“ETHICS ABROAD: FIELDWORK IN FRAGILE AND VIOLENT CONTEXTS”

I. INTRODUCTION

A political scientist studying wartime sexual violence finds herself at a clinic being introduced to a rape victim who looks younger than 18 and visibly distressed, yet has traveled a significant distance to be interviewed. A team of researchers running a behavioral experiment wonders if a local partner organization is endangering participants in order to implement its randomization scheme in a conflict-adjacent village. A graduate student working on a limited budget in a refugee camp is overjoyed to find an educated, passionate RA who will set up, conduct, translate and transcribe politically sensitive interviews for only $60 per month. All of these academics are benefitting from the unparalleled access to, and potential for exploitation of, research subjects, local partners, and labor that are often present in environments of extreme state fragility. In this article, we explore the ethical pitfalls presented by these dynamics, and their consequences for the populations among whom the research is conducted.

In countless discussions at conferences, in graduate student seminars, and over meals in the field, we have heard fellow social scientists echo a common theme regarding work in violent and fragile contexts: concern about the ethical implications of their fieldwork and uncertainty over how to mitigate them.1 Nearly every researcher we have spoken with described at least one instance in which they were called upon to make an on-the-spot decision involving ethical issues they had not anticipated, without time to fully consider the consequences. On subsequent reflection, researchers often wished they had made different decisions.

As the volume of field-based research on fragile or violent contexts increases, it is hard to ignore the fact that such settings pose challenges that are not present elsewhere. Access to new political spaces in which to answer pressing social science questions, the availability of cheap labor, the ease of access to powerful figures, and the excitement of “the field” attract social scientists to these settings. However, they often constitute permissive environments in which researchers can engage in conduct that would be considered deeply

1 Several of our colleagues have written very compellingly about these challenges. See, e.g., Desposato (2015); Fujii (2012); Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read (2015); Mitchell (2013); and Sriram et al. (2009), among others.
problematic at home. Institutional review boards (IRBs) follow guidelines developed for medical research rather than for social science. Moreover, they assume regulatory structures and socio-political norms that quickly lose relevance outside of Europe and North America.

The unique characteristics of these spaces mean that some researchers operate unaware of the ethical implications of their work while others find themselves unprepared for dilemmas they face in the field. In the following pages, we draw from our own experiences and those of colleagues who have conducted interviews, surveys, RCTs and ethnographic research in areas of state fragility.2 We begin with a brief discussion of some common features of these settings. The subsequent section delineates the ways in which these characteristics can lead to ethical dilemmas and snap decisions that affect three distinct local populations: research subjects; research partners and organizations; and research assistants. Finally, we conclude with a set of practical questions and recommendations for consideration by those undertaking fieldwork in areas of state fragility, as well as for those evaluating, advising, or reviewing such work.

FIELDWORK IN VIOLENT OR FRAGILE SETTINGS

Stepping off the plane at a field site in western Europe, a researcher can feel confident that with an approval from her home institution’s IRB, certification from the host country’s national IRB, and perhaps a prearranged partnership agreement with a local organization, she is clear to begin her research. But arriving in an environment of fragile state authority or violent conflict can be a very different story.

While governments in these contexts may have agencies in the capital dedicated to issuing formal research permissions, research sites might still fall under the de facto governance of customary authorities, NGOs, civil society groups, international agencies, or UN Missions. Contested territorial control may mean that researchers need to obtain formal permissions from parallel authority structures to avoid risks to their personal security. The empirical realities of weak statehood mean that a variety of non-state actors function as de facto legitimate authorities and that these stakeholders engage in tasks that would elsewhere

2 The data and insights presented in this article are the product of over a decade of research undertaken in areas of extreme state fragility and conflict by the authors. Many of the examples provided are based on firsthand observations or secondhand testimony from fellow researchers. Quotes from colleagues are reproduced with permission on condition of confidentiality.
fall under the responsibility of the sovereign government (Arjona 2014; Lund 2007; Mampilly 2011; Menkhaus 2007; Rotberg 2004; Staniland 2012).

Additionally, authority structures in weak states rarely represent coherent chains of command. Even in territory controlled by a single armed group, power may be distributed among competing elites or be highly locally dispersed (Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers 2004). Where formal regulations persist, they are rarely enforced in practice. Furthermore, multiple hierarchies may compete within a single government unit or bureaucracy (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2014).

Areas characterized by these dynamics pose a series of unique challenges. Formal and informal fees may be levied for research permits, permissions, access to public records or access to territory. Yet which constitute legitimate expenses and which constitute forms of graft can be difficult to ascertain, as distinctions between formal and informal spheres of authority can be easily blurred. For instance, it may be impossible to conduct research in certain areas without paperwork authorized by an insurgent organization, but paying the administrative fees necessary to obtain research permission qualifies as “supporting a rebellion” in the eyes of the territorial state (and perhaps also in the eyes of the U.S. government’s Office of Foreign Assets Control).

Finally, deference to the central government, a given in most settings, may be a questionable choice when that government lacks control over the research context, is openly hostile to populations in its territory, or shuns researchers. For example, in repressive states, whether or not to comply with government visa requirements or obtain local ethics approvals from the host government poses a serious dilemma for many academics, who may need to obscure the purpose of their travel to avoid surveillance, harassment, or worse. When invited to attend a human rights conference in a country that had recently initiated a crackdown on civil society and frowned on external human rights researchers entering the country, [author’s] attempts to secure the appropriate travel documents descended into Kafkaesque absurdity. The country’s consular officials in the US ultimately suggested traveling on a tourist visa, with fingers crossed against deportation for engaging in unlawful human rights related activities.

When the relevant authorities are unclear, contradictory, or morally questionable, it can be hard to be sure what constitutes ethical research practice. The guidelines provided by home IRBs often fail to transport to such radically different socio-political structures.
Indeed, requirements imposed by IRBs (to obtain local approvals, or to require written consent documents) may place interview subjects at grave risk. These challenges are exacerbated in volatile security situations. While IRBs issue their approval on the assumption of a fairly static level of risk, fragile and violent contexts often make continual reassessment necessary. A particularly stark example of this dynamic comes from a colleague who embarked upon fieldwork in Iraqi Kurdistan in May 2014 when it was quiet and stable. But a month later, when his informants assured him they were still available to go forward with scheduled interviews despite the rapid approach of ISIS, he wasn’t sure whether to take them at their word. Were they neglecting their own safety to accommodate him, or were they simply more knowledgeable about the level of threat? While western researchers may be able to mobilize foreign passports or take advantage of humanitarian networks to evacuate rapidly should a security situation deteriorate, local interlocutors can rarely invoke the same protections.

How should researchers balance these concerns? Building relationships, developing trust, and becoming acquainted with political systems and social norms in a way that would allow them to engage these dilemmas with more confidence can take time that researchers do not always have. And even with time, the disparity between the safety net of a western passport and the relative vulnerability of local fixers and drivers is difficult to overcome. Should academics avoid active conflict zones altogether? How can researchers best protect the time and safety of their interlocutors, while negotiating complex dynamics of power and advancing scholarly knowledge of violent conflict? The following section details the ways in which the dynamics described above can lead to decisions that result in harm to three distinct local populations that researchers encounter in the field. We conclude with some practical recommendations to help advance ethical scholarship in such settings.

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3 Parkinson (2015) and Thomson (2009) have discussed the ways that, in Lebanon and Rwanda respectively, obtaining research approvals from the government can be used as a form of surveillance, which would pose grave risks to interview subjects if the researcher is not adequately prepared to protect the identity of interviewees. Further, the electronic documentation of names, field notes or consent documents could pose serious threats to interviewees if seized at border crossings or by other security personnel.

4 See Fujii (2012) and Goldstein (2016) for further discussions of these issues. See Loyle (2014) for a discussion of self-preservation in dangerous or traumatic fieldwork.

II. Enabling Problematic Research Practices

The complex layers of authority and shifting risk dynamics outlined above have profound implications for interactions with research subjects and local partners. Subjects lack the protections they would be afforded in Europe or the US. Furthermore, they may have the impression that socio-material benefits will accrue from participating in academic research projects. Local research partners likewise might be incentivized by the personal and professional benefits that arise from being affiliated with foreign researchers. These motivations can include the prestige or political capital from working with foreign universities, or the implicit expectation of future funding, employment or educational opportunity. These power dynamics and incentive structures are not immediately obvious, but failing to account for them can lead scholars to inadvertently engage in harmful or exploitative practices.

Research Subjects: Vulnerable Populations

In 1960, journalist Edward Behr overheard a British TV reporter demand of a group of Congolese refugees: “Anyone here been raped and speaks English?” This anecdote sounds exaggerated, or even antiquated, but countless colleagues highlighted the ease with which vulnerable populations can be accessed in fragile and violent contexts. Researchers working on topics such as civilian victimization or torture reported to us experiences in which, in the early days of their field research, local fixers had accompanied them – often unawares – to hospitals or safe houses to speak with victims of horrific human rights abuses. Indeed, on a trip to [postconflict fieldsite] an official offered to set up an impromptu meeting with survivors of war crimes for a group of undergraduates (untrained and inexperienced in speaking to vulnerable populations) [author] was accompanying on a study trip.

In Europe and North America, legal rules and professional best practices prohibit academic researchers or journalists from arriving at hospitals, children’s homes, or domestic violence shelters unannounced and requesting to speak directly to patients, service recipients or other vulnerable populations. Research with these populations is usually the result of extended discussion or longstanding relationships built over time with relevant authorities, and any research must be firmly justified by its expected benefit. But arriving unannounced and asking to conduct interviews with victims and perpetrators of trauma or abuse is common practice in many fragile and violent settings. Indeed, “City of Joy”, a
transformational leadership community for women survivors of violence in eastern DR Congo, had become something of an obligatory tourist stop for visitors to the region. So many western researchers were turning up at City of Joy unannounced that its founders eventually had to close the door to visitors altogether.6

While none of the researchers we spoke with admitted to exploiting access to confidential medical, police, or court records to recruit interviewees or research subjects, many pointed out the ease with which they could have done so if they had wanted to. In several cases, our colleagues reported that organizations were more than willing to share identifying details such as names, phone numbers or addresses of service beneficiaries.

Even assuming that researchers recruit interviewees in the most professional manner possible, ethical challenges can overshadow the researcher-subject relationship. Particularly when working with research subjects or populations with limited literacy or prior interaction with academic researchers, researchers can easily be mistaken for service providers, an identity that often works to their advantage. Wood (2006) discusses the frequency with which she was assumed to be a church-worker when carrying out her research on civilian victimization in El Salvador, and the lengths to which she had to go to in order to correct this assumption. [Author] (2016) had similar experiences. In an environment saturated with aid and development programs, the logical assumption that interviewees drew was that she was affiliated with an organization providing humanitarian assistance. Some directly requested financial support or expressed hope that aid would result from sharing their stories with a western researcher. In contexts dominated by international development assistance, it can be challenging for researchers to separate themselves from the aid organizations that local populations are accustomed to interacting with. Conversations with white women holding pens and notebooks inevitably carry certain expectations. Even when academics do their best to make clear to potential interviewees that they are under no obligation to participate in the research and that they will receive no direct benefits from doing so, it can be hard to ensure that the message is heard.

6 Advanced permission from medical staff is now required before visiting City of Joy. Indeed, the process for obtaining research permissions to visit other hospitals in South Kivu has recently been formalized, in some cases costing upwards of $800 USD. While this is an example of best practice, and serves to limit the ease of access to vulnerable or traumatized individuals, the fact that it was necessary to implement such hefty barriers speaks to the extent to which visits to meet victims of sexual trauma first-hand had become an unquestioned part of foreign visitors’ itineraries.
When asked about the phenomenon of “profiting off of information extraction”, one researcher noted:

How do I respect the safety, security and integrity of my informants, where there is such a clear power and benefits disparity? Because I’m white, will they speak to me even though it may present a danger (that I don’t know about) to them in the future? How can I honestly portray my research and the real potential it has to be beneficial to them while still accomplishing what I need to accomplish?

In her 2013 piece on public health in the eastern DRC, D’Errico observed visible frustration with the power disparities inherent in academic research. One focus group participant asked whether or not foreign professors are paid to teach classes based on the knowledge gained from visits to the DRC, suggesting that such payments should be shared with their informants (D’Errico et al. 2013: 53). Another participant noted: “they say they can’t pay us [for research] because that would be unethical, but they take our dignity for free”.

Many researchers we consulted, particularly those working in sub-Saharan Africa, emphasized the regularity with which interviewees requested money to feed and clothe their children, assistance securing refugee status or visas to Western countries, or help obtaining medical care. Uncomfortable with the extractive nature of receiving information for nothing, some of our fellow researchers reported transgressing their defined interviewer-interviewee boundaries, for instance by accompanying research subjects to hospitals or clinics after interviews were completed. Understandably, they felt it was “the least they could do”. But many also worried that providing this kind of assistance might not only complicate the expected impartiality and objectivity between researchers and subjects, but also perpetuate the expectation that benefits accrue from being interviewed for research. For many of us, it’s difficult to shake the concern that interviewees are consenting to interviews because they hope to get some remuneration, even when they’ve been clearly informed that they won’t.

Others working in post-conflict environments have commented on the readiness with which interviewees disclosed their experiences as victims of trauma, even when that was not the subject of the research. One researcher told us: “[my] interviews felt very strongly like therapy sessions, and when I would leave I was often profoundly thanked for listening”. Another noted:

7 Confidential conversation with scholar, 2015.
8 Clark (2012) offers a powerful discussion of reciprocity in interviewer-interviewee relationships from her research in Bosnia-Herzogevina.
9 Scholar observation (2015). Quoted here with permission and anonymity.
I had to comfort victims of sexual violence and it was difficult not only because I am not trained to do so but because they somehow expected me to. I had to explain that my role as a researcher would limit what I could provide to the subjects, but that I was ready to provide them with any help I had the capacity to provide.\(^{10}\)

These stories show that for researchers working in conflict-affected states, access to vulnerable and traumatized individuals is so easy that it happens inadvertently. While a handful of scholars working in this field have training that helps equip them for these interactions, this is not the norm. And without that experience, these dynamics can be problematic for even the most thoughtful and sensitive of researchers. However, firsthand research with such populations continues to be highly valued – and frequently rewarded – in the profession. Scholars are commended for conducting original research, even when advocacy organizations have engaged in similar work. More worryingly, they are often applauded for their bravery and innovation when traveling to “dangerous” fieldsites, or presenting research with ex-combatants or other vulnerable populations, despite frequent lack of experience or training.\(^{11}\) It is extremely rare to hear questions about research ethics or security posed in academic presentations, despite the fact that these – and other – power disparities too often call into question the fiction of informed consent.

**Research Partners, Organizations and Elites**

The effects of fragile and violent contexts on relationships with elites, research partners and organizations play out differently but are also characterized by levels of access unparalleled in environments of greater institutional stability. Many researchers we spoke with reported (with some chagrin) securing appointments with high-level officials simply by showing up at government offices. Junior scholars have managed to conduct interviews with government ministers, high court judges, and even presidents and prime ministers with no prior notice. In addition, many of our colleagues reported remarkable generosity from powerful interlocutors, including introductions to other elites, expedited security approvals, access to government data, and personal phone numbers to call for follow-up questions.

One particularly troubling dynamic pertains to mistaken identity. Stephen Brown notes of his research in Malawi:

> I have no doubt that many Malawian officials and donor representatives (my main interlocutors) saw me around town, noted with whom I was socializing and associated me with the American government crowd…Once a US Embassy

\(^{10}\) Confidential comment by researcher.

\(^{11}\) See Mohan (2014) for a discussion of similarly troubling trends in journalism.
security guard let me through to someone’s office without checking for identification or phoning ahead—clearly against security protocols—presumably because he thought I was an American official (Brown 2009).

While Brown did not purposefully mislead his interviewees, he was conscious of how his off-duty conduct would influence perceptions. Assumptions made on the basis of race and nationality can be hard to shake; academics working in sub-Saharan Africa know that white skin or a Western passport opens doors. Even when the researcher is inexperienced or lacking in credentials, efforts may be made by senior officials to permit access to restricted data or respond to researcher requests with speed, deference and ceremony.

While these dynamics can affect research throughout the developing world, a particularly strong reliance on funds from external actors in fragile or violent settings amplifies this expectation, especially among NGOs. Because many organizations receive revenue from “invisible” foreign donors – who may, on occasion, visit field offices during funding visits, foreign researchers can be implicitly associated with the possibility of future funding. An NGO director in a well-studied conflict zone joked to us that 90 percent of his time is spent fielding questions from American PhD students. Local staff have reported feelings of duty or obligation regarding requests from western researchers, often resulting from ambiguity over who they are and what their potential or future position of influence might be (vis-à-vis donors or other partners or opportunities).

The power imbalances between Western researchers and local organizations in conflict or post-conflict contexts become all the more problematic when the relationship is not that of researcher-subject, but of research partners. Partnerships take many forms. Organizations may serve as “host” institutions, lending desk-space or a formal affiliation to a researcher or team. NGOs may serve as project implementers, delegated to coordinate, oversee, monitor or evaluate research activities for a negotiated fee. They may be service providers who agree to randomize aspects of their programs. These relationships often appear (and indeed, can be) mutually beneficial. Yet, the realities of implementation often reveal decisions and dilemmas that call into question the principle of “do no harm”.

Much ink has already been spilled on the ethical issues that plague field experiments. Challenges that prove hard to overcome in the developing world are almost always

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12 See Smyth (2005) for a discussion of insider-outsider dynamics in researching conflict. See Bouka (2015); Davenport (2013); and (Henderson 2009) for reflections on researcher positionality as non-white academics working in sub-Saharan Africa.
compounded in fragile states where oversight of research is limited and researchers are, in practice, almost entirely responsible for policing their own ethical conduct. Even where researchers do due diligence to abide by relevant local regulations, information about applicable law and policy may be hard to come by. And contradictions within the law can make good faith compliance challenging. For the less scrupulous, or those inattentive to or unconcerned about ethics, limited monitoring and enforcement can make the rules easy to circumvent. These trends have led Scott Desposato to describe experimental research in the developing world as a “wild west where anything goes” (Desposato 2014a: 2). Pointing to the example of researchers hiring of locals to commit traffic violations in efforts to investigate bribery and corruption across Latin America (Fried, Lagunes, and Venkataramani 2010), among other similar examples, Desposato notes that academics too frequently engage in research that transgresses ethics requirements or break national law. Again, these problems are only compounded when competing spheres of authority make formal requirements and obligations difficult to identify and therefore easy to circumvent.

Working through local partner organizations is one way in which field experimenters attentive to these challenges have sought to mitigate harm to local communities. The logic is that local partners are more knowledgeable of the legal context in which they are working, as well as the potential pitfalls of the research design with regard to ethics concerns. Humphreys (2014) explains:

> Even if they are not critical for implementation, partnerships can simplify the ethics. The decision to implement is taken not by the researcher but by an actor better equipped to assess risks and to respond to adverse outcomes.

But local organizations do not always employ scrupulous ethical practice themselves, and the power disparities and perverse incentives discussed above raise the possibility that local organizations may sacrifice their own standards, or disregard risks and ethics concerns in exchange for the benefits of affiliating with a wealthy foreign university. Shifting the responsibility to local partners should not serve the purpose of absolving western researchers of their own ethical obligations.

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13 Writing about a now-notorious US-based field experiment that made illegal use of the Montana state seal to solicit responses to campaign material during an election cycle, Desposato (2015; 2014), notes that such practices are commonplace outside of North America and Europe. In addition to the traffic violation example, he discusses the illegal dissemination of 100,000 campaign flyers in Brazil, violating national political communication laws (De Figueiredo, Hidalgo, and Kasahara 2011). See also Zimmerman (2015) for a thoughtful discussion of this topic.
Research Assistance and Intellectual Labor

Scholars often arrive at new research sites with limited prior knowledge. When working in volatile, dangerous or unfamiliar settings, we rely heavily on fixers, RAs, and other local staff. Socializing and working with locals are how we learn about new contexts; these relationships are fundamental to successful research. But they can raise ethical issues of their own.

For partners whose role is formalized, through pay or otherwise (i.e. RAs, fixers, interns, survey administrators), the concerns are explicit: Are they paid enough for the work that they do? And is their contribution to the intellectual product recognized? Local research assistants frequently assume responsibility for organizing every aspect of large and small-scale projects; from arranging interviews, providing contacts, organizing drivers, making travel arrangements, organizing research permits, obtaining visas, doing translation, carrying out surveys, and paying informal fees. For larger projects, they might facilitate or organize trainings, reserve conference space, organize equipment, and manage teams of local staff. In conflict settings, or in politically volatile research climates, this work might pose immense personal risks to themselves or their families.

These individuals are often paid shockingly little for their contributions. Researchers we spoke to reported wages as low as $37 per month. Widespread poverty and unemployment in conflict and post-conflict environments makes it possible to find local support staff eager for any form of employment and willing to work for any wage; sometimes for no wage at all. The extent to which NGOs and other external actors monopolize local economies in fragile conflict or post-conflict settings means that affiliating with foreign individuals and institutions may be perceived as the only option for exit, or for an above subsistence living. Out-of-work or underpaid professionals may affiliate with foreign researchers for no pay, therefore, in the hope that doing so could lead to future employment. Work experience, introductions to other researchers, and the prospect that research with a foreign national will make them more attractive to foreign NGOs, prove powerful motivators for working for free. Yet future opportunities rarely materialize.

If the unspoken promise of future employment allows researchers access to skilled labor at rock-bottom prices, it’s not only their budgets that benefit. Frequently, locals advise on core substantive elements of the project. They play critical roles in designing studies, conducting analysis, interpreting data and informing the conclusions researchers draw. Yet
their contributions are rarely recognized beyond a footnote. In some cases, their absence may result from legitimate security concerns. But often, it reflects an assumption that local partners do not share in the intellectual ownership of the work. This has led to the widespread erasure of local contributions from many published studies. Journals are so accustomed to seeing only European and American names on research projects undertaken in the global south, that the fact that crucial African, Asian, Middle Eastern and Latin American contributors are rendered invisible at publication rarely catches the attention of editors or reviewers.

That’s not to say that researchers don’t value the work that their partners do. Many feel profound gratitude to and affection for their RAs and have built lasting relationships with them. Several of our colleagues spoke of writing recommendation letters, paying for schooling, advising or supporting visa and asylum processes, or sending money to assist with family crises. Nevertheless, their labor contributes to publications, research funding, doctoral degrees, and tenure and promotion for the scholar, few of whose benefits they share in.

III. CAN WE DO BETTER?

Weak or contested authority and ongoing conflict mean that researchers in such settings find themselves (usually unintentionally) skirting the edges of what would be considered responsible research practice elsewhere. Their incentive structures, as well as those of their research subjects and local partners, generate potentially exploitative dynamics. Academics are rewarded professionally for firsthand insight and experience of the socio-political contexts they are studying. In the face of limited budgets and competitive tenure and promotion processes, environments that permit sensational or large impact projects to be completed quickly and cheaply make appealing research sites. At the same time, the comparatively disempowered position of local research subjects and partners may lead to acquiescence in decisions and practices that cause local populations immediate or deferred discomfort and harm.

None of this is to say that academics should not work in such environments. Some of the most valuable research in political science has come from research across methodological traditions in exactly the settings we describe here. Cohen (2013), Hoover Green (2016), Parkinson (2013), Straus (2006), Wood (2003), and others have illuminated the complexities of participation in violence. Fujii (2013) and Thomson (2014) have brought illuminating testimonies of political persecution to light. Yet many of these scholars have
extensive ethics training, or practical skills and professional backgrounds that equip them for this work.

Careful research with vulnerable populations, therefore, can generate new and important insights and advancements in knowledge. Moreover, it can bring the often overlooked perspectives of marginalized or underrepresented communities to light. But the process by which these insights are generated warrants scrutiny. Our observations do not mean a moratorium on such research, but they do mean being attentive to – and curtailing – potentially exploitative dynamics. And ensuring researchers who travel to work in such settings are appropriately trained and prepared to do so. Building from the observations of researchers working in violent or fragile contexts across multiple methodological traditions, we delineate a set of concrete questions and recommendations in Table 1 to help guide scholars embarking on this type research.

But it’s not only individual researchers that need to be more reflective about the ethical implications of our work in fragile and violent contexts. We need to do better as a research community. At the institutional level, this means more discussion of fieldwork ethics, more formal training and oversight for graduate students, greater reluctance to reward ethically thoughtless or problematic studies, and clearer standards for crediting the contributions of local partners. It also means that input from – and deference to – area specialists should be sought at all stages of preparation and review. Further, the lone question about ethics at conference presentations should not be dismissed as peripheral to a study’s theoretical innovation. Conference attendees, faculty advisors, grant evaluators, journal editors, anonymous reviewers, dissertation committees and readers should all engage in critical evaluation of the relative value of any academic research project – particularly if carried out by inexperienced researchers – vis-à-vis the potential harms inflicted.

As delineated in Table 2, all of these audiences should consider (and ask!) whether the study would be possible in their home countries; whether they would be comfortable if the study involved members of their own families; how visible and invisible power disparities were thought through in the research design and implementation; whether participants appeared to have been exposed to risk; and whether the contributions of local partners are sufficiently credited. The political science community at large has an obligation to relentlessly question whether the scientific contribution of the final product genuinely warranted sensitive firsthand research.
Works Cited


Parkinson, Sarah Elizabeth. 2015. “Reflections on Researching Violence in the War on Terror.” In . San Francisco.


Table 1: Questions for consideration by scholars embarking on field research

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<tr>
<th>Before Heading to the Field</th>
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<tr>
<td>☐ Have you done your homework? How well do you understand the political context you’ll be working in? Have you reached out to others who have worked in your research site to ask about the ethical challenges they faced? How would you handle these challenges if you encountered them in your work?</td>
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<td>☐ If your research involves vulnerable human subjects, have you thought through how necessary their firsthand testimony is for your research design? And if others have worked on similar questions, are you confident that your project adds something valuable to offset the potential harm?</td>
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<td>☐ Who will you reach out to if you need to discuss ethical issues that arise during your fieldwork? What will you do if you feel your research is endangering someone in ways that you didn’t anticipate? What ethics issues are you concerned about that were not raised in your human subjects review? How will you deal with these?</td>
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<td>☐ Have you decided how you will handle requests for financial or other assistance from research subjects? What types of researcher-subject relationships are you comfortable with? How will you weigh your perceived objectivity as a researcher against your ability to provide sometimes life-saving support to someone in need?</td>
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<th>In the Field</th>
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<td>☐ Would all of the practices you are employing be considered ethical in your home country?</td>
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<td>☐ Would you be comfortable with someone treating you or your loved ones the way you are interacting with your research subjects and partners?</td>
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<td>☐ Are you confident that you’re really getting informed consent from your participants? Have you encountered difficulties in explaining your project or your role to your research subjects? Do you need to rethink your description of your project to ensure that participants understand the information they are getting about who you are and what your research is for?</td>
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<td>☐ Have any of your research participants asked you for medical, material or professional assistance? Do you think these requests influenced their willingness to participate? Does this alter your recruitment strategy in the future or how you approach research participants going forward?</td>
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| **Does it affect how you interpret your data?** | ☐  
| If you are working with a partner organization, are you aware of how (and what) they are communicating with research participants about your project? Do staff members appear to be attentive to the wellbeing of research subjects? | ☐  
| If you are employing local staff, what factors did you consider when negotiating a rate? What are your research assistants and collaborators contributing to the project? If a colleague at your home institution were performing this role, would they deserve an author credit? If not, how else can you appropriately and adequately compensate your local colleagues’ time and labor? | ☐  
| **After Coming Home** | ☐  
| Have you ensured that your research subjects and partners are comfortable with the ways in which they are attributed and acknowledged in your work? Have you given credit where credit is due? | ☐  
| And have you thought beyond the requirements of your IRB to consider whether additional confidentiality measures might be necessary? For example, where appropriate, have you removed dates and place names, as well as other identifiers, to ensure that individuals cannot be linked to a particular interview or sentiment? | ☐  
| Have you made a plan to ensure that your research results are disseminated back to the affected community in ways that are meaningful or valuable to them? What would a valuable dissemination strategy look like in the context in which you are working? | ☐  

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<th>Research subjects</th>
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<td>□ Does the contribution of the project genuinely warrant firsthand field research?</td>
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<td>□ How were interview subjects or research participants recruited? Did the author do this his/herself? Or were local support staff used to set up or conduct interviews?</td>
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<td>□ If research assistants or fixers made the research arrangements, what did they communicate to subjects about the project? How could the author be sure that accurate information was transmitted?</td>
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<td>□ If the project involves work with vulnerable populations, does the researcher possess the necessary skills and/or training?</td>
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<td>□ How did the author obtained informed consent?</td>
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<td>□ Were research subjects given anything in return for their participation?</td>
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<th>Research partners</th>
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<td>□ What responsibilities fell to local partners and what fell solely to the author?</td>
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<td>□ How did the author recruit or establish relationships with local partner organizations?</td>
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<td>□ What information about the project and its benefits was communicated to local partners?</td>
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<th>Research assistants and intellectual labor</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Did the author carry out the research his/herself?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Does the author speak local languages? If not, was an interpreter used? What was the nature of the relationship between the interpreter and local subject populations?</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Are the contributions of local partners sufficiently acknowledged or credited?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>□ What risks were assumed by research assistants or fixers in facilitating the research?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Did the author establish a prospective security protocol for managing these risks?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ How much were local staff paid for their labor? How was this fee agreed?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>□ If you or a faculty member at your home institution had undertaken the</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>labor invested by the researcher’s local staff, would they expect an author credit?</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>