

Original Article

Qualitative and Multi-Method Research

2020, Vol. 17-18, No. 1

[https://DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.3976055](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3976055)

Innovative Data Collection and Integration to Investigate Sorcery Accusation Related Violence in Papua New Guinea

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Despite global outrage at several widely-publicized, extreme incidents of sorcery accusation related violence (SARV) in Papua New Guinea (PNG), research into SARV has been largely limited to ethnographic accounts, with little done to document its prevalence or the responses that prevent or limit its occurrence. This paper describes an innovative and collaborative approach adopted to generate and integrate data for a mixed methods study of SARV. This project has built two significant new datasets and collected extensive qualitative data through interviews, focus groups, and participant observation in workshops and meetings. We describe our participatory, collaborative, and ethical approach, and why a mixed methods research (MMR) design was essential. The key data generated by the project is explained, with special attention given to the most innovative and vital element of the project: the complex and detailed incident data collection in selected locations. The subsequent section summarizes how the principles of grounded theory are helping to develop and revise conceptual and thematic strands across multiple sources of data, and the practical use of spatial-temporal coding to link and compare different sources of data. Several examples of preliminary findings are provided in order to illustrate the analytical advantages of the project's MMR design and collaborative approach. The final section acknowledges the limitations of the study design and the ways these are being mitigated.

The Context and Its Methodological Challenge

Sorcery and witchcraft beliefs and practices, and subsequent violence against those accused of witchcraft, generate a range of law and order problems in the world, especially in the global South. In 2009, the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial killings concluded that at a global level, "there is little systematic information on the available numbers of persons so accused, persecuted or killed, nor is there any detailed analysis of the dynamics and patterns of such killings, or of how the killings can be prevented" (UN 2011, 13). Although the common trend in the literature is an assertion that the number of cases is on the rise and that these cases are becoming more violent (Adinkrah 2004; Gardini 2013; Jorgensen 2014), the difficulty of proving such claims quantitatively is acknowledged. In fact, there remain considerable gaps in knowledge about the extent of SARV, whether it is increasing in severity, what interventions are effective in curtailing its severity, and why (Forsyth 2016).

Undertaking research on SARV is challenging for numerous reasons, including community complicity (meaning such crimes often do not come to the attention of the authorities), fear of re-victimization (meaning that victims often do not report the reasons behind the crime to justice agencies or hospitals), and the generally scattered and incomplete nature of official police and court records in the country, which often do not record a crime in relation to the motivations, such as SARV, that

lie behind its commission. Other potential data sources, such as official health records, are also of limited value, as victims are often afraid to disclose the reason behind their attack for fear of further violence or stigmatization.

PNG poses particular challenges because of its difficult terrain, language and cultural diversity, and poor reach and reliability of data collection from the government services that respond to SARV. PNG is a country of great geographic and socio-ethnic diversity, with at least 800 languages and a rapidly rising population of more than eight million people. Most of the population (over 80 percent) live in rural and remote areas, which are difficult to access. A country rich in natural resources, the benefits of this wealth are very unevenly distributed, and are most evident in the urban centers, most notably in the capital city of Port Moresby. In a country with a weak or fragile state, high levels of corruption, private and public violence, and an eroding public sector, it is extremely difficult, and sometimes dangerous, to conduct research.

The vast majority of literature on SARV in PNG is qualitative in nature, and most is localized, with no large-scale quantitative studies, except for an analysis of newspaper reports (Urame 2008). The majority of research in this field is ethnographic, an important source of information which demonstrates that although much has changed in a constellation of beliefs and practices, there are certain core continuities from the past, including widespread but often diverse beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery (Eves 2010; Schwoerer 2017).

In terms of the prevalence of SARV in PNG, official records are fragmented and often incomplete, and those that do exist are fraught with the potential to be misleading. Incomplete and fragmented data also distorts the characteristics of SARV and the association between SARV and related factors. As we demonstrate later in this paper, there are significant variations between regions in the characteristics of victims, often based on different cultural traditions and particular local history, which problematizes any analysis about sorcery at a national level.

In order to better address the serious harm caused by SARV, there is a clear need to develop a better understanding of the scope of the problem, its various dimensions, provincial variations, and trends over time. One of the main challenges is overcoming data availability and finding new ways of accessing and collecting data that accurately quantifies and describes SARV. The other major challenge is accurately identifying and connecting related social events and their impact on SARV and

building an evidence base of current and promising interventions that can inform future efforts to overcome SARV in PNG. The importance of an evidence base to underpin policy development and advocacy programs in this area is also recognized in PNG's SARV National Action Plan (NAP), developed in 2014 and endorsed by the national government in 2015.

The Aims and Methodology of the SARV Project

The current study commenced in November 2016 and runs for four years. The project is a collaborative partnership with academics from the Australian National University, Divine Word University, and the National Research Institute in PNG. Local researchers and data collectors also play a crucial role in gathering information. The main research questions are:

1. Who is being accused of sorcery, where, why, how often, by whom, how does this change over time, and why?
2. Why do accusations lead to violence at certain times and not others?
3. What regulatory levers exist to overcome sorcery accusation related violence, and what context or conditions are necessary for them to work effectively?
4. How is the SARV NAP working as a coalition for change network? What are its impacts, failures and challenges?

These two main requirements of the project (i.e., accurately describing and *measuring* events, and *interpreting* and influencing social meanings) call for different methodological approaches. Reporting on the prevalence of events calls for a positivist approach, which considers “social facts as things,” taking on an objective and therefore measurable character (Durkheim 1938, 14), while understanding the “meaning” of social action in order to explain it calls for a constructivist approach (Weber 1949). In other words, a research design is needed that can reliably quantify events, while accounting for the subjective beliefs and norms informing the actors involved.

To respond to these requirements, a convergent MMR design, combined with a collaborative team approach that draws on both qualitative and quantitative sources at national and sub-national levels, is used. Describing a social phenomenon as complex as SARV using numbers is highly challenging. Yet, in order to organize and summarize our knowledge of SARV, and facilitate decision-making, we require data in countable terms (Engle Merry 2016). While quantitative data conveys an

“aura of objective truth” despite the “interpretive work that goes into their construction” (Engle Merry 2016, 1), its value without context, history, and meaning is limited. To analyze how sorcery, witchcraft, and violent responses to accusations are understood in PNG, what they signify to people, and how these social meanings relate to and are influenced by current and historical processes, quantified data needs to be integrated with qualitative information to uncover the context-dependence of constructed meanings (Bazeley 2017). Adopting an MMR design also improves the transferability of our findings to other settings, and is consistent with the academic ideals of scholarship (e.g., Bergman 2008; Creswell and Plano Clark 2010; Tashakkori and Teddlie 2010).

There are several key dimensions to the methodology that coalesce into a collaborative, participatory and ethical approach. The collaborative and participatory approach is reflected in every facet of the study, from the composition of the team leadership and its members’ engagement with the SARV NAP, to the critical role of local people who collect data through what we term the “recorder networks.” There has been an ongoing refinement of the methods and tools through the feedback provided by the recorder networks. Our ethical obligations mean that the safety of those being interviewed and consulted, and of those doing the research, are prioritized. More is said on the protocol that was developed to minimize risks for the recorders, those who provided information, and those who have been or could be accused of sorcery in a forthcoming paper. The research design relies heavily on the lead academics and team leaders’ knowledge of risks, especially at a local level. There is constant monitoring and review of how the study is going, with a focus on the sites where incident data is being collected. At the outset, the Australian National University’s Human Research Ethics Committee scrutinized and approved the study’s approach and design and drew attention to the risk factors involved. These are discussed further in a forthcoming paper that describes in detail the development of the recorder network.

Multiple Data Sources

The initial phase of the project involved a comprehensive review of relevant literature and reports, discussions generated by three workshops in PNG and Australia on SARV in 2013 and 2014 (see Forsyth 2013a; 2013b; 2014 for more detail), consultations with key stakeholders (including members of the SARV NAP committee), and an assessment of the types of statistics and data collections in PNG that may have assisted with

the project. It was found that existing data sources were limited on a number of fronts, including in terms of accessibility, coverage, and reliability. A very partial and disjointed assembly of potential data included judgments reported on the Pacific Islands Legal Information Institution website (PACLII), which are primarily restricted to National Court decisions and higher courts; Village Court quarterly reports; selected police records; NGO reports; and data recorded by the offices of the public prosecutor and public solicitor.

None of these data sources regularly focus explicitly on SARV, and only in some instances, such as media reports, is it clear that SARV is being identified and described. Village courts’ quarterly reports only have the category “sorcery” to report, and this may be interpreted very differently by different clerks—it may mean offences that involve sorcery under the village court regulations (such as “practicing or pretending to practice sorcery”), or it may mean those cases where other wrongs or crimes are committed due to sorcery accusations. These data are therefore of little assistance as it is not possible to disaggregate the cases where sorcery concerns provoke violence (SARV), and cases where concerns about sorcery are brought before the court to manage. Similarly, the higher courts and police records relate to criminal offences generally, and it is only through a review of case files or through interviews with police or magistrates that the link between violent crime and sorcery accusations becomes apparent. Upon the evaluation of these potential data sources, it became apparent that different collections pick up different cases. Thus, it was decided to retain all data sources, but only report from them when integrated with, or related to, other data sources for a particular geographical coverage.

The initial phase demonstrated very clearly the need for the project to generate primary data, especially that which could meet several basic requirements in terms of volume and coverage over time and geography. Two key datasets have been developed and continue to be added to and expanded. The first focused on trends in cases of SARV reported by national newspapers and courts over at least a twenty-year period, and the second, which is the cornerstone of the project, is the collection of information on incidents of accusations of sorcery that result in violence, and those that do not result in violence, in a number of locations across PNG. More is said on these two collections below, along with a final section on the wealth of qualitative material being gathered as part of the project.

Media and Case Law Analysis

One of the important quantitative data sources to estimate SARV in PNG is the analysis of national media and case law from 1996 to 2016. Newspapers currently provide the most comprehensive dataset of SARV in PNG. Because of the unevenness of journalistic coverages, there are serious drawbacks to relying on media analysis alone. However, when triangulated with a range of other data sources and methods, it provides a unique, if far from comprehensive, account.

An earlier study by Urame (2008) of SARV in PNG over a seven-year period also used media analysis. A similar but more comprehensive approach was adopted for this project. The dataset comprises articles from two national newspapers: *The National* and the *Post-Courier*, and national court cases reported on PACLII over a twenty-year period (1996-2016). It was supplemented by searches of other media through the online FACTIVA database. The bulk of the unique cases were identified through newspaper articles (n=418) and when 51 national court cases were added, the total number of unique SARV incidents in the dataset was 452 (each incident often had a number of different reports). There was an overlap of only 17 cases when comparing these two sources, which speaks to the partiality of the datasets.

Incident Dataset

The above described nationwide newspaper and court case dataset is supplemented by the creation of a dataset of incidents of sorcery accusation in a number of selected provinces between 2016 and 2019. The multi-layered and cross-sectoral nature of the project means that the scope of the research is national. Yet, PNG's topographical obstacles and poor infrastructure makes a comprehensive data collection extremely difficult, especially in rural and remote areas. Accordingly, three locations (Enga, Bougainville, and Port Moresby) were selected as the first tranche of study sites to collect in-depth quantitative and qualitative data on SARV incidents.

Developing this dataset required the development of a new instrument to collect quantifiable data on SARV. In the initial stage of instrument development, to ensure content validity, the team members had extensive dialogue with key informants, research partners, and scholars in the fields of criminology and anthropology. Next, a pilot questionnaire was administered to collect data, and feedback was sought on the pilot form from a broad range of stakeholders. Feedback and suggestions were considered and implemented when deemed to be

appropriate. This included rewording, adding new items, and revising predefined categories. Clear specifications in instructional protocols and on the form are included to ensure that the same thing is being considered when reported. This was also ensured through translating the form into Tok Pisin, which revealed areas of ambiguity that needed to be addressed in the English version of the form. Pre-coded categories for responses was another strategy used to improve data reliability and consistency. These fixed categories had to be descriptive, specific, and straightforward. A preliminary sample of the collected data was coded and entered into SPSS to test how it would perform, which resulted in further fine-tuning.

Incident forms are completed by a network of data collectors recruited from the local community to reduce the understandable distrust of research and outsider researchers. Gaining access to sensitive information is one challenge; the other is obtaining as much information about the incident as possible and recording it in a consistent manner. Instead of recording a single person's experience or recollection of an incident, recorders are instructed to talk to a range of witnesses to collect as much information about the incident, victims, and accusers as possible before completing the incident form. The benefit of this approach, as opposed to interviewing a single person about the incident, is that more comprehensive information is obtained, minimizing:

- Multiple reports of the same incidents by various actors;
- Underreporting of incidents, due to the general and established issue of underreporting of crime experienced by victims to interviewers; and
- Missing information in data fields. Typically, different people know different aspects of the data collected; for example, one person may have more knowledge of the demographic characteristics of the victims, while another may know more about whether those accused of committing the violence were charged.

A limitation of this approach is the reliance on the recorder to synthesize information collected from multiple sources, introducing the potential for individual bias through different ways of synthesizing information, or giving more weight to one source than another. We have tried to account for this by developing clearly specified protocols on how to collect and synthesize information, and providing regular training to data recorders. For example, we have a sheet of written general instructions about how to fill out the forms. The first part contains

very basic information, such as “always try to speak with at least two and preferably many more people about an incident,” and “always write ‘don’t know’ if you do not know the answer rather than leaving it blank.” The second part contains detailed instructions about particular questions that we identified as causing problems, together with screenshots of what correct and incorrect answers look like. This information is then orally imparted to the recorders by the lead recorder in each province during training sessions that have been held at least three times with each group since the project commenced. The data recorders are all literate in Tok Pisin and many in English as well, but none has a university education, while the lead recorders are all significantly more educated and fluent in English. The lead recorder is also responsible for checking over the data before it is sent to be entered into the database, in some cases requiring the recorder supply further information, or to fill out the form again if it is unclear or contains logical inconsistencies. Additionally, data is collected on the level of agreement between the people that the recorders have talked to. Recording the level and detail of disagreement between these voices also highlights cases with a risk of poor reliability due to the accuracy of recollection by the people interviewed.

There are two incident forms designed to capture information on victims, perpetrators, state and non-state interventions, and responses to the incident. The first section in both forms focuses on the accusation of sorcery, while only the second form records details about the violence that followed from the accusation of sorcery. The dataset is designed in a way that data can be analyzed either at an incident or a victim level, as many incidents have more than one victim, and supports quantitative analysis to identify factors which correlate with, as well as predict, accusations of sorcery leading to subsequent violence.

Qualitative Data

Semi-structured (and in some cases, more free flowing) interviews are also being conducted with a broad range of stakeholders who hold official and non-state positions or deliver services at a provincial, district, or ward level, as well as some survivors, with an initial focus on the three locations where the incident data collection was first established. To date (in just under two years), more than 180 interviews have been conducted and recorded, as transcripts or as detailed notes. This cross-sectional sample includes survivors and perpetrators, those working in the justice system or for non-governmental organizations, and at the village or

neighborhood level, church and village leaders.

These interviews have been complemented by some participant observation of training, workshops, and other events, as opportunities have arisen. One of the project’s key aims is to document as many local initiatives to prevent or minimize the violence that stems from accusations of sorcery as possible. Participant observation and a series of interviews with key personnel also help inform the description and assessment of SARV NAP as a coalition of change network. Qualitative data were collected using digital recorders and through filming when possible, but as a degree of caution was required, in certain situations, conversations with participants were more open-ended, and not recorded. A geo-reference in the form of *ward* and *ward number*, or *urban community* in the case of Port Moresby, were noted by interviewers in the attached metadata. Qualitative data is being explored through a narrative analysis using NVivo.

Finally, information from social media (i.e., those who are linked on Facebook with key organizations and individuals involved in SARV in PNG, or who use Facebook to raise awareness of activities and advocacy events or to coordinate rescues) is used to alert us to intervention initiatives and incidents that have not been flagged by our recorder network.

Integration and Analysis of Data Sources

With an extremely difficult and under-explored research topic such as SARV, our study has to draw on the principles of grounded theory. Multiple sources of data are collated and coded to enable inductive analysis and the development of conceptual themes in a reiterative process. This process is performed through constant comparative analysis, moving back and forth with increasingly focused attention to themes within and across the data. Through various collaborative and specific mechanisms, one of which is elaborated on below, the process involves gradually linking initial codes or nodes into progressively abstracted higher level categories and conceptual themes (Charmaz 2006; Glaser 1992; Glaser and Strauss 1967), which are re-tested and adapted in a process not dissimilar to that advocated in Layder (1998). We are seeking to be rigorous while staying true to the context which is generating data, staying open to possibilities of new ways to theorize or conceive of SARV, and efforts to address it. A crucial dimension to the process is the regular reviewing of emerging themes and theoretical focus within the research team and with external stakeholders and academics. For example, an annual workshop organized by the funding body, Pacific

Women, is held each year in Port Moresby with NGOs encountering SARV in their service delivery, and with academics involved in film documentation of those who challenge SARV and assist survivors (Stop Sorcery Violence, 2020).

On a practical level, as a means to integrate different types of data from multiple sources, we are “anchoring” the range of data through spatial-temporal linkages. Data is related and linked through a common geographical location to produce spatially related and linked information. Coalescing the data from different sources, relating to the same geographical space, can show convergence, as well as variation in results. Finding the same results and gaining empirical support using different methods and data sources can strengthen the reliability and trustworthiness of findings. Contradictory findings, on the other hand, can be conceptually illuminating, and can lead to refined research questions and new conceptualizations or theoretical redescription of existing constructs (Bazeley 2017).

Findings from the data sources listed above are integrated and analytically linked by applying the spatial reference of each information source. Findings are also spatially related to contextual secondary data, such as the census, using ArcGIS software. A temporal and spatial matching of these secondary data accommodates the exploration of how socio-demographic, legal, civil, and religious society relate to, frame, and directly or indirectly impact SARV incidents.

Our systematic approach to data collection and analysis is captured in Figure 1, which displays the relationships between the data, analysis tools, and exemplar outputs. Figure 2 shows how the data collection and analysis is part of the broader, iterative spiral of adaptive theory building. At the heart of the process, driving the spiral, are the four key research questions.

Figure 1: Sorcery accusation and related violence in PNG: Data sources, software tools, and data integration and analysis.

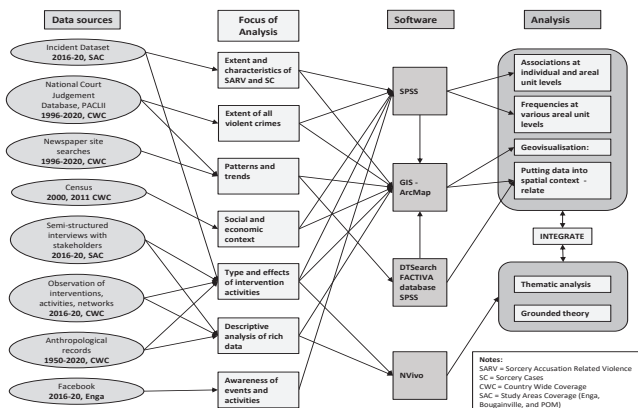
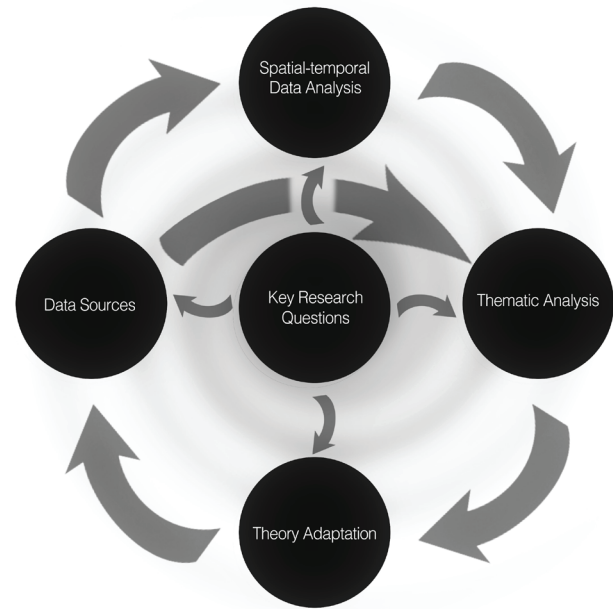


Figure 2: Spiral of adaptive theory building.



Discussion Including Preliminary Findings

Eighteen months after the commencement of the project, for the incident data collection, 357 questionnaires have been completed, resulting in detailed information on 240 non-violent and 117 violent incidents of sorcery accusations in the three study provinces. So far, a number of issues have emerged that warrant further attention and investigation. First, the volume of victimization and the number of injuries and deaths from SARV across the different locations in the country are very concerning. Second, in the majority of reported incidents, there were multiple victims and often extreme violence involved, including torture as well as ongoing insecurity and psychological damage. Third, there are significant differences in the way male and female victims are harmed, with the latter sometimes raped and more likely to be burnt and tortured than male victims. Fourth, this is often a type of mob violence which involves large groups of perpetrators.

Our unique MMR design, combined with a collaborative team approach, provides a valid and credible dataset for monitoring SARV in PNG, and an enriched insight into the impact of state and non-state interventions on these violent incidents.

Our quantitative data collection allows us to establish trends and patterns in behavior and to find general descriptors of SARV events. Our systematic approach to the collection and analysis of information from multiple sources provides a robust foundation for

monitoring change over time, while comparing trends and relationships between indicators and between regions allows us to make some inferences with respect to the size and scope of the issue.

To complement these findings, our qualitative in-depth interviews generate detailed data on the perceptions, emotions, experiences, meaning making, and behavior of actors. It provides insight into how people make sense of or rationalize external events, and their motivations for specific behaviors. It also captures different interpretations, dynamics and norms in different regions. As demonstrated by Searle (1996), social realities are humanely created, and the continued existence of institutional or other group practices lies not only in the beliefs of the individuals directly involved, but also a sufficient number of members of the relevant communities.

While using different methods allows us to investigate different components of the research question, the real benefit of using MMR is bringing together and integrating findings from these two approaches to develop insights into SARV. The integration of data from multiple sources and the use of various techniques means that information included from a range of participant groups (witnesses, victims, perpetrators, family members, NGOs, officials) enhances the validity of the findings.

Findings from different methods have importantly complemented each other and also usefully suggested other avenues of inquiry and analysis. For example, identifying the gendered dimension to SARV has been a critical but confusing component for which to account. The incident data collection has been critical in supporting, and being supported by, the media analysis and anthropological literature in identifying very strong gendering of victims based on location. Somewhat fortuitously, the two first provinces we focused on, Enga and Bougainville, have almost completely mirror images of each other in terms of women or men being targeted. In Enga, 96 percent of those accused of sorcery were women, compared to 4 percent in Bougainville. By drawing on the other data sources, we are able to question and interrogate what appears to be a gender bias in the state justice system towards supporting male victims, rather than revealing men as being predominantly the subjects of SARV.

Another example illustrates the ways in which mixed methods data collection enables the development and testing of hypotheses about our data in an ongoing iterative process. We learned from the anthropological evidence and from our interviews that SARV was a new

phenomenon for most of Enga, entering the province around 2010. We developed a hypothesis that one reason explaining the explosion of cases was a form of contagion relating to a particular narrative about women being possessed by evil spirits that cause them to seek out and “eat” the hearts of living people, causing them to become sick or die. This narrative is accompanied by a behavioral “script” about how to respond to fears about such women, which involves torture and interrogation. We were able to find considerable evidence to support that hypothesis by drawing upon the incident collection data, which revealed very obvious temporal and geographical clustering of cases, as well as a remarkable similarity in narrative associated with the accusation and the form of violent response.

Limitation of the Approach

Research of this nature has significant limitations. Often, data is partial, not always reliable, and never replicable. Much is hidden and where overt, not necessarily recorded with consistency. As noted earlier, the incident data collection is heavily dependent on individuals accessing and accurately recording data. Another limitation is the exclusion of more remote areas in most if not all data sources used in the study due to difficulties in accessing these areas. To correct for this, we have mapped out the collection sites in which recorders collect data, and these boundaries are related to spatial analysis and visualization of data. Data collection with spatial information attached provide a different level of accuracy and are geo-referenced to spatial boundaries which do not always align. These limitations mean that we are not able to produce choropleth maps. In addition, detailed in-depth accounts of SARV in geographic areas and among certain cultural-linguistic collectivities of people underline the diversity and specificity of beliefs and practices, and how they change over time (see e.g., Forsyth and Eves 2015; Zocca 2009). However, informing policy and support for national and local efforts to address SARV requires evidence that has a wider scope (in time and place), and multiple sources of information. Documenting how we are trying to do this is the first step in being transparent about methods and the tentative conclusions that emerge from the study, so that others can engage with us in debates about their significance and merit.

Conclusion

This article described the innovative, collaborative and evolving approach that has been adopted to study SARV in PNG. Our unique MMR design, combined

with a collaborative team approach, provides a valid and credible dataset for monitoring SARV, and an enriched insight into the impact of state and non-state interventions on these violent incidents.

It is important to note that while this methodology provides a reliable estimate to monitor the extent and type of SARV (and approaches to prevent it), it cannot be used to measure the absolute level of SARV at either the national or provincial level. All of our data sources are likely to underrepresent the true numbers of incidents to varying extents, and we do not know what this “dark figure” may be. However, it does provide us with some credible statistics in relation to incidents we can be reasonably certain at least occurred, although we cannot have full confidence in all of the details of the incidents themselves. Additionally, in the three study provinces, the triangulation of findings from different data sources reduces the gap between the actual and our measured levels of SARV incidents.

Along with this quantitative analysis, our rich, qualitative, in-depth interviews generate detailed data on the perceptions, emotions, experiences, meaning making, and behaviors of actors. It provides an insight into how people make sense of or rationalize external events

and their motivations for specific behaviors. It also captures different interpretations, dynamics, and norms in different regions. As demonstrated by Searle (1996), social realities are humanely created, and the continued existence of institutional or other group practices lies not only in the beliefs of the individuals directly involved, but also with a sufficient number of members of the relevant communities.

Importantly, by linking people’s behavior to social structures, institutions, and the changing historical context of PNG society, we gain a better understanding of the *relational powers* and *contingent conditions* producing and mediating SARV. After all, no social action can be understood without understanding the broader context in which it takes place. At the same time, people’s actions are never determined by structures alone; people can see, choose, or be forced to choose alternative actions (Danermark et al. 2002). Our design is set out to capture these relational interplays between social agents and social structures to study how social actions of committing violence, condoning violence, or standing up against violence despite the risks involved, are generated and produced.

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