



Developing Ethical Guidelines for Researchers working in Post-Conflict Environments: Research Report

Susan M. Thomson
School of Political Studies
University of Ottawa
sthomson@uottawa.ca

Background

The Program on States and Security was established in 2004 at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and is funded by the Carnegie Corporation. The work of the Program addresses the gap between academic knowledge on post-conflict state-building and operational practice, with the broader purpose of bringing together scholars and policy practitioners to connect research with policy.

An integral component of the Program is the Post-War Scholars Database. At present, the database is made up of more than three hundred scholars, working across a variety of policy topics, including Security Sector Reform, transitional justice and reconciliation, democratization, refugees, and government institutions. The Database is an important resource for academics and practitioners alike and is available online at: <http://statesandsecurity.org/database.php>.

A recent workshop, held at the Graduate School and University Center at the City University of New York in December 2008, recognized the need of balancing academic research in conflict or post-conflict environments with research ethics. Good ethical practice was identified as an important aspect of academic research.

Why Develop Guidelines on Ethics in Post-War Field Research?

A review of the predominant research frameworks in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom shows areas of concern for researchers working in conflict or post-conflict environments, most of which revolve around the place of qualitative research on ethical conduct for research involving human subjects. There are no

specific frameworks or guidelines in place for research involving human subjects in conflict or post-conflict environments. Looking for direction from home Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) offers little solace in helping researchers confront the often unanticipated ethical, social and political challenges that arise when conducting research in open-conflict or post-conflict environments.¹

Compounding the dearth of institutional guidelines on ethical practice in conflict environments is the nature of such research itself. Research in post- or open- conflict contexts often involves vulnerable groups, is usually politically sensitive, and frequently involves the permission of a gatekeeper for access to research respondents. It is also usually context-specific, and encompasses a diverse range of risks for both the research subject and the researcher that must be managed or mitigated.²

A focus on the ethical decisions that often confront researchers, as well as awareness of the possibility of doing harm, are necessary components of any ethical framework. The ethical imperative of research – to do no harm – is intensified in conflict and post-conflict zones where the research environment is politically polarized, armed actors are often present, and the local population lives in fear and insecurity. Indeed, researchers have ethical responsibilities to assure the security, privacy and well-being of research subjects, as well as their own safety and well-being.

Despite these challenges, research in conflict or post-conflict environments is necessary. Research carried out in these difficult situations provides alternate ways of understanding particular conflicts, and can greatly facilitate policy responses. Waiting for the guns to fall silent can mean that policy action is not informed by empirical research. Such research is also possible -- researchers whose fieldwork is informed by an understanding of the patterns and dynamics of the conflict can make informed decisions about when, where and how to do research. Ethically informed decision-making must include the motives and responsibilities of the

¹ For examples, see the code of ethics from the American Political Science Association (http://www.apsanet.org/content_9350.cfm); the Canadian Association of Political Science (http://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/template_e.cfm?folder=about&page_name=ethics_main_e.htm); and the British Economic and Social Research Council (http://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/template_e.cfm?folder=about&page_name=ethics_main_e.htm). A prescriptive code of ethics is available from Human Rights Professionals (http://www.humanrightspersonals.org/images/hrfo_ethics%20for%20hrs%20fieldwork.pdf). See also subject specific guides, such as that prepared for conducting research with children living in conflict zones (<http://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/PDFs/workingpaper30.pdf>).

² See the introductory and concluding chapters in *Surviving research: Doing fieldwork in difficult and violent situations*. Editors, Chandra Lekha Sriram, John C. King, Julie A. Mertus, Olga Martin-Ortega and Johanna Herman. London: Routledge, 2009.

researcher, as well as anticipate the direct and indirect impact of research on people in conflict or post-conflict situations.

Awareness of these risks is an important step in assuring the quality and integrity of research that is conducted in difficult contexts. To this end, the Program on States and Security commissioned this research report. Its purpose is twofold: 1) To gather and collate the self-defined ethical dilemmas of researchers who have conducted research in conflict or post-conflict environments as individuals who have “hands-on” experience; and 2) to share the solutions of field researchers to the ethical dilemmas they encountered in the field. Intended as a “living document,” the report will be shared with members of the Program on States and Security and will be updated periodically to sustain and encourage good ethical practice in research in conflict or post-conflict environments.

The Survey Methodology and Sample

In June 2008, an internet-based survey was circulated to the 300 members of the CUNY post-war scholars database and other individuals working in post-conflict environments, notably the Canadian Consortium on Human Security doctoral fellows. In total, the survey was sent out to 482 individuals. In December 2008, some members of the Post-War Scholars Database, most of whom did not complete the on-line survey, met at the CUNY Graduate Center to discuss the survey findings. Their comments and reactions to the survey findings have been incorporated into this Report, most notably in the “Next Steps” section.

The survey was divided into three general sections: 1) safety and security of researcher and researched; 2) obtaining informed consent; and 3) dissemination of research findings. An optional and final section of the survey asked respondents to share their strategies for dealing with specific ethical challenges in their own work that were not addressed in the survey.

One hundred-and-six individuals responded to the survey. Of the 28 individuals who did not complete the survey, most responded that they had not thought through the ethical challenges inherent in doing research in post-conflict environments, or felt that they did not have enough field experience to “reply adequately” and consequently chose not to complete the survey. One individual shared that his research was “too sensitive” and he did not feel comfortable completing the survey. In sum, the field-based experiences of 78 researchers in dealing with the ethical challenges that arose in the course of their research provides nuanced yet practical advice to scholars working in open- or post-conflict environments.

The field experience of these 78 scholars brings forth a wealth of knowledge about doing research in open- and post-conflict environments. Respondents carried out research in 36 countries, the majority of which are in Africa (15 countries).³ Conflicts in Asia (seven countries⁴), Latin America (five countries⁵), the Middle East (five countries⁶) and Europe (four countries⁷) were also studied. Post-genocide Rwanda warranted the most interest, with nine researchers sharing their field experiences from this country alone. Four respondents each shared their experiences from Colombia, Bosnia, Liberia and Sierra Leone; two each shared field experiences from Israel-Palestine, northern Ireland, northern Uganda, Pakistan and Somalia.

Respondents worked with a variety of actors in the field, from guerilla and insurgent groups, paramilitary organizations, government and foreign armed forces, to demobilized combatants, refugees, internally displaced persons, victims of sexual violence, and youth, to community activists and civil society leaders. Many of the individuals that respondents worked with are emotionally traumatized.

Most respondents (66) felt that their research was conducted in a context of low-intensity or latent conflict. Open conflict was a reality for the remaining 12 respondents throughout the course of their fieldwork. The research of 65 respondents was conducted in the course of doctoral studies since 2002. Forty respondents completed their doctorates since 2005. Four respondents were Fulbright scholars while two are tenured professors. Eight respondents are still writing their doctoral dissertations.

I have not cited any of the survey respondents by name, deciding instead to reference the statements of respondents by research location. This has not been done in all instances, as 46 respondents did not give permission to identify their research site by location.

Safety and Security

Safety of the researcher: Accessing the research site

The physical safety of the researcher was a stated concern for all respondents. Researchers worked with a variety of local and international actors to assure their **safe access to research sites**. United Nations agencies

³ Angola, Benin, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Northern Uganda, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, and Togo.

⁴ China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, and Sri Lanka.

⁵ Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Peru.

⁶ Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Territories.

⁷ Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Northern Ireland.

working closely with affected populations were often a first point of information about prevailing security conditions. UNICEF, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Programme (WFP) were trusted first points of access for many researchers, and made their institutional resources available, including armed escorts and radio contact with the UN field office. Arriving under armed guard, which paves the way for easier access to the research site, nonetheless, raises ethical questions for many respondents. As a researcher working in northern Uganda wrote: “The war affected [individual] appeared to completely understand it [the presence of armed guards] and lived in such highly militarized settings that the sight of a military person did not distract them.”

The home embassies of respondents sometimes provided a useful first contact in country, although most respondents reported that these contacts were not particularly helpful in accessing the research site. In the words of one respondent working in the Occupied Territories, “the Canadian Representative Office in Ramallah refuses to facilitate entry to Gaza ... in the name of security.” Fulbright scholars all received guidance from the US Embassy in the countries of their research. Only one individual found its support helpful. One respondent noted caustically, “They [Embassy officials] told me not to use local transport, then gave me a stipend that was too small to be able to afford taxis!”

Local actors, notably representatives of domestic NGOs and civil society organizations as well as journalists, were useful contacts in “introducing [researchers] to the people and places.” The political nature of these local contacts was reported by many respondents, as researchers questioned the **ethics of working with local partners** who seemed closely aligned to government or to a paramilitary or insurgent group, or of working with local authorities allegedly involved in human rights abuses against populations under their control. This was particularly acute in situations where government permission to enter the research site is required. Many respondents acknowledged the “implicit, not explicit constraints” that the prevailing political climate placed on research in a given location.

In several instances, the implicit constraint was a **threat to one’s academic independence and autonomy** in the form of “the state apparatus and its agents, who watched my every move and monitored whom I spent my time interviewing as well as my free time.” Some mitigated this concern by “not being seen in public with local actors” and relied on formal affiliation with local partners “as a means of gaining research approval [from government authorities].” This raises the ethical concern of whether the research is important enough to undertake and whether new knowledge on the topic warrants the possibility of harming interviewees and other local actors in the course of the research. In most cases, researchers tried to act ethically so as not to endanger

the people they were working with in either “re-formulating the initial research design” or “cutting short the research period to assure the safety of my informants.”

Understanding the research environment

Acting ethically requires a certain appreciation and understanding of the research context, and many respondents remarked that **preparations before arriving in the field** were particularly useful in assessing unanticipated ethical challenges. This was helpful not only in using one’s often-limited financial resources wisely, but also in appreciating that access to the field is an ethical issue. Knowledge of the **history of conflict under study**, as well as an understanding of the **current political climate** is necessary for researchers to identify potential risks and the appropriate response. As one respondent working on Sudan noted “more background research about the country, and more time in the field would have helped.”

Once in the field, respondents saw an appreciation of local power dynamics and relations as “critical” to good ethical practice,

Dealing with local partner institutions shaped the research in positive and negative ways. In most cases institutions helped to provide great access to information and key informants. In some they sought to overly shape my views, or to undermine competing organizations (usually NGOs) to me.

In some instances, it is likely that my affiliation with a particular institution cause some to view me with skepticism, although I am not aware of any specific examples. I sought where possible to affiliate with widely respected individuals or centres at academic institutions, and NGOs generally not viewed as having a particular political affiliation or stance.

Identifying local partners and research assistants

Finding “good” local research assistants and translators was also seen as contingent on the respondents’ understanding of local power dynamics. Most respondents felt that local actors, whether elites or ordinary people, had “already established their angle [on the conflict] and were unlikely to waver from it” and cautioned “awareness of different subject positions is important when conducting research in conflict contexts.” This was considered particularly relevant in the aftermath of ethnic conflict where animosities lingered, as they do for example in post-genocide Rwanda where public references to ethnicity are illegal. One respondent shared his experience, “in order to make my RAs and translators appear neutral to the community where I worked, I chose French-speaking individuals. In Rwanda, English is the colonial language of Ugandan returnees, who are generally Tutsi.” One respondent who conducted comparative research in Peru and Guatemala found the process of identifying local research assistance “really tough.” She writes,

You want someone who knows the local context, but is not a direct member of the area because I found this influenced them. Trying to explain to translators that you do not want them to interpret responses was also hard. I had to keep repeating this, and still am not sure if they fully understood.

In one community, I had a community member as a translator and this did not work well and I would never do it again. Having translators that have been affected by the conflict is also hard because they have their own bias into it. My translator in Peru lost two brothers during the conflict and at times I felt like she acted as if she knew everything about the conflict, when I was actually trying to find out about other people's experiences.

Respondents who attempted "to remain completely independent" soon realized that this is impossible in conflict environments and that "it is **ethically preferred to appreciate and understand the bias of local actors** in hopes of making better sense of the complexity of post-conflict reconstruction." What is important, according to survey respondents, is to understand that "local partner organizations and research assistants can influence the neutrality/objectivity of the research site and of its respondents. It is necessary to appreciate this and think about how local actors alter/impact both the research process and its findings."

Local power dynamics

Power imbalances between local actors -- and between the researcher and the researched -- are "especially sensitive in the context of military occupation, especially when local partners are highly skilled and well educated and the local population is not." Several respondents identified the ethical standard of "objective and neutral" research as "traditional and out-moded." Instead, these respondents focused on transparency, both to their local research partners and their often-vulnerable interviewees. The need to produce "traditionally ethical and objective" research was criticized by several respondents, with one individual noting forcefully that

Academic standards of objectivity can create a balance or equity [in viewpoints] where none in fact exists, which risks allowing the research process to become severed from the local realities it is there to examine. We need to be careful not to be too neutral or objective if it means displacing any kind of sustained attention to the damaging impact of local realities and the power dynamics within.

The key is to balance the need to reveal local realities with the actual dynamics on the ground in ways that protect and nurture local actors who take the risk to work with western academics like me.

One respondent whose research focuses on vulnerable groups in post-genocide Rwanda took the point slightly further in asking about the **ethical standards for "returning research material** to people living in an authoritarian country," concluding that there were no reasonable guidelines "to fall back on." Another respondent who works on the conflict in Northern Ireland felt that while she thought about and reflected on possible ethical dilemmas that might arise in the course of her fieldwork, in the final analysis she understood

that “the research benefited me. I am unsure of how it benefited the communities, or the young people, that I took knowledge from. Next time I would use a more participatory research design that is more able to take into account different viewpoints and biases. But that would entail yet more ethical dilemmas....”

An **appreciation of the broader political and social context as well as local power dynamics** was seen as particularly relevant for recruiting potential interviewees to participate in individual research projects; all respondents identified the recruitment of potential interviewees as “extremely problematic in countries where the topic researched is highly divisive or emotional.” The key element was a willingness to modify one’s research design in accordance with prevailing local conditions, and “attempting to use many different methods to build up a relationship of trust that benefited both parties [researcher and researched].” Most respondents identified the recruitment of a broad-cross section of potential interviewees from across the political and social spectrum as a good strategy.

Researcher well-being

Respondents also highlighted the often-difficult task of assuring their own **safety in the field**, despite the safeguards they each used. Some respondents felt physically secure, but emotionally vulnerable, and they shared that they should have taken “better care of myself so that I could have been more emotionally available to my respondents.” Designing the research project to include periods of rest and relaxation was seen as a good coping strategy, as was having a strong support network in the form of family and friends available to them through regular email and Skype contact. One respondent working on El Salvador said, “I spoke to my spouse everyday and that was important because he had distance from my daily reality and could sometimes help me identify risks to my safety just by listening to me talk about the day’s events.” Another researcher, working in Israel-Palestine said, “in hindsight, I should have told a friend my daily plans. I usually just took off, without much regard to my safety, and realized when I returned home [to the States] that there were a lot of different incidents going on around me that I didn’t even know about!” Others kept dairies “that helped me to express some of my frustrations and fears on paper.”

Safety of the researched

The **safety of interviewees** varied according to context. In cases where the research focused on state actors or rebel/insurgent groups, researchers reported their individual feelings of vulnerability and fear, highlighting their position of weakness in the interview relationship. Respondents were aware of the need to offer various forms

of protection to individuals made vulnerable by violent conflict. Of particular concern were the emotional well-being of traumatized individuals and their care and comfort during and after interviewing. Most respondents adopted an open-ended interview format, with the goal of allowing interviewees to direct the content of the interview according to their comfort level and willingness to speak. In most cases, respondents asked very general questions, and allowed the interviewee to guide the more difficult questions, particularly those about specific experiences of conflict.

The **time and place of interviews** were usually chosen in conjunction with the interviewee. In some cases, researchers woke early to interview at daybreak, away from the watchful eye of local authorities. In others, researchers spent time in a given community long before approaching potential interviewees “to assess the surroundings and the ‘neutrality’ of seemingly common spots such as cafes and markets. Greater familiarity with the type of crowds, patterns and parallel activities related to particular [interview] spots would allow me to better judge the safety and/or neutrality of the location chosen for certain types of interviews.”

Interviewee emotional well-being and their traumatic memories

Traumatic memories that came up for interviewees during the research process pushed respondents to develop ethical solutions beyond the risk of doing no harm in “**displaying empathy and respecting choices to remain silent** on some issues when needed.” All respondents working with vulnerable populations gave interviewees the option to “opt out of certain questions or leave the discussion entirely.” Here research design was seen as important as was common sense and intuition, since it determined how interviews with vulnerable individuals would be approached. Probing questions were rarely asked; instead, discussion often flowed from “abstract concepts such as violence, peace, democracy” which in turn allowed interviewees to determine what they wished to talk about. In many cases, the discussion was “recorded as an entire narrative.” One respondent whose work deals with the psychosocial after-effects of the Biafran war said,

It is important when studying difficult realities to temper idealism. I knew when I interviewed [traumatized] people that I might not be able to learn the real truth because their memories would be too much. So I just listened to them, and modified my research question to adapt to what [they] said to me. How they spoke and what they said made a narrative that was ultimately more useful to understanding post-war Nigeria than my initial question.

Several respondents shared that they completed **short-courses on trauma counseling** to provide them with “a set of guidelines to protect the emotional well-being of the informant and ourselves [the researcher and her team of assistants]”. One respondent admitted that when working in situations of mass murder and other human rights violations, no amount of training can ever suffice. In such cases (reported from Colombia, Rwanda, Sudan and northern Uganda), researchers developed “a policy of referral for individuals who really needed

direct intervention [for their traumatic reaction].” In some cases, respondents noted that some interviewees really wanted to talk, and while aware of the risks and benefits of the research question, chose to speak “to ensure they were making a contribution to peace” or to ensure that “storms like the genocide never happen again.”

Survey respondents also considered the **ethical aspects of post-interview traumatic aftermath** for their interviewees. Frequent visits to interviewees by the researcher in a social capacity – for example, to share a meal or a drink -- was a common strategy, as was sharing of personal stories about the researcher’s private life. Women respondents were often asked about their children, which opened up avenues of shared experience with interviewees. Talking about the future, rather than focusing solely on the past, was also seen as important in helping interviewees “work through traumatic memories.”

Giving back

Survey respondents felt that an important **ethical aspect of giving back to the community** and the individuals who participated in the research was “not to raise expectations of the local community” and “be careful not to promise to improve people’s lives.” Respondents saw taking extra care not to raise the expectations of traumatized individuals as particularly important. A respondent working in Rwanda amongst traumatized women said,

We get caught up in our research; we want a [doctoral] degree. It is sometimes enticing to promise things to traumatized women. This is a grave ethical danger because while we might want to help, we can’t. We as researchers need to understand and appreciate their trauma and how that is shaped by their poverty as well as memories of the genocide. When someone is deep in their traumatic memories, we perhaps promise things we can’t deliver. This must be avoided.

“Trying to solve people’s problems” was also an ethical concern for those survey respondents working in open conflict environments since most of their informants/interviewees “did not have access to social services” which meant that “there was actually very little I could do in a more long-tem and sustainable way.” Several respondents felt that the needs of the people they were interviewing were “so profound” they had to “state forcefully and clearly again and again that there would be no benefits from participating in the study.” This raises the ethical dilemmas of “giving back” to the communities and individuals under study.

Most respondents understood that **finding a meaningful way to give back through publishing is difficult**, particularly “since my research focuses on the most marginal of individuals in Rwandan society. None of my informants read English.” Other respondents spoke of their wish to expose social injustice and political inequalities. One respondent whose research focused on Pakistani refugee communities living in India said,

Since the end of my research, I have tried to remain committed to the issues of the individuals I worked with. I cannot safely have contact with them, and logistically it is next to impossible anyway. Instead, my work is a sort of “bearing witness” in hopes that will raise awareness that can perhaps lead to social change.

Some have told me that this is idealistic and naïve but I see bringing the issues and problems of so-called forgotten populations like the stateless refugees I worked with as politically relevant and important. Bringing in marginal populations is one of the reasons I decided to do my PhD in the first place!

Obtaining Informed Consent

Explaining risks and benefits of participation in the research

Oral consent, instead of IRB written consent forms, was standard practice for all survey respondents. Other important ethical considerations that respondents identified are ensuring that interviewees understand the nature of the research, its purposes, as well as the possibility that its findings might not accord with the interviewees’ own interpretation of the conflict. Monetary payment was offered in only two cases as respondents broadly felt that any compensation should take the form of dry goods (sugar, flour, tea) or a shared meal. It was also felt that the academic objectives of the research be stressed in contexts where foreign aid agencies were conducting “food for work” programs or other in-kind payments to vulnerable individuals as these types of programmes “change the relationship of the population to foreigners. In my experience, local people expect us to pay them to tell them their stories.” Respondents working on the Israel-Palestinian conflict, as well as in Indonesia and Sri Lanka, deemed **explicit acknowledgement of which donors were funding the research** important in several research sites.

Respondents also felt it was important to ensure **continued consent** in “checking back in with each individual towards the end of the research period.” This was done with each interviewee “at the beginning and end of each encounter to confirm whether the individual was still comfortable participating in the research and to double-check what information they were comfortable sharing.” One respondent whose research focused on displaced populations in Angola wrote,

In explaining the risks and benefits to them [interviewees], outside researchers need to acknowledge that local participants know much more than outsiders and we need to respect the ability of our respondents to make informed choices on their own. Double-checking their [the interviewees] comfort levels throughout the course of the research cycle is an important step in this direction.

Respondents sometimes explained to interviewees the **risks and benefits of participating in their research both orally and in written form**. This was seen as especially relevant in small communities with strong kin or clan ties. One respondent working in Somalia found that using both oral and written sources to explain her

research was invaluable as the permission of “tribal leaders was necessary”; the objectives of her research were passed along orally, and usually inaccurately. When called to account by local leaders, she was able to show the written text, which was “invaluable” in assuring both the integrity of her research and the continued participation of interviewees in this volatile context.

Another ethical dilemma to be weighed by the researcher is to “balance the research’s contribution [to knowledge] with the rights/desires of people to be heard.” Risks and benefits of the research projects of survey respondents were usually explained to interviewees by local research assistants/translators, which was often identified as a risk to socially, or politically marginal interviewees in open conflict environments or in highly politicized research sites. Most survey respondents chose their research assistants through local contacts, notably civil society organizations that in many cases “placed clear constraints on whom [researchers] could speak with.”

Confidentiality

For most respondents, confidentiality means a safe and agreed upon location to conduct the interview with local actors, as well as a mutual understanding of the “conditions under which the interview would be conducted.” Standard practice for survey respondents was not to ask the birth names and place names to “prevent any side or actor in the conflict [from being able] to identify my respondents.” Using this technique, respondents could assign **varying levels of confidentiality**, ranging from “total anonymity to generic identification and identification by name and title.”

Another tactic used by several respondents was to interview on agreement that its content would not be cited in subsequent publications, but be for “background information only,” as a means for the researcher to gain local insider knowledge on a specific issue or problem.

Government interference and surveillance

Respondents considered the **security implications of government interference** for their interviewees as “important to think about before going to the field.” Several respondents noted that government interference “slowed down my work because I needed so many approvals and letters of reference to successfully enter the field.” Survey respondents working in Ethiopia, Indonesia, and Rwanda noted that government surveillance “affected the work activities of my informants” and caused some backlash between the community and the researcher. Only one respondent was stopped by local authorities in Sri Lanka, and had her research documents confiscated, to which she wrote, “I knew that my documents and files were secure so when the officer took my

information, I really only worried about the loss of my USB stick, which didn't contain enough information to allow them to identify my interviewees.

Anonymity

Survey respondents all employed a number of techniques to assure the anonymity of their interviewees, which were in turn linked to the levels of confidentiality that interviewees chose. In research sites where the level and intensity of violence were high, respondents **uploaded any recorded material to central web spaces** which only they knew and could access from anywhere in the world. Where respondents chose to use **audio recorders**, the material “was erased within hours of the interview” to ensure that “no record of the interview could be left behind in country where it could be accessed by someone else.” Respondents who used audio recorders “would not transcribe either the interview’s content or summaries of it until I would be away from the interview site where information was susceptible to be seized.” Many individuals uploaded their field-notes and audio files to their iPods or other MP3-type devices since “hiding files in places other than my laptop seemed a better idea.” Most respondents, however, relied on **hand-written notes**, which they wrote up in password-encrypted files on their laptops following each interview day. Paper notes “were then destroyed” and “no record of the interview left.”

Most respondents used **coding strategies** to protect the identity of their interviewees. One respondent who worked on the Colombian conflict used an “extensive code system using characters from my favorite films, TV shows and books. I switched these names for actual place names and people’s name so that only I knew who said what, when and how.” Other respondents did not record the names of people or places, using instead basic demographic data (ethnicity, sex, age) to identify their interviewees.

Respondents who worked with local research assistants or translators spoke of the ethical challenges of ensuring the “**reliability and commitment of the people I worked with**” in “maintaining anonymity and confidentiality.” Most respondents relied on trusted local partners to assist them in identifying research assistants that “respected and appreciated the political nature of my study.” This was not without its challenges as most respondents lacked the financial resources to hire more than one assistant. Many respondents felt that their research would have benefited from working with more than one assistant and that more research assistance would have facilitated a “better balancing of my desire to contribute to the peace building literature and respecting the vulnerable individuals whose life stories form the backbone of my academic contribution.” Respondents working with victims of sexual violence were acutely aware of this balance; in the words of one respondent working on reconciliation and justice in post-genocide Rwanda,

A male informant told me about being raped over a beer one afternoon. I was stunned, not only that he had been raped but that he chose to tell me about it. We never spoke about it again, although I would have pursued the issue further to raise awareness about rape as a weapon of war for both women and men. But I felt that I would be betraying his confidence since my language skills required the use of a translator during my interviews.

Dissemination of Research Findings

Protecting individual identity

Concern for the **anonymity and confidentiality of the material** gathered while in the field remained a concern for survey respondents during the writing-up phase of the research process. All respondents relied on either pseudonyms or composite “characters” when writing up their research. Some did not use names at all, opting instead to identify individuals by their professional title. Respondents whose work focuses on vulnerable individuals chose to “limit their verbatim quotes” that criticized governments or other powerful actors, opting instead to “rely on my own observations to provide constructive criticism.”

Another ethical concern for survey respondents was the possibility of “having put into place the proper safeguards for my informants, only to have others [at the research site] misconstrue, willfully or not, what I have written.” The value of material gathered that was not ultimately used in publication was, nonetheless, deemed by respondents as “still helpful in that it helped shape my own views and perspectives, even though I cannot use it in any publication.” Respondents also reflected on whether or not to thank key informants, research assistants, and other local contacts in their acknowledgements, deciding in most cases it is best not to thank these individuals by name.

Suppression of interview material

Respondents also felt it necessary to take **appropriate measures to ensure the interviewees could not be “retraced” or “identified”** from any resulting publications. In some instance, particularly in highly politicized post-conflict research environments, respondents sometimes chose to suppress the narratives of some interviewees out of concern for their physical safety, even though in one case of Congolese refugees living in Uganda, “research subjects not only wanted their real names to be used, but also wanted me to publish everything about them.” In addition, several respondents wondered about the impact of publishing research results that criticize local power holders. In one case, an interviewee had indicated broad approval for his story to be shared, including having “clear statements attributed to him” but was assassinated before he had formally given consent. In this instance, the respondent chose to “exclude his statements out of concern for his family and colleagues, and this did exclude some important insights which he had provided.”

Publishing politically sensitive material

Survey respondents felt that **the act of publishing was important** in sharing the knowledge gained through fieldwork in open- or post-conflict environments but lamented the “lack of impact that my research has on Western foreign policies.” Several respondents shared that their interview informants gave generously of their time and analysis “in part in the hope that Western-generated policy research will inform a positive change in Western policies” which in turn led to feelings of “taking advantage of” and “not responding to the needs of my informants.” One respondent working on the Israel-Palestine conflict summed it up,

Because those of us working on the Middle East have been spectacularly unsuccessful in provoking a progressive and positive policy change, I cannot avoid the feeling that I am exploiting my respondents for my own career gain. Yet to do nothing, to refuse to continue to speak out, would also be an abandonment – something that Middle East contacts reinforce in discussion of this issue.

Next Steps

Almost all of those academics that participated in the December 2008 workshop on “Developing Ethical Guidelines for Research in Open- or Post-Conflict Environments” were committed to working together to **create an interactive forum** to move the process of developing “Ethics in Conflict Research” guidelines forward. Participants made three specific proposals:

First, the **development of a dedicated website** to collect and make available the experiences of individuals who have “hands-on” field experience in dealing with the myriad ethical challenges that can potentially arise in open- and post-conflict environments available to a broad audience. The purpose would be to educate dissertation supervisors and IRB staff while supporting students and colleagues seeking to conduct research in conflict environments. This “Ethics in Conflict Research” website would provide an interactive forum where researchers could work together to develop and refine their research.

Participants at the December 2008 meeting identified three broad thematic approaches for the website *viz.*, a) “Preparing to Enter the Conflict or post-Conflict Environment,” b) “In the Field,” and c) “Publication and Dissemination of Research Results.”

It was also proposed that additional, **more specific surveys be carried out** among the members of the Post-War Scholars’ Database to gain concrete examples of how individual researchers dealt with the ethical challenges identified in this Research Report.

Second, the **development of a series of “Ethical Briefs,”** meaning short three-to-five page document dedicated to a specific theme highlighted in the initial survey. Each “Brief” would illustrate how researchers identified and solved ethical dilemmas in the course of their own work and would be available on the new website. Possible topics for the Briefs include:

- a) Research planning and design, including thinking about entering the field
- b) Gaining IRB permissions
- c) Accessing potential interviewees
- d) Working with local partners, including the identification of research assistants and translators
- e) Working with vulnerable populations, including working with traumatized individuals
- f) Working with armed groups
- g) Understanding local power relationships
- h) Is Academic independence or neutrality possible in conflict environments?
- i) Issues of informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality
- j) When and how to give back to local actors
- k) Researcher safety and well-being
- l) Writing up and publication

A third concrete proposal emerging from the December 2008 meeting was for participants to take an activist role, as academics working in open- or post-conflict environments, to **engage Institutional Review Boards (IRBs)** to appreciate that the ethical challenges and complexities inherent in conducting research in difficult or dangerous situations require a different, and often more thoughtful and detailed, ethical protocol.

They would initiate a “pushback” process against IRBs in the United States and elsewhere to revise their ethical protocols in ways that allow University administrators to appreciate the different needs of academics working in conflict environments. The States and Security Program should work with academic professional associations (APSA, AAA, etc) to **sensitize IRB administrators and staff to the different ethical challenges** of academics (and others) working in conflict environments.

Young academics with “hands-on” field research experiences are encouraged to **write up their experiences** to show the systematic need for revised and updated ethical guidelines for researchers working in open- or post-conflict environments for publication in academic journals.

Similarly, a **statement of the limitations of current IRB ethical requirements** from frustrated young scholars like members of the Post-War Scholars Database would help individuals lobby their own institutions to grant context-specific ethical permissions. Such a statement could also be used to educate IRB staff of the challenges of research with human subjects in open- and post-conflict environments in particular, and more generally, of the different ethical challenges of doing research outside of the US. It could also be used by researchers to reform ethics procedures at their home institution, for example, to provide an opening for researchers to meet with IRB staff to explain their research projects, rather than simply submitting written applications that can be misinterpreted by staff who have little, or no, international experience, or at least with research projects that will be carried out in conflict environments.