



Field Research and Ethics in Post-Conflict Environments

Summary Report

The following is a summary report of the workshop held to discuss the ethical dilemmas and field research methodology concerns encountered while conducting research in post-conflict environments on December 4th and 5th, at the Graduate Center, City University of New York.

I. Ethical problems encountered: What do we know?

The workshop opened with a summary of a report outlining ethical problems encountered by researchers today, conducted among active field researchers, in 36 post-conflict, low-level conflict or open conflict countries.¹ A number of significant problems were raised in the following discussion. First, the question of timing: researchers typically reflect on the ethical dimensions of their work when confronted with ethical problems in the midst of their research, rather than in the planning stages. Second, researchers are given very little preparation for ethical challenges in the field, and very little, if any, training on how to cope with these challenges once encountered. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) process is frequently the only time researchers are officially required to confront ethical dilemmas raised by their proposed research, but the structure of the process is often not flexible and the boards are unaware of specific problems that might be encountered in post-conflict or conflict environments. Third, researchers frequently do not consider that ethical problems may continue long after the field research is completed; for example, the publication of research in a journal or book may affect respondents years later. While there was a great deal of concern about these issues from the workshop attendees, it is not clear who among the larger community of scholars should be wrestling with these questions.

II. Safety and Security of Researcher and Research Subjects

The protection and possible traumatization of both researcher and research subjects was of primary concern. In terms of the protection of research subjects, the workshop attendees felt that the informed consent and confidentiality concepts, at the core of the IRB certification, are not enough to protect research subjects in post-conflict environments, where participating in any research may have life-threatening consequences. Approaches such as getting oral consent, rather than written consent, and techniques for disguising identities of respondents and their environments were discussed. One attendee proposed that there are different levels or dimensions of ethical obligation to respondents and their safety that arise over the course of the research: professional obligations, personal obligations to respondents and their families, and moral obligations.

¹ This report, "Research Report: Developing Ethical Guidelines for Researchers working in Post-Conflict Environments," by Susan M. Thomson is available on our website on the Field Research and Ethics Workshop page.

In dealing with vulnerable populations in post-conflict environments researchers may not be as aware as they should be of the potential traumatizing effect of their questioning, and they may be ill-equipped to tailor their research to minimize this effect. Researchers may also be ill-equipped to deal with the possibility of suffering trauma themselves as a result of what they discover or witness. Discussion about how to resolve this issue centered around improving training for researchers prior to their field experience.

The lack of a code of ethics specifically targeted to research in conflict and post-conflict environments was pointed to as a problem, but most attendees felt any code of ethics would not be able to address all problems encountered in the field and might short-circuit creativity and flexibility. A flexible understanding of possible ethical dilemmas and appropriate responses was thought to be a better approach.

III. Ethics and Neutrality

The question of neutrality was raised repeatedly during the workshop. While the ideal of a neutral, unbiased researcher is held up as a goal, attendees were in disagreement as to whether researchers can or even should portray themselves as neutral in the field. The perception of the researcher as either neutral or biased affects both the access to respondents and the data collected, and will affect access to other groups as a result. In post-conflict environments in particular, researchers may feel the need to identify with one party or another, and begin to feel that their role can be to seek social justice. However, this active involvement will influence their research, objectivity, and findings, and attendees were divided as to how separate research should be from advocacy, and when or if academic researchers should cross that line.

In conflict or post-conflict environments, in order to gain access to respondents and for their own security, researchers often need to form associations with organizations in the field, such as NGOs, IOs, or peacekeeping troops. These associations, however, can have a large impact on how the researcher is perceived, the perceived neutrality of the research, and on the potential bias in their results, which the researcher must take into account.

A great deal of discussion was given to the concept of “giving back” to the community and the lack of guidance researcher receives in how to “give back.” Researchers often have to contend with expectations of the communities they research and how to balance those expectations with the possibility of biasing their research. Possible approaches to “giving back” were discussed, such as publishing results in local languages and venues, sharing the results with local communities, remaining politically committed to the problems of the communities, or maintaining ties and interaction with local researchers and local research centers.

IV. Access to Local Populations and the Influence of Research on Local Populations

In conflict or post-conflict environments, the problems associated with gaining access to local populations are exacerbated by concerns of safety for both researcher and research subjects, and heightened political tensions. Suggested approaches to minimize access problems and promote confidence in the researcher included: extended field stays rather than short visits; use of traditional, location specific methods; and work with local research centers.

In certain environments, researchers face research fatigue, or over-exposure, among the local populations to academic and policy researchers, which may affect access to local populations and reduce the willingness of people to talk to researchers. Solutions to this dilemma included expanding the pool of potential research subjects beyond the obvious contacts in terms of location, class, and ease of accessibility.

A recurring theme during the workshop was the ethical implications of the power imbalance that exists between the researcher and the research subjects, although there were not obvious or simple solutions in how to rectify those imbalances. The attendees were divided on the question of how appropriate or possible it could be to involve local population more substantially in the research, such as in determining the research question and methodology. While such efforts do go some way towards addressing the power imbalance, they raise questions about the resulting objectivity of the work and the effect on the case selection and methodology.

Finally, the issue of the identity of the researcher and the effect of his or her identity on the research was explored. Depending on the context, the nationality, the ethnicity, the gender, the education level, and the class of the researcher all will affect the research, the access of the researcher, and the power dynamics of the relationship between the researcher and the research subjects.

V. Influence of Post Conflict Environment on Research Design and Methodology

In post-conflict environments, there are factors complicating research design and methodology, including security of researcher and research subjects, uncertainty and flux in the field, changing levels of risk for participants, high levels of polarization, and lack of alternative sources of documentation, which may limit the researcher and introduce additional sources of bias. Research designs, which appear feasible during the planning stages, may no longer be achievable once the research is underway, placing the researcher under additional pressures and complicating the research. Researchers are put in the position of continuously reevaluating the levels of risk the research poses to themselves, members of their research team, and respondents, and must be willing to judge when the level of risk outweighs the benefits of the research, and terminate or radically change the research design to compensate. The best forms of research design for these changing environments should incorporate some levels of flexibility. Some of the problems facing researchers in these environments might be mitigated by training that is specific to conducting research in high risk environments.

VI. Further Discussion and Follow-up

Three ideas for future development received the most support from the attendees. First, the development of an online resource could address some of the concerns regarding the dearth of training and resources for researchers embarking on field research endeavors. This online resource, moderated by a committee, could publish papers on the topic of ethics, annotate links to other sites or resources, publish relevant bibliographies and syllabi, and share IRB protocols. The second, an “anti-manual,” could be a list of ethical and methodological themes that should be considered by researchers prior to their field experience in conflict or post-conflict environments. It could identify the general principles that should underpin research from the origination of the research question, through research in the field to publication of results. Both the online resource and the “anti-manual” could provide material for courses or training for researchers. Finally, a third idea for future development was the planning of panels at academic conferences, with the aim of furthering the discussion of these issues with a broader community.