

Literature Review
Ethics of Research in Conflict and Post-Conflict Environments

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Susanna P. Campbell¹

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

Abstract

This synthesis provides an overview of the literature on ethical challenges and dilemmas facing research in conflict and post-conflict environments. This literature 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 the authors covered here argue require more nuanced guidelines and professional training.

Introduction

This review synthesizes the literature on the ethics of research in conflict and post-conflict environments.² In contrast to the significant body of literature on the ethics of research on human subjects, the literature on the ethics of research in conflict and post-conflict environments is relatively scant. Nonetheless, the articles and books reviewed here provide important insights into the challenges and dilemmas facing the application of standard ethical research principles – respect for persons, beneficence, and justice – to research in conflict and post-conflict environments. Given the importance of the challenges and dilemmas outlined, the literature is in agreement that specific ethical guidelines and training must be developed for research in conflict and post-conflict environments.

This synthesis begins by providing an overview of standard ethical principles and guidelines for research on human subjects. It then reviews the particular challenges and dilemmas that arise in applying these principles and guidelines to research in conflict and post-conflict environments. It concludes by outlining several authors' suggestions for how to address these challenges.

Ethical principles and guidelines for research on human subjects

The three ethical principles and guidelines for research on human subjects were outlined in the Belmont Report, which was commissioned by the US Department of Health and Human Services in 1979. These principles and corresponding guidelines were intended specifically 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 (Belmont Report 1979, 5). The second ethical principle, *Beneficence*, requires the researcher both to protect research subjects from harm (e.g., Do No Harm) and to maximize the

¹ Susanna P. Campbell is a Research Fellow at the Center on Conflict, Development, and Peacebuilding at The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva – susanna.campbell@graduateinstitute.ch.

² For the purpose of this review, conflict or post-conflict environment refers a geographic area, either within a country or a region, which is experiencing or emerging from a period of widespread open violent conflict.

possible benefits of the research to research subjects (Belmont Report 1979, 5-6). Third, *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 has understood 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” (Belmont Report 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 (Belmont Report 1979, 9). 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 included in the information provided during the informed consent process.

Justice, particularly in the regard to vulnerable subjects, should be protected through “fair procedures and outcomes in the selection of research subjects” (Belmont Report 1979, 11). Individual justice requires assurance that researchers “not offer potentially beneficial research only to some patients who are in their favor or select only ‘undesirable’ persons for risky research” (Belmont Report 1979, 11). 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” (Belmont Report 1979, 11).

Ethical dilemmas and challenges of research in conflict and post-conflict environments

While the ethical principles and guidelines outlined in the Belmont Report form the bedrock of research ethics in conflict and post-conflict environments, all of the literature reviewed here argues that they are insufficient to address the particular challenges and dilemmas facing research in these complex and sensitive environments. Conflict “heightens and amplifies the ethical challenges faced by all researchers” (Goodhand 2000, 15). In conflict and post-conflict environments research ethics are therefore more difficult and possibly 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. Several authors claim that this imbalance 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 interviewees’ consent can be ensured by giving them the authority to decline to answer specific questions, withdraw their participation at any point during the process, and dictate whether

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” (Belmont Report 1979, 6).

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 be given 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 2009; Norman 2009; Ross 2009). As Ross (2009, security and silence, para. 8) 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).

Researchers may also be tempted to compromise informed consent by providing incomplete information about the research project in order to gain access and/or conceal his/her "ideological or political leanings or general hopes for study findings" (Norman 2009; Paluck 2009, methodological and ethical issues, para. 2). Nonetheless, researchers have an obligation to provide sufficient information for prospective participants to make fully informed decisions about their participation (Paluck 2009, methodological and ethical issues, para. 2).

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, with the potential that the perspective of the investigator and the interviewee differ significantly. Consequently, an accurate assessment of risk requires particular sensitivity to the culture of the potential participants (Sieber 1993, 19). Wood (2006, 380) explains that she felt initially naïve about the potential risks to prospective participants in her research, in spite of the approval given by her university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). 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 a high degree of pre-fieldwork preparation as well as serious time in the country dedicated to building understanding and trust (Cammatt 2006; Mertus 2009; Thomson 2009). In addition, 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). 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/his research subjects, she/he will still have difficulty predicting all of the potential benefits and harms of her/his research. This is particularly true in conflict and post-conflict environments where the institutions of state and society are in flux and outcomes are even more difficult to predict. For Kelman (1982, 88), the maintenance of confidentiality helps to 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, the researcher must guarantee the security of field data, particularly in conflict environments where the data often has political implications (Thomson 2009; Ross 2009). 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 and post-conflict environments, taping interviews is rarely recommended (Wood 2006, 381).

The stress and isolation experienced by researchers in conflict and post-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).

Confidentiality may also be challenged 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." Robben and Nordstrom (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 is fraught with ethical dilemmas and challenges. Lundy and McGovern, who conducted research into the histories of those who had disappeared during the Northern Ireland conflict, argue 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 harm that can be caused by possible 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 risk and benefit of research in conflict and post-conflict environments.

Goodhand (2000, 13) writes that risk is present even in the way that subjects are broached in an interview, and require a high degree of political judgment about the particular context. "Some subjects may be taboo because they are too risky while others, though sensitive, may be approached indirectly" (Goodhand 2000, 13). To accurately judge the potential risks and benefits, the researcher must know the difference. The only solution for researchers is to 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, last para.).

Smyth asks if 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-manoeuvring, 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 these "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 repellent 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

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

Mertus (2009, the problem, third para.) 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, the problem, third para.). Mertus (2009) proposes 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). Goodhand (2000, 13) argues that a risk assessment is insufficient, and must be supplemented by 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 2009). Furthermore, 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 offers no 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).

Giving back

The final ethical dilemma for fieldwork in conflict and post-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 tell their stories and 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

⁴ Paluck (2009, defining repellent populations, first para.) defines a repellent population as one whose ideology “promotes dominating other groups in society. These sorts of ideologies may be found across the political spectrum. Under this rubric, warlords, guerillas, paramilitaries, and even some states could be classified as repellent.”

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 and post-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 2006, 181-182).

Several authors, however, question whether “giving voice” to research participants is sufficient (Robben and Nordstrom 1995, 11; Schepher-Hughes 1995, 419). For Schepher-Hughes (1995, 419) the privilege of ethnographic research comes with the responsibility to be “personally engaged and politically committed” to the 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 sound in order to be policy relevant.

Several other authors argue that objectivity is particularly difficult, although necessary, in conflict and post-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, human security and the relevance of research, first para.). 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 consensus that researchers must seriously consider their responsibilities to the subjects of study and how the research may also benefit them, at the very least in an attempt to fulfill the three ethical principles articulated in the Belmont Report.

Conclusion

The challenges and dilemmas facing research ethics in conflict and post-conflict contexts are significant. While many of these challenges and dilemmas are likely also to be applicable in non-conflict countries, they take on particular significance in conflict and post-conflict environments. The challenge of obtaining truly informed consent is made more difficult by the mistrust that pervades interpersonal interactions in conflict and post-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 impact of the research on those dynamics. The challenge of judging acceptable risk intensifies when research subjects are traumatized, and the current and future risk and harm of the research to them is difficult to determine. Finally, the moral and ethical obligation of researchers to give back to the subjects of their research would seem to be even greater when those subjects are suffering the effect of war and violent conflict. The scale of these ethical dilemmas calls out for improved standards, guidance, and training for researchers in conflict and post-conflict environments.

The potentially significant risk faced by research subject and researcher alike, requires more nuanced guidance for researchers in conflict and post-conflict countries than can be provided by simple checklists and guidelines (Baarts 2009; Goodhand 2000; Kellehear 1989; Kelman 1982;

Wood 2006). “The most responsible and relevant ethics are, or will be, those which will arise from the particular social and moral complexities of the research, the type of participants, that is, their particular characteristics, and their social and political contexts” (Kellehear 1989, 71). To this end, several of the authors discussed above have developed ethical frameworks and questions to guide researchers in conflict and post-conflict environments.

Goodhand (2000, 14) outlines several practical precepts for conflict researchers.

- “Negative impacts can to a great extent be minimized in advance by:
 - sensitive selection of mature researchers aware of ethical dilemmas;
 - getting the right balance of insider and outsider researchers with relevant language skills and religious and ethnic backgrounds;
 - predicting likely ethical issues;
 - awareness of implicit messages given as a result of selection of research areas;
 - a detailed analysis of how the research is likely to be affected by, or affect, the local conflict (Goodhand 2000, 14).”
- “During the research period researchers need to:
 - blend in with their surroundings, keep a low profile and not attract unwelcome attention to the research subjects themselves;
 - constantly monitor the security situation and analyze risk, particularly by listening to local informants;
 - obtain informed consent;
 - honestly examine the power relationships between researcher and research subjects;
 - explain clearly the objectives of the research;
 - develop methodological flexibility and adapt methods appropriate to the security risk and need for confidentiality;
 - appreciate the value of restraint: to know when it is time to stop” (Goodhand 2000, 14).
- “After research it is important to:
 - feed back, in so far as security considerations allow, the results to research subjects;
 - build links to local partners and plan follow-up activities so the research is not purely an extractive exercise” (Goodhand 2000, 14).

Leaning (2001, 1432) proposes the guidelines below for research among refugee and internally displaced populations.

- “Undertake only those studies that are urgent and vital to the health and welfare of the study population” (Leaning 2001, 1432).
- “Restrict studies to those questions that cannot be addressed in any other context” (Leaning 2001, 1432).
- “Restrict studies to those that would provide important direct benefit to the individuals recruited to the study or to the population from which the individuals come” (Leaning 2001, 1432).
- “Ensure the study design imposes the absolute minimum of additional risk” (Leaning 2001, 1432).

- “Select study participants on the basis of scientific principles without bias introduced by issues of accessibility, cost, or malleability” (Leaning 2001, 1432).
- “Establish highest standards for obtaining informed consent from all individual study participants and where necessary and culturally appropriate from heads of household and community leaders (but this consent cannot substitute for individual consent)” (Leaning 2001, 1432).
- “Institute procedures to assess for, minimize, and monitor the risks to safety and confidentiality for individual subjects, their community, and their future security” (Leaning 2001, 1432).
- Promote the well-being, dignity, and autonomy of all study participants in all phases of the research study” (Leaning 2001, 1432).

Smyth and Robinson (2001, 209) provide the following summary of the characteristics of quality research in violent divided societies. “Quality research:

- focuses on an issue or a problem which is socially relevant and valuable to understand;
- takes into account the complexity of the issue or problem and its various facets;
- is designed to collect data on the issue in a way which will inform us about these various facets;
- is carried out in a reliable, valid, ethical and professional way;
- takes responsibility for the impact of the study on those studied, the researchers and on those reading the results;
- is designed to take account of conditions in the field of study, including issues of safety;
- addresses the issues of inter-subjectivity and incorporation of polarized perspectives in the data collection and analysis;
- makes itself accountable to the constituency addressed by the research as well as to funders;
- makes explicit the loyalties and alignments of the researchers and describes measures employed to incorporate other perspectives into the analysis, and
- approaches divided societies in an interdisciplinary manner – for example, in research which is primarily psychological in focus, that the impact of economic or political societal factors is addressed; conversely, in political or economic research, the impact of psychological or emotive aspects is addressed” (Smyth and Robinson 2001, 209).

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