Ethical dilemmas in conducting research with ex-combatants in post-apartheid South Africa

By

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Abstract

This paper addresses the issue of ethical challenges encountered in conducting research with non-statutory ex-combatants in post-apartheid South Africa. There is currently a concern in South Africa that the government's failure to address and meet the needs of ex-combatants could plunge that sector into desperate straits, antithetical not only to political stability, but to inclusiveness, non-violence, protection and access to rights and justice. Thus the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) embarked on an Ex-combatants Policy Dialogue Project. The author was part of a team that ran the project and was also responsible for evaluating the project. This involved accessing and interviewing ex-combatants. It was in his engagement with ex-combatants that he encountered numerous interrelated ethical dilemmas concerning the issues of access, safety (his own as well of that of the wider public), as well as the well-being of ex-combatants as research participants. Evidence suggest that this sector of the population is disgruntled largely because of the flawed way in which DDR took place specifically, and the slow pace of transformation in South Africa generally.

Ex-combatants have been the subject of much research from civil society groups without them necessarily deriving significant benefit from of their involvement in said research. This has made them apprehensive at least, and reluctant at most to engage in research projects. Furthermore, there has also been a high level of organization and mobilization among ex-combatants, which, in itself is not necessarily negative. This, however, has lead to problems when they had agendas and concerns, which were either not on the agenda or could not necessarily be addressed by researchers. This has resulted in safety concerns especially in cases where accusations and threats are made. The challenge, therefore, is how to gain access to ex-combatants without compromising one's safety and the integrity of one's research. An additional and related dilemma involves the flawed DDR process, which has essentially been conducted haphazardly. In my engagement with them, ex-combatants made revelations about weapons not handed in during the DDR process and the fact that these could be used either against the government or for criminal purposes if their concerns and interests are not given due attention. There have been numerous reports of ex-combatants involvement in the recent flare-up of xenophobic violence that had gripped South Africa recently, as well as other criminal activities. The dilemma here is what to do with information disclosed under assumptions of anonymity and confidentiality, but which could have implications for public safety and security. This paper reflects on these ethical dilemmas and how they were addressed. Implicit in this discussion is also an exploration on how they could possibly be better dealt with.

Introduction

In *Surviving Fieldwork* (1990), Nancy Howell remarks that when one factors in illness, auto accidents and natural disaster, then all fieldwork is necessarily dangerous (in Gill, 2004). Following this line of reasoning, it could thus be argued that all researchers, regardless of the contexts in which they work or the topics that they pursue, are susceptible to the potential threats outlined above. Yet, while this might be true, it obscures the fact that research contexts and topics are varied and that this variability impacts on how the research, the researcher, as well as the researched is affected. Some research contexts and topics lend themselves to risks and complications, which are less likely to be encountered in other research contexts or topics. Based on this, one therefore has to concede that some research may be more dangerous that others, especially if one considers the range of topics that have interested social scientists and the diverse contexts in which they are known to ply their trade. Subject and context-specific factors often demand that we confront and deal with concerns, issues and ethical considerations that one might not find in other contexts.

One such context where subject and context-specific factors influence ethical considerations is the post-conflict context. Conducting post-conflict research is ethically complex, especially as the research participants are often vulnerable and disadvantaged people (Davison, 2004). This, in conjunction with the nature of the post-conflict context, also increases our vulnerabilities as researchers. What adds significantly to this complexity is the fact that there are risks and challenges, many of which do not lend themselves to straightforward prediction, inherent in conducting fieldwork research in these settings. Researchers in post-conflict settings sometimes have to deal with issues of mistrust and even accusations relating to their background, which has implications for their ability to secure data and maintain their safety (Gill, 2004).

Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, social scientists, particularly those from North America, began reflecting and discussing the ethical dilemmas faced by fieldworkers studying and living in a world beset by political turmoil (Bourgois, 1990). The result has been that many now include in the reports and papers, a discussion of the methodological and personal ethical dilemmas they faced during their fieldwork. Yet the issue of research ethics is primarily still defined in narrow, unproblematic, traditional terms, with the overriding ethical concerns remaining issues such as informed consent, confidentially, and anonymity. While all of these are indeed vitally important issues that must be confronted during fieldwork and the write-up process (Bourgois, 1990), researchers are often ill-equipped to address ethical quandaries that fall outside this narrowly defined framework. These include the human tragedies and other dilemmas likely to be encountered in the course of doing fieldwork research within post-conflict settings. Researchers often do not know how to confront and address the challenges posed by internal contradictions one is likely to encounter when doing research in post-conflict settings. According to Davison (2004), discussion around research ethics rightly tend to focus on the protection of the well-being and rights of the research participants. Yet researchers are also confronted with a moral responsibility that could compete with the one above. That is, our responsibility towards ensuring our own well-being, as well as that of the broader public.

This paper, although supporting the primacy of protecting the well-being and rights of the research participants, will highlight less visible and familiar, but equally fundamental ethical dilemmas and debates, which have often been neglected. Reflecting on my experiences in participating in an ex-combatant project and conducting research with ex-combatants[1] in post-apartheid South Africa, the paper considers among others, the processes and practices that

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[1] Following Gear (2000), ex-combatants here are defined as the non-statutory fighters of South Africa's past violent conflict who are not currently part of the statutory safety and security agencies, i.e., South African National Defence Force (SANDF), and the South African Police Services (SAPS).

heighten potential for vulnerability and harm to the researcher conducting fieldwork in post-conflict settings. This includes the potential for physical harm as well as psychological distress brought on by the competing moral responsibilities one could likely encounter. The paper starts with a background to the specific project in which the author was involved and on which his ethical reflections considered in this paper are based. This will serve the purpose of contextualising the ethical issues of concern in this paper. This is followed by a critical reflection of specific ethical dilemmas and how these were dealt with by the author.

Contextual framework

South Africa has a long history of conflict dating back to the arrival of the first European settlers in 1652. History abounds with examples of conflicts and military confrontations resulting from tensions over political exclusion, land expropriation, taxes and other oppressive policies. Examples of these include the many wars of dispossession and colonial conquest from the first war against the Khoisan[2] in 1659, to the Bambatha uprising[3] of 1906 (TRC Final Report, Vol. 1, 1998). The latter was regarded as the last case of armed resistance against colonial domination, oppression and exploitation prior to the birth of Apartheid in 1948 (Thompson, 2003). Thus anti-colonial protest actions before 1948 and the introduction of apartheid were largely characterized by non-violence.

When the National Party came to power in 1948, it implemented a range of draconian laws aimed at entrenching white supremacy and ensuring racial

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[2] Khoisan is the name given to the two major indigenous groups that occupied South Africa. These groups were the *Khoi* (more generally known by the derogatory term *Bushmen*) and the San (also known as *Hottentots*). The Khoi were pastoralists, while the San were hunter gatherers (Davenport & Saunders, 2000).

[3] The Bambatha uprising, which was led by Bambatha kaMancinza chief of the Zondi people, was a Zulu revolt against British rule and the imposition of a poll tax of 1 pound on adult males in the Natal Colony (Redding, 2000).

purification in South Africa. Even in the aftermath of this, Black people responded with predominantly non-violent protest actions in the form of boycotts, strikes, civil disobedience and non-cooperation. These actions, however, merely motivated the Apartheid government to intensify its use of increasingly repressive measures such the banning of liberation movements and the imprisonment of its leaders as a means of, at best eliminating resistance against Apartheid policies, and at least containing it. Liberation movements such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the (Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) responded by forming armed military wings in the early 1960s and engaging in armed conflict against the government security forces for the next approximately thirty years. They focused mainly on government and military targets[4], while industrial targets were also singled out for sabotage. Many young people were recruited into the military wings and were provided local and international training with the aim of carrying out attacks on identified targets. During the 1980s, tensions[5] between the Zulu-aligned Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the ANC escalated into open warfare in the black townships of South Africa[6] (van der Merwe & Lamb, 2007). Political violence continued unabated in the early 1990s, even after the unbanning of the liberation movements and the release of political prisoners such as Nelson Mandela. Continuing violence[7], however, did not prevent multi-party negotiations from taking place during the transition to a democratic dispensation.

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[4] Initially distinction was drawn between soft and hard targets. In June 1985, however, the ANC would drop this distinction and direct attacks towards any person, organization, or institution, which supported Apartheid structures (Lotter, 1997). Attacks were now directed towards any person, organization, or institution, which supported Apartheid structures.

[5] Although both the ANC and IFP were opposed to apartheid, the IFP chose to work within apartheid structures in order to oppose racial discrimination, exploitation, and oppression.

[6] The TRC later implicated the state security forces in fueling these conflicts by supplying arms to the IFP.

[7] During this time the boundaries between political and criminal violence became increasingly obscured, with even the state security forces making use of illegal and extra-legal methods to achieve its goals (van der Merwe & Lamb, 2007).

One of the challenges during the negotiation process was: what to do with the many non-statutory[8] combatants produced from the time arms were taken up in the early 1960s, until the armed conflict between the IFP and the ANC[9] in the 1990s. Because of the universally held belief that an effective transition from war to peace is dependent on a successful disarmament, demobilization and reintegration program (DDR) for ex-combatants, South Africa decided to take this course of action. Unfortunately, results from the three most comprehensive studies[10] done on DDR in the almost fifteen years since South Africa became a democracy, indicate that the DDR process in South Africa has had limited success.

According to van der Merwe and Lamb (2007), the limited success stemmed from lack of proper planning, coordination, and implementation of effective programs. Government seemed to lack clear ex-combatant policy directives and had essentially adopted an ad-hoc approach in dealing with ex-combatant issues. Although state funding had been made available, this was sporadic, difficult to access and politically selective. Furthermore, incapacity on the part of government resulted in massive under-spending. This has resulted in the needs of ex-combatant issues going largely unaddressed and unmet, resulting in a fear that the approximately 80 000 ex-combatants may become a significant destabilizing force (Lamb, 2005, in Mika, 2007).

Ex-combatant communities on the other hand, lacked coherence, which resulted in a fragmented engagement with government when this did take place. In addition to this, and despite the fact that more commonalities than differences exist among different ex-combatant entities, there was no platform

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[8] These are ex-combatants who fought in the armed struggle against the statutory former South African Defence Force (SADF). Included in this category is the armed formations listed in footnote 9.

[9] This conflict produced armed actors in the form of the ANC-aligned Self Defence Units (SDUs) and the IFP-aligned Self Protection Units (SPUs).

[10] See Gear (2002); Liebenberg and Rolfs (2001); and Mashike and Mokalobe (2003).

on which these commonalities could be articulated and consolidated. Thus there has been a concern that government's failure to address and meet the needs of ex-combatants could plunge that sector into desperate straits, antithetical not only to political stability, but to inclusiveness, non-violence, and protection and access to rights and justice (Mika, 2007). The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR), as an organization that shared these concerns, therefore embarked on a process of facilitating sectoral coordination and promoting national policy development with regards to ex-combatants in South Africa.

CSVR is a multi-disciplinary non-governmental research organization that is committed to the promotion of peaceful societies based on democracy, human rights, social justice, equality and human security. It aims to contribute to the building of violence-free societies and to promote sustainable peace and reconciliation by means of research, advocacy and other interventions and through establishing strategic partnerships with organs of the state, NGOs, community organisations, individuals and international allies[11]. Transitional justice, as one of the programmatic focal areas of CSVR, was established in 1994 with the purpose of engaging with various issues in relation to the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa. Since then, the programme has evolved into different thematic areas, one involving ex-combatants. Much has been written about the potential threat that ex-combatants pose to peace and stability in South Africa due to unmet and unaddressed needs. Thus in 2007, CSVR, with its commitment towards preventing violence, healing its effects, and building sustainable peace and reconciliation, embarked on an Ex-combatant/Military Veterans Policy Dialogue Project.

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[11] From the CSVR website: http://www.csvr.org.za

The CSVR Ex-combatants/Military Veterans Policy Dialogue Project[12]

In 2007, CSVR initiated an Ex-combatants/Military Veterans Policy Dialogue Project with funding received from Atlantic Philatrophies[13]. Policy dialogues are carefully constructed, deliberative meetings that address both politically controversial and technically complex aspects of an issue in a dispute. According to Adler and Cilico (2003), policy dialogues seek to build consensus recommendations between the public, private, and civic sectors through leaders who are in a position to forge alliances, make decisions, or strongly influence the trajectory of a possible solution to a challenging issue. They are based on the assumption that ordinary people have the capacity, means, and will to participate in shaping key decisions that affect their own welfare (Adler & Cilico, 2003). On the basis of this, it was hoped that the CSVR project would have positive policy spin-offs for ex-combatants and contribute to minimizing the destabilizing potential it could have in South Africa.

The following expected short-term outcomes for the first three years of the project were envisaged:

- Greater levels of networking and collaboration between civil society organisations and others in the ex-combatant sector;
- Better understanding of the needs of their constituencies, of deficits in services, by civil society organisations and of the strategic role civil society organisations could play in addressing these;
- Greater awareness of the problems facing ex-combatants and an informed policy debate on the issues.

In order to achieve these outcomes, the following activities were planned:

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[12] Much of the descriptive information related to this project was gleaned from CSVR project documents and other background material.

[13] As of May 2007, Atlantic Philatrophies was the largest non-governmental donor in the ex-combatant sector in South Africa with grants totaling R26 862 269.00 having been made to three grantees up until then (Mika, 2007).

- A series of meetings with civil society organisations, government departments, Military Veterans Associations and ex-combatant organisations to establish the extent of existing services and resources available to ex-combatants;

- Compilation of a handbook outlining what services are available to ex-combatants for use in the sector and how to access these;

- Six workshops with key stakeholders aimed at examining existing policies and projects for ex-combatants and to identify policy and service gaps;

- Based on the workshops, a series of policy reports were to be produced and disseminated to potential stakeholders;

- Recommendations for policy revisions and improved service delivery were to be made to relevant parliamentary portfolio committees. This was to be preceded by meetings with key contacts in the Ministry and Department of Defence dealing with veterans' affairs, and Department of Defence Portfolio Committee members.

The project started in early 2007 when CSVR engaged a variety of stakeholders working in the ex-com sector, with the purpose of getting buy-in for their participation in the project. Key areas on which the policy dialogues would focus were identified. During the latter half of 2007 and the first half of 2008, the following workshops, each focusing on one of the identified focus areas, were held[14]:

i.   Skills Development and Job Creation
ii.   Ex-combatant Involvement in Crime and Crime Prevention
iii.   The Role Of Ex-Combatants In Memorialisation Processes In South Africa
iv.   Psychosocial Interventions
v.   Exhumations and Reburials
vi.   Restorative Justice and Prosecutions

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[14] Only the first four workshops formed part of the evaluation exercise, since these were the only ones to have been completed when the evaluation got under way.

Project evaluation[15]

At the beginning of 2008, I conducted an evaluation of the policy dialogue project[16]. Information generated by the evaluation was to be used as a basis for:

- Improving the quality of the remaining workshops.
- Assessing the effectiveness of the CSVR's approach in general and the workshop methodology in particular in advancing the causes of ex-combatants in South Africa;
- Extending the application of this approach to other countries in transition and dealing with the ex-combatant factor.

It was ultimately hoped that the evaluation would provide the basis for sound and improved decision-making *vis-à-vis* ex-combatant needs and concerns. This then also provided justification for the evaluation.

The generic goal of most evaluations is to provide "useful feedback" to a variety of audiences including donors, client-groups, administrators, staff, and other relevant constituencies. In the case of the CSVR Ex-combatants/Military Veterans Policy Dialogue Project evaluation, these audiences will be limited to the CSVR as facilitators of the project, and Atlantic Philanthropies, which provided the funding for cost of planning and coordinating the workshops. The feedback mentioned above relates to the following issues:

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[15] Much of the descriptive information related to this project was gleaned from CSVR project documents and other background material.

[16] The author joined the CSVR in January 2008 and was employed specifically for the purpose of evaluating the policy dialogue project. During the course of conducting the evaluation, the author was also involved in the remaining policy dialogue workshops. The ethical concerns and challenges reflected on in this paper are based on the author's experiences in both the policy dialogue workshops and the evaluation exercise. It also needs to be added that both the policy dialogue project and the evaluation thereof involved both ex-combatants, as well as other stakeholder representatives from government and civil society. The ethical concerns and challenges reflected on here, however, are confined to those encountered in the author's interactions with ex-combatants.

- The efficiency of running the project

- The effectiveness of individual workshops

- The appropriateness of CSVR strategy

- The impact of CSVR project

Since the focus of the evaluation was on the experiences of the policy dialogue workshop participants, one aspect of the evaluation design involved conducting semi-structured qualitative interviews[17] with the use of an interview guide with workshop participants. Interview questions were open-ended and focused on eliciting information needed to meet the evaluation objectives. The open-ended nature of the questions gave interviewees significant latitude in the responses they could give and thus allowed for the gathering of discursive information. Qualitative interviews were conducted with approximately ten ex-combatants who participated in the CSVR ex-combatant policy dialogue project. All of the ex-combatant formations were represented in the interviews. Interviews were conducted in both Johannesburg and Cape Town, either at the CSVR offices[18] or at the interviewee's place of work or home as per prior arrangement.

The ethical challenges

A number of ethical challenges were encountered both in the workshops and the evaluation of the workshops. Although I was involved in both of these, my level of involvement was different in each. While I was the sole researcher in the evaluation exercise, I was only a member of a team in the case of the workshops. This team consisted of 5 members of the CSVR Transitional Justice Programme staff including the programme manager. Though my involvement in

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[17] The evaluation used a triangulated methodology. For the purpose of this paper, however, the methodological discussion will be confined to the qualitative interviews that were conducted since these provided the context for the ethical challenges that is of concern in this paper. Although interviews were also conducted with workshop participants other than ex-combatants, the ethical issues reflected on in this paper arise primarily from my interactions with ex-combatants.

[18] In addition to the head office in Johannesburg, CSVR also has an office in Cape Town that is used solely for the management of the transitional justice programme.

the workshops was extremely limited, I was nonetheless exposed to important ethical issues that warrant consideration within the context of this paper. What thus follows is a reflection on the ethical issues encountered in the course of my participation in the workshops as well as those encountered in the process of evaluating the ex-combatant policy dialogue project. This includes a discussion of how these ethical challenges were dealt with.

Gaining access

As have been mentioned previously, the DDR process in post-apartheid has had little success. Many ex-combatants sacrificed their education, their youth, as well as life with their families in order to go underground and fight for freedom for all South Africans. Yet in the almost fifteen years since the attainment of that freedom to which they have undoubtedly made an invaluable contribution, few of them have reaped the rewards for the sacrifices that they have made. This has led to a pervasive sense of betrayal on the part of ex-combatants by those who propelled them into the armed struggle. Gear sums up the sense of betrayal: "We are spanners to fasten bolts, after the bolts have been fastened, we are sidelined..." (2002, p.10). The precarious socio-economic situation that many ex-combatants are confronted with underlies this sense of betrayal. While some have met success in the new South Africa, this has eluded the majority of them. When ex-combatants returned home after the unbanning of liberation movements, many of their expectations were not met and remain unmet. This has fuelled feelings of anger and frustration, which is compounded by the fact that, not only did they have expectations, but so did their families.

The problems and issues facing ex-combatants in post-apartheid South Africa have attracted significant interest. Scholars have made them the subject of scientific scrutiny, while civil society groups have come to the fore claiming to want to advocate on their behalf. All these initiatives off-course require ex-

combatant involvement and have further fostered expectations by ex-combatants that their plight would improve. Despite their involvement in research and other activities purported to benefit them, ex-combatants, however, feel that they have received little substantial benefit from their involvement particularly in research activities (Adonis, 2008). This has left them with a deep suspicion and reluctance to become involved in programs and projects aimed at benefiting them, and have thus created problems for researchers and practitioners in terms of getting access to ex-combatants.

CSVR has been working in the ex-combatant sector for a number of years and has managed to distinguish itself, in the eyes of ex-combatants at least, as one of the few organisations that are genuinely committed to serving the needs and interests of ex-combatants. This has enabled the organisation to successfully build relationships with various ex-combatant entities and leaders, which in turn has greatly facilitated issue of access and getting ex-combatants to buy into the CSVR ex-combatants/military veterans policy dialogue project. This, however, did not mean that the workshops have progressed without any problem. As mentioned previously, ex-combatants have generally been distrustful of researchers and civil society groups whom they feel have exploited them and given them nothing but empty promises. As a result many ex-combatants are extremely vocal about their concerns. This is particularly the case with those in leadership positions, many of whom participated in the workshops.

While it was easy to attract ex-combatant leaders to become involved in the policy dialogue project, attracting ordinary members proved to be more difficult. It is assumed that this was because of the pervasiveness of significant levels of distrust and suspicion amongst ex-combatants. Many have spoken to me about having in the past participated in research and then never hearing from researchers after they have collected their data. This fuelled the belief that researchers and practitioners exploit ex-combatants by using their lives for the

basis of publishing books, but with ex-combatants deriving no benefit from such publications. This has caused ordinary ex-combatants to be apprehensive at least and unwilling at most to participate in research or other projects. Thus the CSVR, despite its profile, had difficulty in attracting ordinary ex-combatants. The willingness of ex-combatant leaders to participate in the project could possibly be explained by the assumption that they, but virtue of their leadership positions, are more likely to benefit from projects geared towards addressing their needs. They would as a result be more inclined to participate. Given that CSVR had successfully cultivated relations with ex-combatant leadership, we were therefore able to use leaders to attract ordinary ex-combatants to the project. Gaining access to ex-combatants was further facilitated by the fact that all ex-combatants who participated in the project were black South Africans and shared cultural and ideological backgrounds with some members of the CSVR project team. This was important in the establishment of rapport and a relationship based on trust, as well as potential linguistic and cultural complication that could have arisen in the interaction between the CSVR team and ex-combatants.

Physical safety

Risk of harm is a prime ethical consideration and while this is possible in most research contexts, the potential for risk increases substantially amplified in post-conflict research contexts due to number of factors. Beside the fact that there is a history of violence, the topics that researchers and practitioners typically seek to address in post-conflict situations are often sensitive to say the least. Furthermore, research populations are more often than not, marginalised and vulnerable. This increases the vulnerability of those working in these contexts. What makes the issue of safety for those working in the post conflict context even more critical is the fact that safety risk does not lend itself to easy, straightforward prediction. A fairly stable and safe fieldwork situation can easily become problematic and uncomfortable once one becomes involved.

Topics not anticipated to be especially risky can quickly become so during the process of fieldwork. In other words, risk may only become manifest during the course of one's work (Davison, 2004).

In South Africa, structural and personal factors have caused many ex-combatants to be unable to successfully integrate back into civil life. Combat experience has left many ex-combatants emotionally distressed, which has led to a sense of frustration and of not being understood by their families, their communities, and society at large. As a result, many ex-combatants feel like outcasts. Additionally, they are saddled with the stigmatization of having fought for the struggle, but not having anything to show for it; of being mad; and of being trouble makers who are involved in criminal and other illegal activities (Adonis, 2008).

As mentioned in the previous section, CSVR in its attempt to contributing to the successful social and economic reintegration of ex-combatants, has managed to establish good working relations with various ex-combatant entities. One of the policy dialogue workshops dealt with the issue of ex-combatants in crime and crime prevention. It needs to be added that decisions around the workshop focal areas were arrived at after a broad process of stakeholder consultation that included the relevant government departments, non-governmental agencies, and ex-combatant structures. Ex-combatant members invited to the workshop did not express any reservations about the title of this particular workshop. Yet during the workshop, some ex-combatants took offense to the workshop title. In addition to this they also took exception to the conduct of a workshop participant who represented the provincial community policing forum, and the way the workshop was being facilitated (Adonis, 2008). They regarded all of these issues as perpetuating the stigma that all ex-combatants were involved in crime and illegal activities.

Although no direct or overt physical threats were made, the accusatory and hostile demeanor displayed by ex-combatants led to workshop organizers experiencing heightened sense of physical threat. The situation became potentially explosive and the facilitator appeared unable to control the workshop proceedings. The fact that the facilitator had a different background from that of the ex-combatants did not appear to help matters. With the facilitator being unable to bring things under control, the situation was diffused by a member of the CSVR team who shared the racial, linguistic and ideological background of the ex-combatants. He was also largely responsible for establishing and cultivating CSVR's relationship with ex-combatant structures. He had thus been able to develop trusting relationships with ex-combatants, gaining their acceptance and dissolving the insider – outsider barriers.

According to Bourgois (1990), the development of trust and gaining acceptance in order to break down barriers in research relationships is important if we as researchers want to encourage informants to forget who we are and what we do. In addition to this, Kovats-Bernat (2002) suggests we apply a localized ethic when dealing with possible victimization or threat. By this he means adequately listening to local populations in deciding what conversations (and silences) were important. In the case of the CSVR workshop, it is argued that the development of trust and gaining acceptance, as well as the ability to be responsive to the demands of the situation was greatly facilitated by the shared cultural, linguistic, and ideological frame of reference between the member of the CSVR team and the ex-combatants. This enabled him to diffuse a potentially volatile situation.

Emotional distress

Many factors can affect distress levels of researchers. These tend to be embedded within the context of the situation in which they arise. They also have the potential to pose significant ethical quagmire for researchers. My interaction with ex-combatants was a significant source of stress. This was as a result of the moral ambiguity caused by having access to information and the competing possibilities of what to do with it. During my interviews with them, some ex-combatants made disclosures that pointed to their possible involvement in the xenophobia violence that took place. Others, in talking about the frustrations that face ex-combatants, spoke about their potential for getting involved in crime and the fact that this is increasingly likely given the fact that the disarmament process was flawed and that many ex-combatants still have access to stock piled weapons not handed in during the disarmament process.

The fact that this information could have possibly been exaggerated did not mitigate the impact it had on me. I could have ignored the claims as the attempts by frustrated ex-combatants to elevate their threat potential to much more than what it was in reality. Yet, I felt that there was sufficient reason for me to believe that the claims made could possibly be true. I had my engagement with ex-combatants at a time when South Africa was experiencing it worst case a xenophobic violence since the end of apartheid. The fact that this violence against foreigners was confined to poor black townships, led many to believe that it was symptomatic of the slow pace of socio-economic transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. Black people by and large, have witnessed little meaningful changes to their material conditions since the end of apartheid. African migrants and refugees are widely regarded to be competing for already limited resources and jobs that black South Africans believe, belongs to them. These views appeared to be shared by the ex-combatants I had engaged with.

In addition to this, ex-combatant factions seemed to have organised themselves and have resolved to fight for what they believed was rightly theirs or should at least have first preference to. One ex-combatant remarked that what was happening currently were no different from what they endured while in exile in Angola. Furthermore, in the midst of the xenophobic attacks, a press statement was issued by an ex-combatant faction. In it, they did not explicitly take responsibility for any of the attacks, but warned the government that the violence was taking place essentially because ex-combatants had been abandoned, and that the violence would escalate if the needs and interests of ex-combatants are not taken seriously. In addition to this, newspaper reports had implicated ex-combatants in criminal activities, most notably cash-in-transit heists. This was largely base on weapons used and the militaristic *modus operandi* used to execute the heists. While all of this does not conclusively implicate ex-combatants in illegal activities and criminal behaviour, the fact that there was evidence to suggest that it may be possible, was a considerable source of stress to me.

The distress I experienced was as a result of being morally torn between my ethical responsibilities to confidentiality on the one hand, and on the other hand, my concerns that ex-combatants might be involved in illegal activities and what to do with that information. Added to my distress was what the implications for my safety would be in the event my concern for the latter overrides that for the former. In dealing with my distress, I found it extremely useful in having debriefing meetings with colleagues in the CSVR transitional justice programme. It is common practice for individuals in our group to feedback to others within the group with regards to progress we are making in our individual projects, including the challenges that we have encountered. Of importance is the fact that these meetings serve as a forum where one can draw on the insights and experiences of others and where one can get valuable advice on how to deal with challenges. But equally important is the fact that it provides a safe environment in which one can merely unload. Davison (2004) is

particularly in favour of researchers accessing peer group support. She argues that researchers often gain confidence and reassurance from sharing insights, which gives them a better perspective in assessing their work context and how to deal with challenges encountered in that context.

Thus my interaction with colleagues not only helped me de-stress, but also gave a sense on how to address the ethical dilemma I was confronted with. It allowed me to adequately and accurately appraise the information I had accessed. It further gave me insight into how to use and present that information in such a way that it did not perpetuate negative stereotypes about ex-combatants and that it did not compromise confidentiality. Thus I chose to foreground the needs and interests of ex-combatants so as to contextualized the social problems that are part of their lives. This was important since it contributes to the understanding of the mechanisms and conditions behind these social problems. According to Gill (2004), this understanding is important since is it a large step towards alleviating these problems.

Conclusion

What is clear from the discussion above is that although traditional ethical concerns such as informed consent, confidentially, anonymity, etc. need to be addressed, the post conflict situations demands that that the issue of ethics be responsive to the dynamic and often hazardous conditions inherent in the post-conflict research context. If one considers the many violent conflicts that have taken place[19] and those that are likely to take place in future, then would be safe to assume that social scientists are increasingly likely to find themselves working in these contexts. In the absence of a blueprint, there exists a need to generate creative and innovative strategies to deal with the ethical challenges that accompany working in these contexts. Gill (2004) highlights the

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[19] For example, in the period between 1989 and 1999, 110 armed conflicts were recorded in seventy-three locations (Wallensteen & Sollenberg, 2000).

importance of being street-smart in one's scholarly engagement with the post-conflict situation. Kovats-Bernat (2002) expresses his preference for the will and wishes of his informants who are better in anticipating danger, over his arrogant assumptions as to what was appropriate. Regardless of which approach one uses, the secret lies ultimately in finding a middle ground that balances safety and risk, without sacrificing trust and acceptance necessary to gather data that will enable us to answer pertinent research questions.

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