influenced my attempts to engage in agency oriented research. The entries are taken from the journal that I have maintained since becoming involved with PVI more than two years ago. The selected entries focus primarily on university and community relations, one interaction occurring in the context

of a PVI school, and highlight issues related to understanding communities that were germane to my evolving understanding of ethical community research and the complex nuances of partnerships that are grounded in school and community development. These reflections connect my experiences to theoretical and practical understandings that I have come to consider in the course of my work in PVI, and raise important questions about the nature of research and partnerships.

Research Journal Excerpt One: Who Said Anything About Research?

I was in a meeting of the Community Health Advisory Board today in Prima Valley. These meetings feel different to me than the first middle school meetings that I attended; there are more members of the university present now than two years ago. I have mixed feelings about this. University faculty members bring so much needed expertise to the table, but they don't know the people in this community. My experience has been that my colleagues at the university differ substantially from the people that I have met in here in Prima Valley. Race, social class, and even gender aside (as if you can ever put those things aside), the culture of this specific area has a rich history that is unique. I worry about how faculty members' personal assumptions and prior experiences with urban research will impact their words and actions in these meetings, and find myself hoping that they will focus on the things that connect all of us. I'm unsure about what these 'things' may be.

Near the end of the meeting, one of my senior colleagues mentioned that faculty would be using their work on this community health project for research. I felt myself blanch. No one has ever mentioned the word "research" in this setting, or any other setting in the context of PVI community meetings, so far as I knew...and I had been involved in many, if not most of the PVI meetings since the early days

of partnership activities. I watched the eyebrows of one of the community members raise slightly. No one else really said anything. I responded, suggesting that research was an important thing for us to consider, but that we as a partnership had yet to engage in any dialogue with community members about the processes of research in PVI. This dialogue, I suggested, needed to happen before we could talk about conducting any research.

The university faculty members that were present stayed after the meeting to discuss this interchange. Three of us were pre-tenure and one was tenured. The senior faculty member was, no doubt, advocating for our best interests as junior faculty members...after all, publication is an important part of being a faculty member. As such, research is a need of the university as an organizational partner. I am working towards tenure and I understand all of this pointedly. What I am wrestling with is the assumption that research should be put on the table so blithely, as a foregone conclusion, in the context of a partnership that required two years of relational work and negotiations to establish. Ideally, a process for research would have been outlined at the outset of the partnership. Let's be honest, though: partnerships are often not so clean cut. In many ways they involve "building the airplane as it flies." This is not ideal. But it is real. (Research journal excerpt, April, 2009).

The False Dichotomy of Sovereign Research Traditions

This experience raised a number of questions for me about research in partnerships. How should university faculty introduce the idea of research to community members? What about the community's needs and rights? Is it ethical for faculty to assume that research is a foregone conclusion in community partnerships? The manner in which my colleague introduced research into the dialogue reified the academic tradi-

tion of sovereign research, wherein researchers autonomously control the research process in its entirety (Nespor & Groenke, 2009). I found this tradition problematic in our context because it established a false dichotomy in the locus of agency in research, simply by virtue of the collaborative essence of the partnership. University faculty and community members had consistently worked together to identify, explore, and determine PVI activities. Why should research have been approached any differently? The raised eyebrows and silence that followed my colleague's statement were troublesome. We had sought to engage and empower community voices over the past three years of the partnership. Introducing research as a "given" instead of a topic for discussion silenced those voices and simultaneously glanced over an opportunity to explore the respective mores, cultural values, politics and knowledge that are so crucial to framing and conducting research. We had had acted as if research was something to be done "on" instead of "with" the community.

Research Journal Excerpt Two: Who Has the Rights to our Research Design?

We've completed the IRB for the focus group research. I feel good about the design of the study; we worked with the Community Health Advisory Group to establish the questions and the language for our consent forms...it feels good to know that in spite of the somewhat shocking way that research was introduced into the partnership dialogue at that Community Health Advisory Group months ago, we've learned and are involving community voice in our research process. I sent one of the key community leaders a draft of the IRB in the spirit of collaboration, along with a request that the draft be kept within the group. A couple of days ago I was cc'd in an email from another agency that is doing similar research to ours in another part of the state. The email thanked the PVC leader for passing along our IRB materials. After a brief moment of panic, I thought to myself, "Is this what it

means to do research with the community?" Do community members now have the rights to share our study design and research instruments with other researchers? I've not done enough collaborative research to know if this is a common practice prior to IRB approval. I feel uncomfortable, regardless. I do not know this organization. I do not know their researchers' level of training. I do not know the purpose of their organization's research or any agendas that may sit behind it. And ultimately, there's nothing that I can do about it now (Research journal excerpt, June, 2009).

Agency, Expertise, and Action

In this entry, I reflect on one community member's decision to send a draft IRB proposal to another agency that has not been involved with our collaborative research project. The community member, part of this research development team and a research participant, acts independently and consults no one about his decision in spite of the collaborative and participatory nature of the research. Sharing the IRB without consulting the team repositions the locus of agency in the research to the community, but the locus is still individual in its orientation. The action speaks to the need to create safe spaces for talking about research as an ethical process; while the community had been involved in the research design, there had been no dialogue about the ethics of research or the research process as a whole.

It is possible that this participant's actions were fueled by political or financial motives. Indeed, this event hearkened to mind the flip side of involving community in agency-oriented research. Weis and Fine (2000) describe these phenomena, speaking of how participants in their ethnographic research have "welcomed us into their spaces to exploit our capacity – our class and professional positions and networks" (p. 59). Had this community participant done exactly that? I was aware that those who received the IRB were associated with a funding opportunity for PVI. In spite of PVI's

dire economic needs, the act of sharing the IRB co-opted the agency of the community members who had participated in the research design process, as well as our agency as faculty members. One community member had made this decision and the locus of agency was once again framed by a positional bound conceptualization of leadership. This action did not infringe on our privacy as partnership participants; however, it tested the boundaries of our rights to intellectual property.

The ethics of this community member's action are complicated. Does the right to act in community research belong to individuals, or collaborative groups? Who, if anyone, should have the final word? Should it be community members or those trained in research? Do the community's needs for money and political support outweigh university research parameters? Murell (2001) addresses these questions in the context of teacher education, calling for discursive practices that allow for "the deliberate and systematic articulation of foundational difference among participants contemplating a research project" (p. 155). Opting to engage in research processes with an individual orientation encourages false dichotomies that overlook the importance of and the need for collaborative spaces where multiple narratives are taken into account during the research process.

Research Journal Excerpt Three: Best Intentions and Faculty Engagement

I was privy to a flurry of disturbing emails today. The correspondence began with a letter from a university faculty member to his Dean. The Dean had forwarded the letter to PVI leadership. The faculty member had been delivering a classroom program in of one of the Prima Valley Schools as part of the PVI. The faculty member expressed extraordinary frustration with students, the classroom Teacher, and the Principal of the school. The letter was then forwarded to the Principal and, subsequently, the Teacher. The Principal and the teacher were incensed; the faculty member had never spoken to either of them about the con-

cerns that had been expressed in the letter. Moreover, the Principal and teacher felt that the language of the letter revealed the faculty member's lack of understanding about what it means to work with children in an urban setting, like the PVC.

I was heartbroken: for the students, who had been unjustly characterized; for the teacher, who I knew well to be an outstanding educator; for the Principal, who had made great academic strides with his school and was deeply committed to PVI; and for the faculty member, who had not been adequately prepared or supported at the university end to work in the Prima Valley community (Research journal excerpt, May, 2009).

Learning from our experiences

Journal Entry 3 also addresses learning and the creation of safe spaces in partnership networks, but in the context of program delivery. The incident described in Journal Entry 3 speaks to the importance of deliberately creating safe spaces for learning that span the organizational, temporal and geographic boundaries of participants. The manner in which the faculty member confronted his problem suggested that he did not feel like he was a member of the network. He did not approach the teacher or school principal as colleagues who might help him to solve this problem. He did not consult fellow researchers who were involved in the partnership. Instead, he went directly to his Dean, who was only tangentially involved in the problem, and resorted to blaming the very people who could have helped him to be successful with his work in the middle school. As I read the email correspondence, I wondered: "What could we have done to draw on the significant knowledge of those in PVI schools to orient him appropriately to their culture? How could we have made this into a learning experience?" Here again, the incident depicts someone acting as an individual agent on behalf of the university, not as a member of a multiple stakeholder partnership. This Journal Entry also speaks to the connection between agency-

oriented research and agency-oriented program delivery. As agency-oriented researchers, we must question, "Does our presence affect or interrupt the music of life within free spaces? Does our social scientific voyeurism shatter the sanctity of that which is presumably (although recognizably not) free" (Weiss & Fine, 2000, p. 58). So too must partnership participants critically examine their own identity, assumptions, and communication patterns within partnership networks in the course of program delivery.

Additionally, partners must be willing to sit down to listen and learn from each other. This holds true for members of all stakeholder groups and is essential if partnerships are to engender learning that ultimately contributes to the capacity of all partnership stakeholders to act in a manner that might strengthen the partnership's collective agency.

What might have been a safe space where even children from the community were allocated agency in their own right became a site of relational contention. Though we have addressed this by holding a community orientation for faculty interested in participating in the PVI, I still wonder: how could we have done a better job of supporting this faculty member? And are we doing enough now? Education was not his area of expertise or interest. He was from an entirely different academic discipline. I had heard him speak. His heart was in the right place; he wanted to share his culturally relevant knowledge with children. The school and community had trusted this goodwill and content expertise, and opened their doors to him, allowing him access to their most precious resource: their children. Did he learn anything from what happened? I wonder, too, what we might do in the future to draw on the significant knowledge of those in PVI schools to orient faculty to the PVC culture? And to what end? Children have always been the heart of the PVI initiative, the goal to help them reach their full potential as learners. Sustenance of the partnership, however, requires support mechanisms for faculty learning too. The act of working in a socioeconomically disadvantaged urban community and the equally vis-

ceral experience of teaching children are complex when taken as isolated endeavors. Combining the two makes it intense. How could we have prepared him? Supported him along the way? Involved classroom teachers and school leaders in the dialogue? There is so much talk about learning communities in schools, and to a lesser extent, universities. This incident speaks to a need to create learning communities, as safe spaces, for faculty working in complex partnerships like the PVI. Indeed, it seems central to engendering sustainable partnerships.

RESEARCH, AGENCY, AND OTHERNESS

I allude to the matter of identity in the context of this writing and feel I must acknowledge: this work largely leaves the matter of my own identity unexplored as it intersects with partnerships and the research process. In choosing to focus on the manner through which I came to understand agency and problem framing in an applied context, I have opted to adopt a lens that is bound to my role of being a university faculty member. As such, I have, for the most part, eliminated matters related to my own race, class and gender. This may be seen as a deficit in my approach. Indeed, there were many times when my own assumptions and beliefs, partially explored herein, rendered me an "other" in the eyes of community members and university colleagues. Examining my "ecology of practice...at multiple levels of expertise, experience, and activity" (Murrell, 2001, p. 7) through the lenses of otherness remain areas ripe for insight. They merit additional consideration in the context of my own work as well as the larger body of scholarship about research, teacher education, faculty development and partnership learning (Orr, 2008; Wilson, 2006). This boundary between self and other is, after all, "the hyphen at which self-other join in the politics of everyday life, that is, the hyphen that both separates and merges personal identities with our inventions of others" (Fine, 1994, p. 70). It is with gratitude and humility that I acknowledge the manner in which research participants allowed me to nego-

tiate this hyphen as I, too, endeavored to learn about the nature of research, agency, partnerships, and learning...as a researcher and an educator.

What Have We Learned?

This research has implications for agency-oriented partnership research in the PVI context and beyond. In my research, I came to understand how extending my conception of research participants across disciplinary boundaries in the partnership provided me with a richer understanding of the influences on leadership development in the partnership context. Working with colleagues and community members compelled me to revisit my ideas about the locus of agency in different situations, as well as the manner in which I framed problems for consideration, particularly during the course of analysis.

The Journal Entries demonstrate the centrality of creating organizational learning structures that will act as safe spaces for dialogue about research and program delivery for members of the partnership. Sustaining partnership learning requires

opportunities to surface and mediate perceptions, values, beliefs, information, and assumptions through continuing conversations; to inquire about and generate ideas together; to seek to reflect upon and make sense of work in the light of shared beliefs and new information; and to create actions that grow out of these new understandings. Such is the core of leadership (Lambert, 1998, p. 6).

Paradoxes, conundrums, and dissonance will inevitably arise in the course of partnership events and often, there will be no easy answers. The capacity for agency lies in the ability of partnership processes to turn these questions into learning experiences. The framework and research experiences presented are compelling incidents that suggest the true measure of partnership success is the extent to which agency oriented research supports safe spaces for partnership learning.

Kami M. Patrizio, Ed.D. is an Assistant Professor of Instructional Leadership and Professional Development at Towson University in Maryland. Her research interests focus on adult learning in organizations, urban education and qualitative research methodology. Patrizio's work has been published in *Qualitative Research* and the Association of Teacher Educator's *Yearbook XVII: Teacher Learning in Small-Group Settings*.

ENDNOTES

[1]All names of people and places used in this article are pseudonyms.

[2]All names of people, organizations and locations used in this research are pseudonyms.

[3]The website is not included in order to maintain the confidentiality parameters of the research.

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