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

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

This literature review outlines the main ethical principles and dilemmas of research in conflict and post-conflict zones. It was prepared for a conference on "Field Research and Ethics in Post-Conflict Environments" (4-5 December 2008) organized by the Program on States and Security at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. In contrast to the significant body of literature on the ethics of research on vulnerable subjects, the literature on the ethics of fieldwork in conflict and post-conflict zones is scant.[1] As a result, this review includes relevant literature on the ethics of research on vulnerable subjects. In the paragraphs that follow, I provide a brief summary of the primary ethical principles and dilemmas of research in conflict and post-conflict zones outlined in the literature, and of the gaps in the literature. Then, I outline each of the ethical dilemmas in more detail, and conclude with suggestions on how to improve the ethics of research conflict and post-conflict zones.

The literature covered here is in agreement on several principles of ethical research. First, research on vulnerable subjects, including subjects whose vulnerability is derived from their residence in conflict or post-conflict zones, should Do No Harm (nonmaleficience) and should ideally also Do Good (beneficence). Second, informed consent – a participant's consent to participate in the research with full understanding of the potential risks and benefits – must be attained from all research subjects.[2] Third, the confidentiality of vulnerable subjects should be maintained to ensure that the information that they provide does not later cause them harm.

The literature also reveals several potential ethical dilemmas that arise during research in conflict and post-conflict zones. The first two dilemmas present the greatest challenge to ethical research in conflict and post-conflict zones. First, informed consent is difficult when there is inadequate information about the implications of the research. Full information is rarely available to foreign researchers in conflict or post-conflict zones because they often lack the cultural sensitivity to fully understand all of the information available to her/him. Further, even with complete information it would be difficult for the researcher to predict how her/his research would impact the rapidly changing conflict

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

[2] According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, "the informed consent process involves three key features: (1) disclosing to potential research subjects information needed to make an informed decision; (2) facilitating the understanding of what has been disclosed; and (3) promoting the voluntariness of the decision about whether or not to participate in the research. Informed consent must be legally effective and prospectively obtained." (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2008, http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/informconsfaq.html#q1)

context. Second, it is very difficult to calibrate the benefits-harms balance. Does the benefit of the research outweigh the potential harms that can be done by it to the subject under study, third parties, and even the researcher her/himself?

In addition to the two primary dilemmas, there are several other ethical dilemmas of field research in conflict and post-conflict zones. While strict adherence to confidentiality agreements guards against unforeseen consequences of research, it can also leave the researcher feeling isolated, with a likely negative impact on both the researcher and the research. In addition, there is a potential tradeoff between respecting the confidentiality and rights of research subjects and achieving the ideal academic output. Finally, is research alone is enough? Does the researcher not also have a responsibility to act to improve the well-being of the people that she or he studies, particularly when that well-being is under threat?

In spite of the important contribution made by the existing literature, there are several gaps in the literature that would be particularly important for research in conflict and post-conflict zones. First, there is no distinction between the ethical requirements for research that takes place in open war versus that which takes place in the tenuous stability of a post-conflict context. Second, although most authors call for a high degree of sensitivity on the part of the researcher to the culture under study and the particular dynamics of the conflict or post-conflict zone, they provide few recommendations as to how an external researcher can build this degree of sensitivity. Third, the literature focuses only on the considerations facing foreign researchers conducting research in conflict and post-conflict zones, and gives insufficient attention to the particular challenges faced by researchers from these areas or to partnerships between foreign and national researchers. Finally, the authors fail to clearly specify what is different about research in conflict zones, other than the heightened vulnerability of the research subjects due to the potential threat to their lives and livelihoods posed by the conflict. These gaps point to the need for further research and writing in this area, which should be informed by the existing literature, outlined below, on the ethical dilemmas of research in conflict and post-conflict zones.

The difficulty of obtaining truly informed consent
Obtaining and maintaining "truly informed and voluntary consent" may be particularly difficult in conflict and post-conflict zones because of differences between the researcher's and the participants' language, culture, educational background, and social norms (Leaning 2001, 1433). Several authors claim that this challenge 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." Wood (2006, 308) describes how her oral, informed-consent process gave her prospective interviewees a great deal of control over the content of the interview and her use of the material. Her oral consent protocol gave her interviewees the authority to decline to answer specific questions, change their mind about their participation at any time during the process, and dictate how the information

they gave her could be used (i.e., for her information only, for publication without attribution, or for publication with attribution) (Wood 2006, 308). "I had an abiding impression that many of them deeply appreciated what they interpreted as a practice that recognized and respected their experience and expertise" (Wood 2006, 381).

Even with a good process, it is difficult for an external researcher to understand and thus inform his/her prospective research participants of all of the potential risks and benefits. Sieber (1993, 18) asserts that the perception of risk is highly subjective, and that the perspective of the investigator and interviewee can differ significantly. As a result, an accurate assessment of risk requires particular cultural sensitivity for the people potentially affected by the research (Sieber 1993, 19). Wood echoes this point, explaining that she felt that she was initially naïve about the potential risks to prospective participants, in spite of the approval of her research 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, 380). The mutual trust that enabled Wood to learn from her interviewees was at least partly due to her strict adherence to their confidentiality agreement.

The importance and challenge of confidentiality
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 zones 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." Consequently, Kelman (1982, 89) argues that both confidentiality and informed consent are rights that must be protected regardless of calculation of potential harm by an IRB or other group.

Ensuring that field data are secure is essential to ensuring confidentiality in line with the consent agreements made with research participants, particularly in conflict environments where the data can be highly political (Wood 2006, 381). There are numerous strategies for ensuring data security, from developing a coding system for names or not recording names at all, to taking messy hand-written notes (Wood 2006, 381). In conflict and post-conflict zones, taping interviews is rarely recommended (Wood 2006, 381).

The stress and isolation experienced by researchers in conflict and post-conflict zones may make it particularly challenging to maintain the confidentiality of their sources (Wood 2006, 386). "Those carrying out extended field research in conflict zones are likely to experience… fear, anger, outrage, grief, and pity, often through observing, suffering, or fearing the effects of violence" (Wood 2006, 384). "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). All of these acts could significantly compromise the research subjects (Wood 2006, 384). Wood argues that the good researchers will find ways to manage these emotional tensions and maintain their objectivity and confidentiality, but does not offer any concrete suggestions (Wood 2006, 384).

The tradeoff between research ethics and research output
Ethical research in conflict and post-conflict zones may even affect the academic quality of the research by constraining the research design or delaying the publication of the results. "This is not only due to practical problems resulting from destroyed infrastructures, but also as a result of ensuring the best possible environment for those involved in the research" (Bell 2001, 189). Consideration for the interviewee may require group interviews, shorter interviews, care in raising certain sensitive issues, and a willingness to back away from particular questions when the interviewee expresses reservations (Bell 2001, 189). In addition, ethical research may entail delaying the publication of results until a time when they will not cause harm to the research subjects. Wood "waited nearly a decade after the end of the civil war to publish some of the most sensitive material, particularly the relationship between various non-governmental organizations and the insurgents" (Wood 2006, 382).

Ethical considerations also impact the selection of a research topic. Smyth (2001, 6) asks 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?" The researcher's commitment to "Do No Harm" applies throughout the research and publication process, although the degree to which the benefits outweigh the harms is often far from obvious.

The challenge of judging acceptable harm
Weighing benefits and harm is often fraught with ethical dilemmas, particularly when research involves unearthing potentially painful memories or could put the research subject's safety or livelihood at risk. When Kellehear (1989, 64) conducted interviews with patients dying from cancer he often experienced anguish at the potential harm that the interview put his interviewees through. Nonetheless, by agreeing to be interviewed by him, the research subjects consented to experience some degree of harm. Kellehear argues that this pain is inevitable in research on highly vulnerable subjects, and that the benefits often still outweigh the harm. "My research, and research into vulnerable social groups generally, caution against the arrogance of assuming that comfort and safety are more important to them than their desire to be heard, or their desire to contribute to our attempts to understand them" (Kellehear 1989, 65). Consequently, Kellehear (1989, 65) criticizes 'do no harm' for being a simplistic axiom that provides little guidance for how to deal "with participants when hurt and trauma are companions in the research enterprise, when both researcher and participant agree to these companions."

Lundy and McGovern, who conducted research into the histories of those who had disappeared during the conflict in Northern Ireland, support Kellehear's point. They emphasize that although research into sensitive subjects may cause pain to the interviewee, it does not mean that they are unwilling to participate in the research or that it does not also bring important benefits. One participant in their research echoed this sentiment: "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).

Ball, on the other hand, questions researchers' common assumption that the benefits will outweigh the harm that can be caused by possible re-traumatization. "Although victims may manifest relief at being able to talk openly about their trauma, this secure and sympathetic surrounding in which the interview occurs is unfortunately temporary. 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). None of the authors directly address how the risk to interviewees may be different during times of open violent conflict, when their lives and livelihood are under more direct and immediate threat, or during the post-conflict phase when the interviewee is simultaneously trying to deal with the negative impact of the conflict on their well-being and learn to navigate the new rules of the post-conflict context. In addition, the literature provides few clear solutions to the challenge of weighing benefits and harms. It only calls for an improved understanding of the potential ethical dilemmas and improved professional standards and training.

Is research alone enough in conflict and post-conflict zones?
The final ethical issue for fieldwork in conflict and post-conflict zones is whether and how researchers have an obligation to give back to the subjects of their study, particularly when these subjects are in such great need. Wood (2006, 383) comments that she never felt that she found a meaningful way to give back to the rural residents and government officials who gave so much to her research. She reports that one way of giving back, which is generally accepted among anthropologists and other ethnographers, is to return the materials gathered in the field to "the community of origin" by making publications and articles available (Wood 2006, 383).

While "[s]ome 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," Wood comments that 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 and to tell their stories (Wood 2006, 383). The problem that the researcher faces is that there is no one 'truth,' particularly in highly politicized conflict and post-conflict zones (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).

Wilson (1993, 188) claims that the research process, rather than the product, can provide the most benefit. "Engaging creatively in community life is often the most effective way of having a positive impact on an area through fieldwork" (Wilson 1993, 188). He recommends that the researcher do this by being genuinely interested in who the participants are and making the research process enjoyable for them; by engaging in stimulating discussions with them and helping them to learn from the research process; by sharing the results of the research findings (as appropriate); and possibly by supporting community projects, but only in the latter part of the research trip (Wilson 1993, 189).

Several other authors, however, question whether "giving voice" to the research participants is enough (Robben and Nordstrom 1995, 11; Scheper-Hughes 1995). For Scheper-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. Robben and Nordstrom (1995, 12) argue that the tension between the researcher's desired objectivity and their obligation to expose repression and injustice is not easily resolved, but has to be carefully managed and considered by each researcher. Practitioners of action research reject "the position that research should be objective and value-free and that researchers should remain detached and neutral. 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).

In sum, while there is no agreement in the literature as to whether research alone is ethical, there is agreement that the researcher must seriously consider her/his responsibility to the subjects of her/his study and how the research may also benefit them.

Improving the ethical standards for research in conflict and post-conflict zones
The authors discussed here largely agree that improved guidelines and standards for research in conflict and post-conflict zones and with vulnerable populations are necessary, although several authors (Kellehear 1989, Wood 2006, and Kelman 1982) question whether they are sufficient to ensure that research is ethical. A reliance on ethical checklists could lead researchers to overlook important ethical issues that may not be covered by these checklists (Kellehear 1989, 71). "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). Nonetheless, Kellehear (1989, 71) is not arguing for moral relativism. He supports the development of a basic code of conduct to ensure that at least the minimum ethical standards are followed (Kellehear 1989, 72). These guidelines, however, should be seen as prompts to "show directions, places to look out for, common problem areas" but "can never provide philosophies and guidelines that will encompass the diversity and complexity of current sociological enterprise" (Kellehear 1989, 72). Kelman (1982, 90) echoes Kellehear's

sentiments and argues that nuanced ethical considerations are not well-suited for government regulation. Instead, he believes that "they should be controlled through the development and refinement of professional standards. At that level, we are less bound to the negative emphasis of the risk-benefit model, which links regulation to evidence that certain procedures are potentially harmful; we can instead focus on the positive task of defining the contours of a good investigator-participant relationship as a matter of continuing professional attention" (Kelman 1982, 90).

In conclusion, all of the authors emphasize the centrality of the investigator-participant relationship, and largely rely on that relationship to provide the researcher with the information necessary to resolve the numerous difficult ethical dilemmas that she/he will face while conducting research in conflict or post-conflict zones. Nonetheless, they also acknowledge that guidance and standards are also necessary, if insufficient to ensure ethical research. Surprisingly, there are no guidelines for research in conflict or post-conflict zones. Although the Code of Federal Regulations on the Protection of Human Subjects indicates that special precautions should be taken to protect vulnerable research subjects, it does not provide clear guidance for this research nor does it directly address the numerous ethical dilemmas facing researchers in conflict and post-conflict zones (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2005). While the authors discussed here agree that the principles of ethical research with vulnerable human subjects (i.e., do no harm, informed consent, and confidentiality) also apply to conflict and post-conflict zones, they argue that the adoption of ethical research practices is both more complicated and more critical because the research subjects face a greater potential risk (Leaning 2001; Sieber 1993, 18). The risk is greater for research subjects in conflict and post-conflict zones because their life and livelihoods are likely under greater threat because of the conflict. Furthermore, the topics that foreign political scientists and sociologists may have interest in studying may be highly politically charged in the countries under study, potentially putting the research subjects, and even the researcher, at great risk.

In addition, the five ethical dilemmas outlined above take on particular resonance in conflict and post-conflict zones. The challenge of obtaining truly informed consent is made more difficult by the mistrust that pervades interpersonal interactions in conflict and post-conflict zones, and the often highly asymmetric power relationship between the researcher and subject. The maintenance of confidentiality becomes even more important because of the unpredictability of both the conflict dynamics and the impact of research on those dynamics. The potential tradeoff between research ethics and research output takes on even greater importance, as sacrificing ethical standards may lead the researcher to build her/his success on the backs of people who have already experienced enormous grief and sorrow. The challenge of judging acceptable harm intensifies when all of the research subjects have been traumatized by years of violent conflict, and the current and future potential harm 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 scale of these ethical dilemmas calls out for improved standards, guidance, and training for researchers in conflict and post-conflict zones. The author's suggestions for improved guidance and standards are outlined in Annex I.

ANNEX I:
Criteria and recommendations for improving the quality and ethics of research

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.

Leaning (2001, 1432) proposes the below guidelines 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.

- Restrict studies to those questions that cannot be addressed in any other context.

- 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.

- Ensure the study design imposes the absolute minimum of additional risk.

- Select study participants on the basis of scientific principles without bias introduced by issues of accessibility, cost, or malleability.

- 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).

- Institute procedures to assess for, minimize, and monitor the risks to safety and confidentiality for individual subjects, their community, and their future security.

- Promote the well-being, dignity, and autonomy of all study participants in all phases of the research study.

Kelman (1982, 92-93) raises a number of important questions that he argues should be addressed in developing better standards governing the investigator-participant relationship. Although Kelman was not directly referring to research in conflict or post-conflict zones, his rigorous approach makes these questions relevant.

- What are the limits of stress and deception that an investigator can impose on research participants?

- What are the limits of permissible intrusion and interference in real-life settings?

- How do investigators avoid taking advantage of positions of power within the society, within a particular institutional setting and within the research interaction itself, to manipulate research participants?

- What special obligation do investigators have to protect the rights and interests of disadvantaged and powerless populations on whom they carry out research?

- What obligations do investigators have in debriefing research participants, in feeding back to them the findings of the research, in reciprocating the help that they have received?

- What obligations do they have to people whose data they use when these data were collected by others?

- To what extent are they responsible for the ways in which others interpret and use their own findings?

- What alternative approaches can be developed to replace procedures that are deceptive, coercive, or intrusive, or violate in other ways the standards for good interpersonal relationships?

- How can social science further develop research models and practices that are based on the principles of participation and reciprocity and that enhance the autonomy of the research participant?

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