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**Paper Title:** “Researching Peace and Conflict: Sensitive Topics, Sensitive Environments”

**Abstract**

This paper addresses methodological, practical and ethical questions which arise from doing research in countries which are experiencing or recently have undergone a violent conflict or civil war. The paper will focus on the particular challenges of doing comparative research in such contexts. It will include reflections on my experience of doing comparative research on peace processes and political violence in various parts of the worlds. The challenge for the researcher using a comparative method which includes several conflict countries, is that there may be differences in the countries of study concerning how insecure the environment is, and how sensitive the research topic is. For instance, access to informants and their propensity to provide relevant information depend on when in a conflict cycle the research is carried. The sensitivity of a research topic can change over time making people more or less willing to speak about what has unfolded in the past. For instance, in the midst of, or following a successful peace process, the reduction of tensions and creation of momentum often make the research pursued less of a hot topic and facilitates access to the relevant information. However, incomplete or failed peace processes are often followed by polarisation and an escalation of violence, which make it difficult to gain access to informants and useful information. For instance, the researcher dealing with armed groups in such a context can be suspected of being a terrorist sympathiser. How can differences in terms of gaining access to informants and information be dealt within a comparative research design? How can the problems be tackled when you are in a field situation? These questions and others (such as the relationship with informants, trust and confidentiality, use of snow-ball sampling technique etc) will be discussed using examples from my research in countries such as Guatemala, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Kosovo and Northern Ireland. Some of the issues relate to the sensitive environment in which the research is carried out, while others relate to the sensitivity of the topic of research. These are issues which beyond the methodological challenges, may have implications for the security and psychological well-being of both the researcher and the respondents/informants.

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