

Ethics of Research in Conflict Environments

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Mazurana, Dyan, Karen Jacobsen, and Lacey Andrews Gale, eds. 2013. *Research Methods in Conflict Settings: A View from Below*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lekha Sriram, Chandra, John C. King, Julie A. Mertus, Olga Martin-Ortega, and Johanna Herman, eds. 2009. *Surviving Field Research: Working in Violent and Difficult Situations*. New York: Routledge.

Nordstrom, Carolyn, and Antonius C. G. M. Robben, eds. 1995. *Fieldwork Under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Thomson, Susan, An Ansoms, and Jude Murison, eds. 2013. *Emotional and Ethical Challenges for Field Research in Africa: The Story Behind the Findings*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Abstract

This review essay provides an overview of the literature on ethical challenges and dilemmas facing researchers in conflict and post-conflict environments. This scholarship argues that the basic ethical principles established to guide research on human subjects are necessary but insufficient for research in conflict and post-conflict environments. These environments present unique challenges to informed consent, confidentiality, risk-benefit analysis, researcher security, and Beneficence that require more nuanced guidelines and professional training.

Keywords: ethics, peace, war, conflict, research methods, state surveillance

If methodological problems question the reliability and validity of one's data, then ethical dilemmas question the validity of the researcher's actual presence.

—Kellehear 1989, 64

Introduction

How can researchers manage the numerous ethical issues they confront in conflict-affected environments?¹ In contrast

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1 For the purpose of this review, conflict or conflict-affected environment refers to a geographic location, within either

to the significant body of literature on the ethics of research on human subjects, the literature on the ethics of research in conflict environments is relatively sparse. Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) charged with overseeing the ethics of research on human subjects tend to apply standard ethical frameworks derived from the hard sciences without adapting them to the specific considerations of social science research or the increasingly complex environments in which it takes place. The four edited volumes reviewed here, containing chapters from anthropologists, political scientists, psychologists, sociologists, economists, agronomists, historians, and journalists, are some of the only books on fieldwork in conflict environments and the only ones that give extensive treatment

a country or a region, which is experiencing or emerging from a period of violent political or civil conflict.

to the unique ethical considerations presented by research in conflict settings.² They are highly valuable resources for both senior and junior scholars.

The expansion of security studies into the sub-national sphere and other spaces of insecurity (Adamson 2016) brings the importance of ethically informed fieldwork to the fore. For example, recent articles in *Security Studies* have examined issues of military culture, civil wars, and warlord politics, building on fieldwork in Afghanistan, Somalia, and Uganda (Bell 2016; Ahmad 2016; Malejacq 2016). Other top political science journals are also increasingly publishing scholarship on sub-national violence and insecurity that draws from extensive fieldwork in conflict environments, such as Lebanon (Parkinson 2013) and Burundi (Samii 2013). As the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Global Security Studies* argues, the field of security studies is no longer limited to examinations of state behavior or interstate war (Carpenter 2016). The increased focus on sub-national analyses and non-state actors, however, necessitates improved guidelines for researchers conducting fieldwork in conflict environments. The four edited volumes reviewed here point the way, outlining the key determinants of ethical fieldwork in conflict environments and highlighting the crucial importance of employing them in both qualitative and quantitative fieldwork.

These books emphasize the exceptional nature of field research in conflict environments and the heightened ethical responsibility born by researchers in these contexts. In a rapidly shifting environment where rumor, surveillance, and uncertainty shape people's daily lives and their articulation of this reality, it is often difficult to separate truth from fiction. In such a context, assessing the benefits and harms of one's research is highly challenging, particularly for an outsider. Unlike many other types of research, field research in conflict environments also poses a potential threat to the researcher herself. Few researchers emerge from conflict zones without scars, however invisible. This is evident in the chapters of these volumes. One gets the impression that the process of writing these chapters was a cathartic experience for the authors. It gave them a chance to express the dilemmas and challenges that they faced during fieldwork and to share their hard-won lessons with future researchers.

2 Complementary articles and papers are included in the bibliography and cited throughout this review. Other related books include Richards (2005), and Cramer, Hammond, and Pottier (2011), although the books included in this review give a much more extensive treatment of the ethical and practical considerations of fieldwork in conflict environments.

These books also argue that fieldwork in the conflict environment offers knowledge that the researcher could not otherwise obtain. In conflict environments, state authorities often censor media. Ordinary people may be afraid to discuss their experiences for fear of retribution. In these situations, reliance on media-based datasets may privilege the powerful and further silence the victims of violence (Nordstrom and Robben 1995; Mazurana, Jacobsen, and Gale 2013). Fieldwork can uncover the untold realities of individuals, groups, and organizations—whether victim, perpetrator, or peacebuilder—in conflict environments. The authors of these four volumes agree that fieldwork is important precisely because these stories need to be told.

Below, I consider the relevance of these books for security studies. I then provide an overview and comparison of each volume. Subsequently, I synthesize and discuss the main components of fieldwork ethics, which is the focus of this review. I close by outlining the importance of improved guidance for researchers in conflict settings, particularly in light of the increasing amount of fieldwork conducted by security studies scholars.

Implications for Global Security Studies

Historically, security studies has often overlooked the perspective of those affected by war. Focusing on military strategy, leadership, and interstate war, traditional security studies largely failed to account for the effect of violence and war on both victims and perpetrators. The *Journal of Global Security Studies (JoGSS)* aims to help correct this imbalance. In the inaugural issue of *JoGSS*, the authors argued that the predominant statist understanding of security studies limits scholars' ability to understand the contemporary "deployment and management of violence" (Adamson 2016, 29). Instead, scholars need to be able to understand "spaces of security" wherever they occur (Adamson 2016), "power politics" among whom ever it takes place (Goddard and Nexon 2016), and security (or its absence) as something that is constructed and experienced by individuals and communities (Sjoberg 2016).

The vision of *JoGSS* opens space for the four edited volumes reviewed here. Nordstrom and Robben's (1995, 10) volume directly criticizes the traditional security studies approach, which it argues prioritizes the "rational and coherent structure of death as manifested in such expressions as 'a war machine,' 'do the job,' a 'surgical operation,' and 'an order is an order'" rather than capturing the often "orderless and reasonless" lived experiences of violence and war. Mazurana, Jacobsen, and Gale's (2013) volume views fieldwork as a way to expose the perspectives of those silenced by violence and insecurity, which in

turn helps address the inherent power imbalance that is both a cause and an effect of war and violence. Thomson, Ansoms, and Murison's (2013) volume and Sriram et al.'s (2009) volume are grounded in the conviction that to truly understand war and insecurity, a researcher must build trust with those who issue violence and those who receive it, and gain the particular perspective of each.

Fieldwork is not limited to actions by or within a state, but enables researchers to explore firsthand Adamson's (2016) "spaces of security": through the actions of individuals, within local communities, in refugee camps, along borderlands, in international organizations, through rebel governance structures. By studying power politics where it occurs (Goddard and Nexon, 2016), the researcher can investigate the contestation of power at one of its extremes—in conflict environments where the fight for power upends states, societies, and lives. Fieldwork in conflict environments is also essential for understanding the lived experiences of security and insecurity, as Sjoberg (2016) emphasizes, and how experiences vary across gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, region, and religion. Fieldwork in conflict environments is a crucial explanatory tool that connects global and local security issues, where the local ranges from "San Diego's gangs to community militias protecting civilians in Iraq and Mexico" (Carpenter 2016, 93).

Fieldwork also has the potential to dispel scholars of preconceived notions. Even if researchers simply seek to test hypotheses, they benefit greatly from the inevitably abductive nature of fieldwork (Paluck 2009). Exposure to actual situations in environments where violence is so palpable forces researchers to conceptualize security differently than they might otherwise. This responds to Carpenter's (2016) call for security studies scholars to think about security much more broadly, accepting that many of the existing epistemological and ontological boxes that have characterized security studies are insufficient to describe, explain, or predict the complex and constantly shifting dynamics of global security and insecurity today.

In spite of the importance of fieldwork in conflict environments for understanding how security is manifest in power, space, and time, most security studies PhD students do not receive fieldwork training at all, much less training relevant to conflict environments. Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) bear the primary responsibility for assessing the ethics of fieldwork in conflict environments, but IRB guidelines are rarely adapted for the particular challenges faced by researchers in conflict environments. The chapters contained in these four volumes help fill this gap in knowledge and serve as an invaluable training tool for future generations of students. But, as all of the editors and authors agree, these edited volumes are only a

beginning. The lessons shared in these chapters need to be integrated into standard methods training and be translated into concrete but flexible guidelines that will help scholars and IRB members identify and manage the inter-related ethical, practical, and methodological pitfalls that accompany fieldwork in conflict environments. As the books reviewed here adeptly show, the absence of training in the ethics or practices of fieldwork in conflict environments can have serious repercussions for research subjects and researchers alike. At the extreme, unethical fieldwork could lead to a backlash toward field research in conflict environments, preventing security studies scholars from gaining crucial knowledge about these important contexts.

Overview of the Books

Each of the edited volumes points to strategies and approaches that can help guide the researcher through the chaos, risk, and enchantment of research in the midst of war, violence, and oppression. The authors of these edited volumes reveal sometimes painful stories of reckoning with inadequate preparation for research in such complex contexts. They express the intense responsibility that they felt to do no harm to their research subjects. They discuss their constant concern for their own personal safety and that of their research team. They grapple with the ways in which their perspectives on the conflict environment shifted over time. They acknowledge the difficulty of maintaining objectivity in the midst of violence and conflict. Because of the scope of the challenges facing researchers in conflict environments and the diversity of these environments, no single volume provides sufficient coverage. Combined together, however, they are a highly valuable resource for both experienced field researchers in conflict environments as well as those just starting out.

The oldest book reviewed here, and the most arresting, is Nordstrom and Robben's *Fieldwork Under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival*, published in 1995 by the University of California Press. This book contains fourteen chapters from anthropologists who study the lived experience of violence. The introspective and highly personal nature of these chapters enables the reader to understand the reality of fieldwork in violence. This is Nordstrom and Robben's goal: "the ontics of violence—the lived experience of violence—and the epistemology of violence—the ways of knowing and reflecting about violence—are not separate. Experience and interpretation are inseparable for perpetrators, victims, and ethnographers alike" (Nordstrom and Robben 1995, 3–4). Nordstrom and Robben (1995) argue that violence

transforms all who are in its proximity. It alters people's perceptions of right, wrong, power, poverty, risk, and revenge. The researcher, therefore, must also be an auto-ethnographer—investigating, tracking, and seeking to understand how the lived experience of violence transforms her. She must do this at the same time as she investigates her research subjects' experience of violence. The most courageous of these accounts is by Cathy Winkler, who conducts an auto-ethnography of her own rape in her chapter "Rape Attack: Ethnography of the Ethnographer" (Winkler 1995, 155–84).

For Nordstrom and Robben (1995, 10), the study of violence demands this type of reflexivity. They argue that a detached analysis of violence as simply strategy and tactic "tends to rationalize and domesticate, if not justify, the use of violence." Instead, they aim to help explain the contradictions that occur in the midst of violence: "a simultaneous existence of laughter and suffering, fear and hope, indeterminacy and wont, creativity and discipline, and absurdity and commonplace" (Nordstrom and Robben 1995, 10). While Nordstrom and Robben's (1995, 10) rejection of "rationalist, functionalist, and pragmatist" approaches may not sit well with many security studies scholars, their vivid descriptions of the changing and transformative nature of violence can be highly instructive for all scholars of violence, and particularly those who conduct fieldwork in conflict environments. As the three other books make clear, ethical fieldwork in conflict zones requires that the researcher understand the lived reality of those experiencing violence, either as perpetrators or victims. To anticipate the benefits and harms of field research, including to the researcher herself, the field researcher needs to have sufficient knowledge of the rapidly shifting conflict context. Reading Nordstrom and Robben's powerful volume can be an important first step in gaining a sense of what conflict environments might feel like, and it can serve as a valuable training tool for junior scholars.

While Nordstrom and Robben focus on the lived experience and ethnography of violence, they do not provide many practical solutions for improving the ethics of fieldwork in conflict environments. The other three books pick up where Nordstrom and Robben left off, giving a series of practical recommendations for conducting both methodologically rigorous and ethical fieldwork in conflict environments. The rigor and ethics of fieldwork are highly connected. Methodological rigor ensures a high-quality product that is worthy of the time given by conflict-affected individuals and groups. It is one metric for assessing the potential benefit of the research. Ethical rigor, on the other hand, helps ensure that the implementation of the research methods does not undermine the potential benefit of the research findings.

Research Methods in Conflict Settings: A View from Below, edited by Dyan Mazurana, Karen Jacobsen, and Lacey Andrews Gale and published by Cambridge University Press in 2013, assembles a highly seasoned group of scholars, filmmakers, and journalists to discuss their lessons learned in conflict environments. Mazurana, Jacobsen, and Gale echo Nordstrom and Robben's emphasis on the lived realities of conflict-affected populations, stating that their volume "joins a long intellectual tradition of according epistemic privilege to socially marginalized communities" (Mazurana, Jacobsen, and Gale 2013, 5). Each author is deeply committed to using their research to reveal the daily realities of victims and perpetrators of violence. They are highly aware that this commitment has a potential cost. As Bingham and Connors (2013, 197) write in their chapter: "There is something ironic about going to a war and becoming overly concerned with security. It may seem obvious to say so, but a war is a very dangerous place to be. Risk can be mitigated but it cannot be eliminated."

The eleven chapters in this excellent volume describe the authors' personal and extensive experiences of fieldwork in conflict environments and the lessons that they learned along the way. Several themes weave throughout the chapters. First, the majority of the authors chose to engage directly in policy or practice, rather than confine themselves only to academia. Some, such as Jok, Wessells, Fishstein, and Wilder, even started their own organizations to help the "subjects" they were studying. In their eloquent chapters, the authors describe how and why they took such an active policy approach, which for all of them resulted in part from the expectations that their research raised among poor communities (Jok 2013; Wessells 2013; Fishstein and Wilder 2013; see also Wood 2013, 305). Second, many of the authors emphasize the strong relationship between research ethics and the personal security of the researcher (Bingham and Connors 2013; Mazurana and Gale 2013; Mazurana, Jacobsen, and Gale 2013; Wessells 2013; Wood 2013). If you cannot protect yourself, you cannot protect your data. Mazurana and Gale (2013) provide an excellent overview of how researchers can help ensure their security in active conflict zones. Third, many of the authors argue that ethnographic methods are necessary for research in conflict environments. Wessells (2013, 87), who published in *Science* early in his career, gradually realized that the methodological standards in psychology that required a highly controlled environment did not easily transfer to dynamic research in conflict environments. Furthermore, the conceptual frames, theories, and metrics used by many scholars do not necessarily fit the realities of a local context (Wessells 2013, 89). The authors of this volume argue

that it takes time, and the use of ethnographic methods, to figure this out. “Once they arrive in the field, many researchers realize that the questions they so carefully honed require substantial reformulation or that their intended study subject or methods will not work” (Mazurana, Jacobsen, and Gale 2013, 12).

Emotional and Ethical Challenges for Field Research in Africa: The Story Behind the Findings, edited by Susan Thomson, An Ansoms, and Jude Murison and published in 2013, brings together an excellent group of scholars, all of whom had recently completed their PhDs and conducted extensive field research in the Great Lakes Region of Central Africa. The particular value of this volume is that it is authored by a more junior group of scholars, many of whom are close to contemporary methodological debates and able to understand the unique challenges faced by junior scholars. “Academic literature rarely gives an account of the ‘story behind the findings’, meaning the ethical challenges and emotional pitfalls that you, the researcher, are confronted with before, during, and after the field experience” (Thomson, Ansoms, and Murison 2013, 1). Yet, the editors argue, how the researcher manages the numerous challenges that befall them in places like Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Uganda matters for the research process, its findings, and the emotional health of the researcher. The eleven excellent and thoughtful chapters assembled in this volume will help seasoned and novice researchers better navigate these challenges by providing detailed accounts of how other researchers have navigated them in variegated conflict-affected environments.

Sriram, King, Mertus, Martin-Ortega, and Herman’s 2009 volume, *Surviving Field Research: Working in Violent and Difficult Situations*, published in 2009, fills two crucial gaps in the literature not directly addressed by the other three books discussed above. First, the Sriram et al. volume is widely cited by the other two 2013 volumes and, along with the Nordstrom and Robben (1995) volume, is one of the important reference books on fieldwork in conflict environments. Like the other three volumes, it uses the personal narrative of the field researcher to investigate the challenges, dilemmas, and lessons learned from fieldwork. Unlike the other three volumes, it adopts a more academic tone and more directly addresses many of the methodological and professional standards challenged during fieldwork. Second, it contains a chapter by Elizabeth Paluck (2009) that discusses how she maintain ethical standards during the implementation of Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Paluck’s chapter is the sole

chapter that focuses on the ethics of such a controlled quantitative study. Most of the chapters in all of the volumes focus on ethnographic methods. Paluck concludes that ethical fieldwork requires the use of ethnographic methods, whether you explicitly use these data in your research findings or not. As she states (Paluck 2009, 54), “All of my observations and subsequent critical decisions about methods and ethics with respect to my fieldwork partners came from my intimate engagement with all aspects of the field research.”

It is precisely the breadth of perspective that makes these four volumes valuable. I encourage readers of this article to read each of these books and use them for methods courses and fieldwork preparation. It is rare for researchers to talk about the details of their research process. It is even rarer for them to talk about the uncertainties, mistakes, and lessons learned during their research for fear of reducing confidence in their findings. For this reason alone, each of these books is valuable. But the authors also give highly valuable insights into some of the trickiest research contexts out there: fieldwork in the midst of conflict and violence. Below, I synthesize the books’ main takeaways about the ethics of fieldwork in conflict environments, which I also supplement with other related literature.

Ethical Principles and Guidelines for Research on Human Subjects

One of the most egregious violations of research ethics was the Tuskegee Syphilis Study (1932–1972), in which the US Public Health Service studied the effect of untreated syphilis on African American men in Alabama. The US Public Health Service purported to provide these men with free health care, but in reality refused to cure their disease with penicillin because it would have harmed the study. “These subjects were deprived of demonstrably effective treatment in order not to interrupt the project, long after such treatment became generally available” (Ryan et al. 1979). The Tuskegee Syphilis Study was one of the primary triggers for the Belmont Report, commissioned by the US Department of Health and Human Services in 1979. The Belmont Report and associated, subsequent legislative processes established the ethical principles that guide human subject research in the United States—including the requirement that Institutional Review Boards assess the ethics of all research on human subjects—and form the basis of many ethical research guidelines across the globe.

The Belmont Report outlined three ethical principles and guidelines for research on human subjects: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. These principles and

corresponding guidelines aimed to protect human subjects of biomedical and behavioral research, but today are used by Institutional Review Boards as a basis for guidelines and evaluation of human subject research from all disciplines. *Respect for Persons* is the first ethical principle, and requires the researcher to acknowledge the autonomy of the research subject and protect research subjects with diminished autonomy (Ryan et al. 1979, 5). The second ethical principle, *Beneficence*, requires the researcher both to protect research subjects from harm (i.e., Do No Harm) and to maximize the possible benefits of the research to research subjects (Ryan et al. 1979, 5–6). The third principle of *Justice* refers to the equal distribution of the benefits and burdens of the research.³

To guide the application of these principles, the Belmont Report established several requirements: informed consent, risk/benefit assessment, and guidance for the selection of research subjects. It indicates that respect for persons is protected through *Informed Consent*, or the process through which the research subject indicates that she understands the purpose of the research and consents to participate. Informed consent requires that (1) the researcher provide adequate *information* about the project to enable the potential research subject to understand the commitment that she is making; (2) the information is presented in a way that the research subject can fully *comprehend* its importance; and (3) consent is voluntarily given, without “coercion or undue influence” (Ryan et al. 1979, 7–9).

The report indicates that beneficence is largely ensured through an *Assessment of the Risks and Benefits* of participation in the research for potential research subjects. The risks and benefits that should be assessed are those that pertain to the psychological, physical, legal, social, and economic situation of the research subject (Ryan et al. 1979). While the Belmont Report acknowledges the difficulty of precisely judging the balance between risks and benefits, it recommends that this assessment be done in the most objective way possible and be included in the information provided during the informed consent process.

Justice, particularly in regard to vulnerable subjects, should be protected through “fair procedures and out-

3 The Belmont Report indicates that equal distribution of the benefits and burdens of research can be found in several possible formulations: “(1) to each person an equal share, (2) to each person according to individual need, (3) to each person according to individual effort, (4) to each person according to societal contribution, and (5) to each person according to merit” (Ryan et al. 1979).

comes in the selection of research subjects” (Ryan et al. 1979). Individual justice requires that researchers “not offer potentially beneficial research only to some patients who are in their favor or select only ‘undesirable’ persons for risky research” (Ryan et al. 1979). Social justice “requires that distinction be drawn between classes of subjects that ought, and ought not, to participate in any particular kind of research, based on the ability of members of that class to bear burdens and on the appropriateness of placing further burdens on already burdened persons” (Ryan et al. 1979).

Ethical Dilemmas and Challenges of Research in Conflict Environments

While the ethical principles and guidelines outlined in the Belmont Report form the bedrock of research ethics in conflict environments, scholarship on the ethics of research in conflict environments reveals that they are insufficient to address the particular dilemmas facing researchers in these complex and sensitive environments. Conflict “heightens and amplifies the ethical challenges faced by all researchers” (Goodhand 2000, 15). Thomson argues that “the ethical imperative of ‘doing no harm’ is intensified in difficult contexts where the research environment is politically polarized, armed actors are sometimes present, and the local population lives under constant surveillance” (Thomson 2013, 153). In conflict environments, therefore, research ethics are both more difficult and more important than in non-conflict environments. The following paragraphs outline the particular challenges and dilemmas presented in the literature, and provide some indication as to how they may be addressed.

Obtaining Truly Informed Consent

Obtaining truly informed consent is made more challenging by differences in the researcher’s and the interviewees’ languages, cultures, educational backgrounds, social norms (Leaning 2001, 1433), and power. Yolande Bouka (2013) conducted research in Rwanda in 2008 among released prisoners who had been accused of and imprisoned for acts of genocide. A description of one of her interviews highlights the disparate experiences of the researcher and the research subject, and how this made truly informed consent difficult to obtain:

Jean’s face was as cold as I felt in this windy valley. His eyes were shifting from left to right, as if scanning the horizon for potential uninvited guests that could surprise us in our discussion and denounce him to the authorities. As soon as a neighbor would walk by, he would stop mid-sentence. His answers

were brief, but his eyes had much to say. When he dared to open his mouth for more than a few seconds, it was to praise “L’Etat” for the quality and fairness of the justice system in spite of his ten years of pre-trial detention and the erroneous charges brought against him. We left the courtyard of his modest home after 45 minutes: he had nothing more to say, but he had told us everything. (Bouka 2013, 107)

Several scholars claim that the power imbalance between the researcher and research participant can be partly addressed through careful attention to the quality of the participant–researcher relationship. For Sieber (1993, 18) this “means communicating respectfully and openly with participants and community members throughout the project, respecting autonomy and life-style, and providing useful debriefing about the nature, findings, and value of the research and its likely dissemination.” In addition, the researcher can ensure the interviewees’ consent by giving them the authority to decline to answer specific questions, withdraw their participation at any point during the process, and dictate whether information can be attributed, published without attribution, or used only for informational purposes (Wood 2006, 308). In cases where interviewees have agreed to attribution in the final text, Sriram (2009) argues that it is essential that they have the chance to validate the attributed text before it is formally or informally published.

Maintaining informed consent in the context of unequal power relations between the researcher and the interviewee also requires researchers to refrain from pushing the interviewee to answer questions (Fujii 2009; Thomson 2009a; Norman 2009; Ross 2009). As Ross (2009, 180) writes, this is particularly important in contexts of overt violence and repression: “To research violence required talking to those most affected by the violence. However, the violence itself created the conditions under which seeking information about the violence could provoke further repression.” In these cases, maintaining informed consent may require an interview strategy that focuses on silent listening, rather than on questioning, probing, or prying (Bell 2001; Fujii 2009; Thomson 2009a).

A researcher may also be tempted to compromise informed consent by providing incomplete information about the research project in order to gain access and/or conceal her “ideological or political leanings or general hopes for study findings” (Paluck 2009, 44). Nonetheless, researchers have an obligation to provide sufficient information for prospective participants to make fully informed decisions about their participation (Paluck 2009, 44).

Even with a good process, it is often difficult for an external researcher to understand and thus inform her prospective research participants of all of the potential risks and benefits of the research. Sieber (1993, 18) asserts that perception of risk is highly subjective, and the perspective of the investigator and the interviewee may differ significantly. Consequently, an accurate risk assessment requires particular sensitivity to the culture of the potential participants (Sieber 1993, 19). Wood (2006, 380) explains that she initially felt naïve about the potential risks to prospective participants in her research, in spite of the approval given by her university’s Institutional Review Board. To increase her sensitivity to the real risks, she relied on and learned from her interviewees’ “more highly developed sense of the evolving risks of violence in the area” (Wood 2006, 380). This deep understanding of the context requires intense pre-fieldwork preparation as well as significant time in the country to build understanding and trust (Cammet 2006; Mertus 2009; Thomson 2009a). In addition, other authors assert that the researcher must understand how she is perceived in this culture, and how this influences potential interviewees’ perceptions of risks and benefits of the participation in her research (Brown 2009; Mertus 2009; Radsch 2009). Several authors argue that a good national research team can assist the researcher in building her understanding, although she must continuously seek other perspectives to reduce potential bias (Jacobsen and Landau 2003; Paluck 2009; Thomson 2009a).

Maintaining Confidentiality and Data Security

Even if a researcher is highly sensitive to the culture and social and political dynamics of her research subjects, she will still have difficulty predicting all of the potential benefits and harms of her research. This is particularly true in conflict environments where the institutions of state and society are in flux and outcomes are even more difficult to predict. For Kelman (1982, 88), maintaining confidentiality helps protect the subject from unforeseen circumstances. Because of the difficulty of accurately predicting or calculating the potential magnitude of harm, Kelman (1982, 89) contends that the right to confidentiality “has moral force regardless of whether, in any given case, it can be *demonstrated* that its violation would cause harm.”

To ensure confidentiality, a researcher must guarantee the security of field data, particularly in conflict environments where the data often has political implications (Thomson 2009a; Ross 2009). As Thomson (2013) dem-

onstrates, the researcher has to be prepared to ensure confidentiality even in the face of government surveillance and intense pressure to turn over the data. There are numerous strategies for ensuring data security, from developing a coding system for names or not recording names at all, to taking notes in separate notebooks, to saving typed notes in a secure Internet location (Thomson 2009b). In conflict environments, it is rare to tape interviews (Wood 2006, 381).

Thomson (2013) also notes that there are some contexts where the researcher cannot guarantee interviewee anonymity because of high levels of state surveillance. In these contexts, she argues, a researcher must take additional safeguards to ensure that the information provided by the interviewees remains confidential. This includes working with translators and research assistants to ensure that they cannot reveal the interviewees' identities if pressured by state surveillance to do so (Thomson 2013, 152).

The stress and isolation experienced by researchers in conflict environments may also make it difficult for them to maintain the confidentiality of their sources (Jacobsen and Landau 2003; Wood 2006, 386). "In such emotionally challenging circumstances, most people are susceptible to flattering invitations to share their experiences (and inevitably their data), to entertain new friends with stories (and data) from their field site, to embark on friendships or relationships that may be perceived as compromising the project, or to 'make a difference' by passing on field data 'confidentially' to some (supposedly responsible) person" (Wood 2006, 384).

Maintaining confidentiality can also be challenging if the researcher witnesses or learns of human rights abuses or other violent acts when conducting interviews (Goodhand 2000, 14). Barakat et al. (2002, 994) write that researchers in conflict-affected areas may "be caught between the conflicting obligations of protecting respondents from the risk of violent reprisal and disseminating findings which could promote justice and reconciliation." Nordstrom and Robben (1995, 12) argue that the tension between the researcher's desired objectivity and confidentiality and their obligation to expose repression and injustice is not easily resolved, but has to be carefully managed and considered by each researcher.

Judging Risk and Benefit

As mentioned above, weighing the risks and benefits of research in conflict environments is fraught with ethical dilemmas and challenges. Lundy and McGovern (2006), who conducted research into the histories of those who had disappeared during the Northern Ireland conflict, ar-

gue that just because interviewees experience emotional pain during an interview does not mean that they are unwilling to participate in and do not benefit from the research. According to one participant in their research: "I didn't find any healing in it whatsoever. As I say I found it more upsetting but worthwhile because you know your story was going to be told" (Lundy and McGovern 2006, 59). Other participants also repeatedly "remarked that their own personal costs in giving testimony were secondary to the importance of raising awareness and having their story told" (Lundy and McGovern 2006, 59). Nonetheless, Ball questions researchers' common assumption that the benefits will outweigh the possible harm of re-traumatization. "Once having *opened* the trauma, they must return to an often demanding and unsympathetic environment, without a support system to help deal with the flood of strong emotions that accompany or follow such discussion" (Bell 2001, 185). Unfortunately, there are no general objective criteria for judging the risks and benefits of research in conflict environments.

Goodhand (2000, 13) writes that the way certain subjects are broached in an interview can pose risks to an interviewee. "Some subjects may be taboo because they are too risky while others, though sensitive, may be approached indirectly" (Goodhand 2000, 13). A researcher must be able to judge the difference; researchers must have "a nuanced understanding of local conditions, and an awareness of whom to talk to, how to speak with them, and on what topics" (Thomson 2009a, 121).

Smyth (2001) asks if risk of harm is implicit in the selection of some research topics. If research that has been conducted on the strategies of armed groups is subsequently "used for the purpose of out-maneuvering, militarily defeating or negotiating with such groups, what is the responsibility of the researcher in relation to informed consent of participants?" (Smyth 2001, 6). Gallaher (2009) argues that the same considerations protecting "vulnerable" subjects are not fully relevant for "repellent" groups. She argues that research into repellent groups is an ethical gray area, where the standard ways of leveling the playing field between researcher and subject through "giving back" to informants and sharing drafts of the text with them do not easily apply.⁴ Instead, the most important way for the researcher to give back to re-

4 Gallaher (2009, 129) defines a repellent population as one whose ideology "promotes dominating other groups in society. These sorts of ideologies are found across the political spectrum. Under this rubric, warlords, guerillas, paramilitaries, and even some states could be classified as repellent."

pellent groups is to paint a fair picture of them, providing a more complete and accurate description than is commonly available in the media (Gallaher 2009). The literature on the ethics of field research is particularly silent on the questions that Smyth and Gallaher raise—the ethics of the study of groups that are themselves engaged in harming others—pointing to an important need for further research and writing in this area.

Researcher Security and Emotional Impact on the Researcher

Research in conflict environments does not only pose potential risks to research subjects, but also to the researcher. Unfortunately, measures to ensure researcher security are noticeably absent from standard ethical guidelines. Gallaher (2009, 134) argues that this is a significant oversight, as research is relational and transactional, affecting both the research population and the researcher. She suggests that IRB procedures remedy this by including protocols to protect researchers (Gallaher 2009, 143).

Mertus (2009, 166) argues that self-care and protection are tied to the care and protection of others. “At the heart of both types of care is a belief in human dignity and the equal moral worth of humankind. Whenever people act in ways contrary to their own human dignity, they threaten these fundamental tenets at their root” (Mertus 2009, 166). Mertus (2009) and Mazurana and Gale (2013) propose that academics build on the methods and approaches to staff security developed by humanitarian aid organizations to develop more rigorous approaches to their own security. These methods include a thorough risk and vulnerability assessment, among other daily security measures (Belousov et al. 2007; Mertus 2009; Mazurana and Gale 2013). Goodhand (2000, 13) argues that a risk assessment is insufficient and no substitute for real experience working in conflict environments: “It is unethical to involve researchers who are inexperienced and unfamiliar with working in areas of conflict.” Furthermore, even researchers with significant experience working in conflict environments must continuously “assess whether the results of the research warrant the risks involved” (Goodhand 2000, 13).

Attention to the personal security of researchers is important because researchers may be perceived to play (or actually play) a role in the ongoing conflict. Because researchers are part of the ‘information economy’ of the country, their work may threaten individuals who aim to control and manipulate information and make them appear to be players in the conflict and power dynamics that they are studying (Goodhand 2000, 12; Nilan 2002;

Ross 2009; Thompson 2009a). Talking to specific actors in the conflict, or using key informants as gatekeepers, may also project bias, increasing the risk for both the interviewee and the researcher (Goodhand 2000; Norman 2009). The literature does not offer magic solutions to the management of staff security, other than the development of a nuanced understanding of the context, culture, and the true risks facing the researcher and the research population (Goodhand 2000, 13; Thomson 2009a), and the inclusion of corresponding protocols in IRB approval processes (Gallaher 2009; Fast 2014).

Surprisingly, the literature does not include much advice on how to recognize or address the emotional impact of fieldwork on the researcher. Most of the authors agree that the emotional health of the researcher is necessary for the conduct of ethical research (Mertus 2009; Mazurana and Gale 2013; Thomson 2013). “Researchers who lack the knowledge, ability, and/or discipline to make good decisions to stay physically and emotionally healthy and safe are at risk to themselves, the people on their team, and the people they are interviewing” (Mazurana and Gale 2013, 277). While this seems obvious, my own fieldwork in Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, South Sudan, and Nepal has taught me that it takes active work and distance from the conflict environment to regain emotional health.

When I lived in Burundi during the height of its civil war (2000–2002), I became habituated to a high level of risk and insecurity. As many of the authors here have remarked, risk and insecurity are relative constructs (Nordstrom and Robben 1995; Wessells 2013). I adapted emotionally to the insecurity of a war zone, which was necessary to survive there. However, it was not necessarily good for my emotional health. I realized that I needed physical and emotional distance from Burundi to be able to write up my research findings. Only then could I digest the totality of my data without fearing that I would expose my informants or myself to critique or personal threat. Only when I returned to Burundi in subsequent years—during the post-conflict period (2005–2010)—could I identify the emotional stress that I had been under while living there in the war.

Mazurana and Gale (2013, 288–89) address the effect that vicarious trauma can play on the researcher and her research team. The symptoms “include somatic illness and pain as well as emotional and spiritual distress, all of which have the potential to negatively affect one’s abilities to make decisions and function well” (Mazurana and Gale 2013, 288). They recommend a training module on the Headington Institute’s website that is designed for humanitarian aid workers but would certainly also be useful for researchers. Thomson (2013) argues that strong connections and communication between IRB members and

the researcher can mitigate the emotional effect of fieldwork on the researcher, particularly if the researcher makes a plan to address the emotional effect of the research and receives the necessary support.

The emotional health of the researcher is an area that needs much more attention from IRB members, PhD programs, and advisors. The point is not to make field researchers feel that there will inevitably be something wrong with them after they return from fieldwork, but rather to get them to take the potential emotional impact of fieldwork seriously. In the area of psychology and counseling, there are standard strategies for “supervision” where the health worker has regular opportunities to discuss and get perspective on her experiences. Perhaps similar models could apply to researchers conducting fieldwork in conflict environments. At the very least, this type of counseling would help the researcher address the numerous ethical and methodological challenges she faces during fieldwork. At the most, it would provide crucial early support for researchers, helping prevent negative effects over the longer term.

Giving Back

The final ethical dilemma for fieldwork in conflict environments concerns researchers’ obligation to give back to the subjects of their study. Wood (2006, 383) argues that while some “researchers take the long view and argue that research is nonetheless justified because a sound understanding of conflict is essential to successful intervention and the recreation of social fabric,” her research was given meaning by her interviewees’ continued endorsement of her project, and her sense of obligation to them to see the project through (Wood 2006, 383). Goodhand (2000, 14) agrees with this perspective: “It may be trite to state that truth is the first casualty of war but the fact remains that research can play an important role in countering myths and stereotypes, identifying information blockages and giving voice to the suppressed.” The challenge that researchers face in giving back through “story telling” is that there is no one “truth,” particularly in highly politicized conflict environments (Wilson 1993, 181). “Researching in an ‘ethical manner’ seems not about proclaiming good and evil, but about enabling the reader to hear the voices and appreciate the actions of as many of the different people involved as possible” and by contextualizing these differing perspectives, thereby giving a more accurate representation of the multiple truths (Wilson 1993, 181–82).

Several authors, however, question whether “giving voice” to research participants is sufficient (Nordstrom

and Robben 1995, 11; Schepers-Hughes 1995, 419; Jok 2013; Longman 2013; Wessells 2013). For Schepers-Hughes (1995, 419), the privilege of ethnographic research comes with the responsibility to be “personally engaged and politically committed” to the particular people and communities under study. Practitioners of action research also reject “the position that research should be objective and value-free and that researchers should remain detached and neutral” (Lundy and McGovern 2006, 51). Instead, they aim to place researchers and marginalized groups on equal footing and engage “in a collaborative initiative to bring about social justice and social change” (Lundy and McGovern 2006, 51). Jacobsen and Landau (2003) disagree, arguing that ethical research must be objective and academically rigorous in order to be policy relevant.

Several other authors argue that objectivity is particularly difficult, although necessary, in conflict environments because of the violence and tragedy that one witnesses (Chaitin 2003; Gallaher 2009; Zahar 2009). Ross (2009) agrees that true objectivity is not possible, but that the researcher has a responsibility to carry out methodologically sound research and make the best use of the data gathered to improve the human security of the research subjects. She argues that “it would be grotesque to use the life experiences of informants as mere ‘data’ for our social science research, or, worse, for advancing our careers” (Ross 2009, 183). Nonetheless, a sense of humility is necessary among researchers regarding the degree to which they can actually influence the larger conflict environment, which Goodhand (2000, 14) believes is limited to its contribution to an improved understanding of the context.

While there is no agreement in the literature as to how researchers can and should give back to their research subjects, there is a consensus that researchers must seriously consider their responsibilities to the subjects of study and how the research may benefit them. This, at the very least, would be an attempt to fulfill the three ethical principles articulated in the Belmont Report.

Conclusion

The ethical challenges facing researchers in conflict environments are significant. While many of these challenges and dilemmas are also applicable to other environments, they take on particular significance in conflict environments. The challenge of obtaining truly informed consent is made more difficult by the mistrust that pervades interpersonal interactions in conflict environments and by the often asymmetric power relationship between the researcher and subject. The maintenance of confidentiality

becomes both more difficult and more important because of the unpredictability of the conflict dynamics and the potential impact of the research on those dynamics. The challenge of judging acceptable risk intensifies with already-traumatized research subjects and when the future risk of harm to them is difficult to determine. Finally, the moral and ethical obligation of researchers to give back to the subjects of their research seems to be even greater when those subjects are suffering from violence. The scale of these ethical dilemmas calls for improved standards, guidance, training, and supervision for researchers in conflict environments.

Each of the books reviewed here provides just a piece of the answer. They each leave the reader wanting more: clearer overall guidance, an extremely detailed description of every decision so that you, the reader, will not make the same mistakes. Above, I gave an overview of the ethical issues that arise in fieldwork and what the researcher might do to address them. But this is still inconclusive. It is not foolproof. Wood (2013, 308) questions whether a standard set of guidelines is possible: “Given the differences in local contexts, is a consensus on standards possible? On principles?” The answer seems to be yes and no. Yes, it is possible to alter existing field research guidelines and practices to address the exceptional circumstances faced by researchers in conflict environments. No, it is not possible to develop technical guidelines for fieldwork in conflict environments that are ethically informed. The ethics of research can only be determined by evaluating the particular research topic in the particular context. Ethical guidelines must be flexible.

This is where training and supervision come in. Researchers in conflict environments need support. They need someone who can help them gain perspective on their experiences. For faculty supervising PhD students, this can be very time consuming, but it should be taken seriously and ideally taken into account in evaluating faculty service commitments. Thomson (2013, 153) argues that ethics review boards also need to play a supervisory role by being flexible and engaging in regular dialogue with the applicant, helping both the review board and the applicant better understand the challenges of research in conflict environments. Once in the field, the researcher should regularly revisit her ethics plan and seek guidance from local informants, her advisors or colleagues, and members of the ethics board (Goodhand 2000; Thomson 2013; Wood 2006; Leaning 2001).

The ethnographic bias of the literature discussed here raises a crucial question: Does ethical fieldwork in conflict environments, by definition, have an ethnographic dimension? Most of the authors profiled in this review implicitly or explicitly agree with this assertion. They

agree that ethical fieldwork demands contextual knowledge that enables the researcher to understand the potential benefits and harms of her research in that particular context. They also argue that in these highly sensitive contexts, where victims and perpetrators only voice their true opinions or stories once some degree of trust (however tentative) has been gained, the researcher must build relationships with her subjects. The consequence is that even if your research design does not use ethnographic methods, you will need to employ basic components of ethnography—talking to people, observing the environment, spending time there—to accurately identify the potential benefits and harms (however ambiguous) of your research. It also raises questions about how researchers can ensure that their research abides by ethical guidelines, however vague, when survey firms or other enumerators over which the researcher may not have direct supervision conduct the actual research.

As the books reviewed here make clear, it is important to address these ethical concerns in the field of security studies, where an increasing number of quantitative and qualitative scholars are gathering and using data from conflict environments. For PhD programs, the implication is that students conducting fieldwork need training in some ethnographic methods as well as the appropriate ethical instruction and supervision to ensure that their research is both methodologically and ethically rigorous. For the researcher conducting fieldwork in conflict environments, the task is to be humble; to acknowledge what she knows and does not know; to fill the most important gaps; and to ask for guidance and support when she needs it.

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