Informal Institutions and Survey Research in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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Are informal institutions obstacles for researchers to overcome, or can they be enablers for research—as well as important subjects to be studied in and of themselves? State and formal institutions loom large, in both the discipline of political science and the research processes that political scientists use to generate empirical data. In many contexts, however, formal state structures may be overshadowed or dominated by informal institutions that operate within informal organizations, including strong tribal and/or clientelist networks. Although informal institutions are hardly unique to the Middle East—indeed, they are innate to social organization in almost any setting—their strength relative to the state, especially in conflict zones and disputed territories, means that researchers working in these areas must be cognizant of how they function.

For social scientists used to interacting primarily with formal state institutions, it may be tempting to deem informal institutions—that is, unwritten social rules and norms that primarily operate within informal organizations—as obstacles. Informal institutions often are inscrutable to outsiders; their very existence—not to mention their structure and significance—might not be known to people who are unfamiliar with the context. Moreover, informal institutions operate differently than the rules of Weberian bureaucracies. When informal institutions are strong, the identity of someone making a request can matter as much as the request being made. Researchers might have all of the necessary forms in order only to find that their request for permission never is processed. They then meet someone who has no formal authority yet is able to open doors believed to be permanently blocked.

Reflecting on our joint experiences of conducting two very different surveys in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)—one with female small-business owners in 2014 and the other with soldiers in 2017—we argue that informal institutions present a potential obstacle to scholars who ignore them. However, they offer an opportunity to those who make the effort and investment required to understand them, and they remain a valuable topic of investigation in their own right. After a significant period of mutual confidence building, researchers can tap into these networks of informal organizations to facilitate quantitative research that illuminates our understanding of social and political dynamics. In doing so, researchers also are likely to learn much about the nature of informal institutions and how they might best be studied, using either qualitative or quantitative analysis.

Our work in this context has taught us that scholars can and should embrace informal institutions in several ways. First, acquiring knowledge about informal institutions and the organizations in which they are embedded is integral to devising relevant research questions. Without this knowledge, scholars are at risk of asking uninteresting questions, falling into the increasingly common trap of what we call "using sophisticated methods to state the obvious." They also risk designing experiments and/or surveys that fall short of the goal or fail completely.

Second, scholars who understand informal institutions can better identify and reach the appropriate population for their intended study. Third, they should avoid relying on one set of informal institutions, organizations, or patrons; instead, they need to know when to plug into which informal networks. Fourth, when chosen appropriately, local collaborators embedded in informal institutions and organizations can provide social incentives, thereby encouraging local research teams to work diligently and to not defect from agreements.

WORKING AT THE INTERSECTION OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS

We follow Helmke and Levitsky's (2004, 727) definition of informal institutions as "socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels." Critical to this definition is the distinction between *informal institutions* and the *informal organizations* or networks within which they often operate. North (1990, 4) made this point early in his book: "Conceptually, what must be clearly differentiated are the rules from the players." For example, a tribe is not an informal institution, but the expectation of mutual trust that operates among members of a tribal network is an *informal institutional norm* that holds that informal organization together. It also is important to distinguish these informal institutional norms from the cultural values that generate them. Again, our thinking follows North (1990), who saw the informal institutions generated by culture as critical to overcoming coordination problems. These informal institutions, therefore, are not the values themselves but rather the shared expectations of behavior—or norms—that they produce.

doi:10.1017/S1049096519000131

Where formal institutions are neither enforced nor stable, they can be perceived as weak (Levitsky and Murillo 2009), and informal institutions may substitute for or conflict with them (Helmke and Levitsky 2004). In the Middle East and much of the developing world, where many states are weak and/or exhibit uneven levels of capacity, there are various opportunities for informal organizations to flourish (Migdal 1988). In particular, the presence of ongoing armed conflicts—which, it should be noted, can be both a product of state (i.e., formal institutional) weakness and a force that further perpetuates it—introduces an element of instability. Power relations on the ground change rapidly and the state can find it difficult or impossible to enforce laws in certain territories. It is important to clarify that we are not arguing that the relative weakness of formal institutions renders them unimportant for political outcomes. Rather, like Tsai (2007), we think it is important to understand where, when, and how informal and formal organizations intersect. Intratribal reciprocity, for example, was important in our research with the Peshmerga, particularly where it intersected with formal institutions. Fellow tribesmen could obtain government approval for site visits in situations when relying solely on formal institutions would have resulted in rejection. Where formal and informal organizations intersect, they present possible obstacles to researchers who neglect them and opportunities to those who know how to understand and work through them.

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Both studies discussed in this article included large surveys. Therefore, a word is in order about this specific research methodology and why we used it. Surveys generate quantitative data that—when combined with qualitative data gained through observation and interviews—can be used to effectively study informal institutions. The unwritten nature of informal institutions means that it typically is difficult to study them from afar, whether qualitatively or quantitatively. Although formal institutions such as voting systems can be coded by examining an online version of a constitution, the presence of clientelistic norms and networks requires more proximity to the field. This makes "nested analysis," as advanced by Lieberman (2005), more important in guiding research on informal institutions. Daily living, careful observation, and interviews generate qualitative data about cultural values, the norms that they produce, and how these norms operate in various networks. The contextual knowledge gained from qualitative research then can alert researchers as to which informal institutions and organizations are likely to be important to their topic. Surveys designed on the basis of this knowledge generate data that allow for a style of quantitative analysis that effectively supplements the qualitative impressions in a way that other methods of data gathering generally would not (Sieber 1973). Simply stated, studying informal institutions via a survey without designing and preparing it on the basis of careful field-based qualitative work is not impossible. However, the quality of the research, we believe, is more likely to be impaired.

DEVELOPING RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SHAPING RESEARCH DESIGN

Without a solid understanding of informal institutions and organizations, researchers may be asking wrong or irrelevant questions. In Fabbe's 2014 survey of female small-business owners in the KRI, understanding informal institutions proved critical to developing the appropriate set of research questions and designing a suitable quantitative survey instrument. The author initially intended to study the barriers that inhibited women from accessing formal sources of business financing and lending. However, during six weeks of preliminary fieldwork, it became increasingly apparent that this research question was misguided. Informal, long-form qualitative interviews revealed that women rarely sought formal financing. A culture based on strong familial ties and an underdeveloped formal banking sector in the KRI meant that instead of turning to banks, there was a strong informal institution of first turning to family members for lending and borrowing business capital. Thus, the barriers to accessing formal sources of finance were basically irrelevant to most business strategies; the women business owners rarely even considered approaching banks.

As such, the informal institution of borrowing and lending within and among families provided a more appropriate target of research for understanding the dynamics of female business ownership in the KRI. It was only when familial avenues for financing were completely closed—because of abject poverty or because of patriarchal family dynamics that were so strict that a male relative did not approve of his female relative engaging in business—that women sought loans from formal institutions. Also, the women who sought formal financing happened to be in the most disadvantaged position to access the formal lending system because of their social status and their lack of experience and connections outside of the home. The author's original question about barriers to formal lending, therefore, was incorrect. A better set of questions revolved around how female business owners navigated familial relationships to obtain financing and loans. Without extensive preliminary interviews with the business owners and their families, the survey would have failed completely.

FINDING THE APPROPRIATE STUDY POPULATION

Awareness of informal institutions also can build knowledge about the population frame when state records are lacking or not available to the public. For our survey of the Peshmerga,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096519000131 Published online by Cambridge University Press

we asked a government official for a list of the Peshmerga bases from which to sample; he demurred, saying, "The [anti-ISIS] coalition has been asking for that for years." This answer was typically vague, and we had many encounters in which government officials refused to give a definitive "no" to this request and others like it. In this case, informal norms of cooperation among local university professors were instrumental. Our local partner was able to coordinate with members of several local universities that had knowledge of the government's operations in their province. Working province by province with local academic informants who knew their home geography, we were able to create a population frame of bases from which to sample. In this way, the informal institution of cooperation among academics enabled us to obtain a more representative sample than we otherwise could have obtained given the absence (at least to us) of official state records.

A similar situation occurred with Fabbe's survey of female-owned small businesses. Although the relevant ministries signaled a willingness to be cooperative, the preliminary data they provided were insufficient because the gender of firm owners was not included. The data also seemed outdated based on preliminary qualitative work by the researcher and a small team of student assistants. Therefore, the author and her team pivoted and instead went to popular business districts in key city centers, selected random blocks, and tallied female-owned firms. They found that there were many more female-owned firms than expected based on official numbers. What the author discovered through this preliminary work was a significant informal economy—especially in certain sectors such as tailoring and retail that were not bound by formal health and safety codes. Given that the author wanted to include both "formal" and "informal" firms in her study, she resorted to a combination of random walks and snowball sampling for her subsequent quantitative survey. As these examples show, when the population frame is either not legible to the state or the state is not willing to make it legible to the researcher, informal institutions can help researchers find a viable path forward.

BUILDING DIVERSE NETWORKS AND USING THE RIGHT INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS AND FACILITATORS

In our work, we also found that it was better to build relationships of mutual trust with multiple local collaborators embedded in various informal institutions and networks rather than rely exclusively on a single individual or organization. Although having a single "fixer" may seem convenient, it often is advantageous to branch out in a way that facilitates engagement with other informants, contacts, and gatekeepers from different sectors of society.

The importance of cultivating diverse networks became especially apparent in our work with the Peshmerga. Despite having written approval from the Minister of Peshmerga Affairs, the formal head of all Kurdish forces, we found that permission from the commanders of individual units had to be negotiated separately. Doing so was much easier when these individual unit heads were connected to tribal networks of which we were aware and with whom we also had established ties.

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The formal head of one of the largest military units, for example, was also the sheikh of a prominent tribe with whom we had cultivated a good rapport. We discovered that the connections among members of the tribe were as important as formal hierarchies. For commanders who also were members of that tribe, both formal and informal institutions aligned to facilitate the access we needed for our survey; with nonmembers, we encountered more difficulties in gaining access.

These tribal ties were important not only among elites, however. When negotiating access to one military unit, our driver recognized the battalion commander as a fellow member of his tribe, which expedited our work. There are two possible explanations for why this tribal connection was effective in facilitating our access. First, the trust that exists among tribe members perhaps legitimated our presence—that is, we were the beneficiaries of trust by affiliation. Second, similar to what Tsai (2007) found in China, members of formal institutions may believe that they will pay a social cost for failing to deliver favors to members of their embedded informal network. Regardless, the commander's embeddedness in an informal network certainly provided a connection that enabled our research in a way that—had we focused solely on formal institutions—we might have missed. As such, informal institutions and organizations can mitigate nonresponses that might plague other surveys that do not leverage informal norms.

Although these examples of tribal connections ultimately were positive in facilitating our work, we also experienced how informal institutions and organizations can present obstacles when ignored. In a meeting with a government official, we brought a facilitator who was from the other side of the country and whose accent instantly identified him as such. The meeting was chilly because of tribal tensions, almost derailing our survey of Peshmerga. Researchers are well advised to be mindful of their facilitators' group membership and adjust their team in anticipation of how identity differences can impact their work. These differences even can be leveraged to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096519000131 Published online by Cambridge University Press

measure outcomes (e.g., inter-ethnic trust), as Samii (2013) was able to do by measuring the differences in response rates of Burundian soldiers to enumerators who were either co-ethnics or of a different ethnicity. Short of such advanced methodology, researchers at least should aim to avoid creating obstacles for themselves, as we failed to do in this instance.

Another set of informal institutions that shaped our research experience was clientelistic networks. In the KRI, political patronage is a critical source of jobs and is one reason why the principal political parties continue to be such important institutions (Irwani 2015). Our principal local collaborator on the Peshmerga survey taught at a university that had been established by the son of the president. In addition to his academic qualifications, this meant that he was connected into an informal network that could facilitate connections to other professional domains. In this case, the son of the president was also the head of some of the security forces that we were trying to study. When meeting with other members of the same network, he could appeal to their common membership in the network and encourage cooperation. Unfortunately, we did not do as well in establishing connections with other, competing clientelistic networks in our Peshmerga survey, which caused problems.

Rather than trying to strong-arm research teams to be respectful, trust can be built indirectly. By building careful partnerships in preliminary work, researchers can use informal institutions of deference to authority in preexisting social networks to signal to subcontractors that they have the approval and backing of someone who is widely respected.

DEFERENCE TO AUTHORITY AND SOCIAL SANCTIONING VIA INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS

Unless researchers are from the country they happen to be working in, chances are they will be perceived as an outsider in some sense. Rather than trying to strong-arm research teams to be respectful, trust can be built indirectly. By building careful partnerships in preliminary work, researchers can use informal institutions of deference to authority in preexisting social networks to signal to subcontractors that they have the approval and backing of someone who is widely respected. If employees are tempted to deny contracted services, a researcher's connection in these potential defectors' informal network might cause them to reconsider before shirking. These potential partners might lack a formal position in the state, but their social status can help to coordinate among otherwise disconnected members of society and ensure that local employees remain committed to their work.

In our study of Peshmerga, our local academic partner had this authority. He also recruited employees for several of our enumeration teams. Like our partner, these enumerators were embedded in one of the KRI's two main clientelist political networks. This patron's approval (and eventually that of other senior patrons in this network) for our project ensured that these enumeration teams were committed; they put in long hours to professionally implement the survey.

Another of our survey teams, however, was composed entirely of university students who were not hired by our local academic partner and were not in a clientelistic network with which we had worked to establish strong connections on this visit. Unfortunately, after the second day, some team members —although they continued interviewing Peshmerga for two hours each morning—began filling out fake interviews in the afternoon. Our use of tablets for data collection was key in detecting survey forgery because the Qualtrics™ software reported the duration of each survey in the metadata. After being fired for this infraction, the leader of the wayward survey team threatened to use his tribal connections to block our survey in his province, where we had not had as strong a buy-in from senior leaders.

To solve the problem, we had to work carefully at the intersection of formal and informal institutions. We arranged a meeting at a hookah bar with the son of a senior government official with whom we were friendly, who also happened to know the leader of the team that had falsified data. At the meeting, we were able to negotiate a compromise: we would pay the team leader via this intermediary for the four hours of work they already had done. Our willingness to acknowledge monetarily that some work had been completed by this dishonest team allowed us to avoid creating tension with any higher-up, tribal elite, and connected politicians. Meanwhile, we sought other local academic connections to recruit and train a different team to resume our work in this area, which fortunately continued without problems. This vignette demonstrates how appropriate management of informal institutions can ensure that local partners work diligently, whereas neglecting them leaves researchers more exposed to the possibility of being defrauded and potentially even blocked from certain regions if conflicts are not carefully managed.

Finally, the use of informal networks in research can introduce ethical complications that researchers must consider. First, informal institutions of deference may compel potential subjects to participate in research. Therefore, it is essential for researchers to convey to all parties involved, including facilitators, that participation is entirely voluntary. Second, managing expectations about the benefits that result from research is an important consideration when leveraging informal institutions, particularly a norm of mutual trust and reciprocity. Third, the knowledge that researchers are tapped into informal networks with institutionalized norms of sanctioning noncompliance might compel enumerators to take risks

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096519000131 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that they otherwise would not. Therefore, researchers must carefully monitor security and safety. Although we lack the space to elaborate on these issues, they certainly cannot be ignored.

CONCLUSION

Informal institutions suffuse human interactions around the globe but gain particular importance when formal institutions are weak. This means that they are more likely to affect the research conducted by political scientists because we often must interact with informal institutions to do our work and to do it well.

To conclude, we reiterate the difficulty in understanding informal institutions from afar: some institutions that are noted in secondary sources might be exaggerated, outdated, or irrelevant to a specific research agenda. For example, several KRI sources discussed the historical importance of Sufi Islam and the networks created by Sufi prayer groups (e.g., Gunter 1996; McDowall 2004, 12). We initially expected that these prayer groups would be central to our research on both projects. However, over the course of several trips, it became apparent that they were less significant now than they had been when the books were written. The point is that the relevant informal institutions rarely announce themselves to researchers when they begin a project.

We have not always been successful in navigating the informal institutions of the KRI while conducting our research. Our successes were sometimes as much the product of chance as they were by design. We have been transparent about our failures. However, we think that we mitigated many other potential pitfalls by spending significant time in country, conducting preliminary fieldwork to understand informal networks, and attempting to structure our two studies accordingly.

Overall, even when doing quantitative work in which many tasks are subcontracted, there simply is no substitute for personal experience in country. We share a set of advisers who are dedicated field researchers, and we were trained to value an approach to research that prioritizes preparatory fieldwork, regardless of methods. As other professional obligations and the pressure to publish "quantity" increase, our modest hope is that quantitative scholars working in the region—as well as those who advise aspiring quantitative scholars—will appreciate the importance of understanding informal institutions and therefore find as much time as possible for preliminary fieldwork. ■

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096519000131 Published online by Cambridge University Press