

From principles to practice: Methods to increase the transparency of research ethics in violent contexts*

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Abstract

There has been a proliferation of research with human participants in violent contexts over the past 20 years. In contexts of violence, it is particularly important and difficult to adhere to commonly held ethical principles such as beneficence, justice, and respect for persons. This note argues that practices around adhering to ethical principles in violent contexts should be reported more transparently in research outputs, and should be seen as a subset of research methods. We offer practical suggestions and some preliminary empirical evidence from our research on violence in Zimbabwe and Mexico around risk assessments, mitigating the risk of distress and negative psychological outcomes, informed consent, and monitoring the incidence of potential risks.

*This note draws on research conducted with a number of collaborators, including Omar García-Ponce, José Antonio García Lopez, Adrienne LeBas, Alexander Noyes, and Thomas Zeitzoff. We also learned significantly from local research implementers at Buendía y Laredo in Mexico and Voice for Democracy and the Mass Public Opinion Institute in Zimbabwe. These projects benefited from funding from the National Science Foundation, U.S. Institute of Peace, and International Peace Research Foundation. We thank Graeme Blair, Robert A. Blair, Jennifer Freyd, Emilia Simison, and the Brown-MIT Development Workshop for helpful comments.

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Over the past 20 years, there has been a proliferation of field research involving human participants in contexts affected by political violence. The boom of field research in violent contexts has been fueled by a number of important goals championed by different parts of the discipline: the desire to test the “microfoundations” of theories about the causes and consequences of public conflict (Kertzer, 2017), the growing demand for research designs that identify causal claims (Gerber, Green and Kaplan, 2004), and concerns that the voices of people affected by conflict should be represented in scholarship (Pearlman, 2017). Most importantly, the proliferation of field research in violent contexts is driven by a desire to use high quality research to inform the design of better policies to mitigate and prevent violence.

Yet the fact that many researchers have good intentions clearly does not imply that doing research on violence is ethical. Many of the leading researchers conducting fieldwork in violent contexts have written about the ambiguity of ethical decisions (Wood, 2006; Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018). This letter highlights some of the main ethical principles that researchers working on violence aspire to uphold – some of which fall outside the current scope of the ethical guidelines followed by American Institutional Review Boards – and suggests practical solutions that we believe will help researchers better adhere to them. These suggestions are by no means exhaustive, and are generally ways to monitor and validate assumptions about ethical goals rather than “solve” ethical dilemmas. Many of the practices we suggest draw from research on forms of violence that tend to be less of a focus for political scientists such as child abuse, intimate partner violence, and sexual abuse.¹ We follow Wood (2006) in arguing that there cannot be a one-size-fits all solution to research in violent contexts. However, we think that these practices might help researchers adhere more closely to maximizing the benefits of their research, protecting participant autonomy, and minimizing potential harm to various stakeholders including participants and staff.

First, it is important to briefly discuss the relevant ethical principles involved in research in violent contexts. Most of these are derived from the broader guidelines laid out in the Belmont

¹See recent work by Cohen (2016), Kreft (2019) and Córdova (Book in progress) for important exceptions.

Report, a document formulated by a national commission in 1976 and adopted by the U.S. government to inform federal policy and regulations for research with human participants. The Belmont Report lays out three core principles: beneficence, justice, and respect for persons. The principle of beneficence mandates that research should attempt to maximize benefits and minimize harm to participants. Furthermore, potential benefits of research must outweigh risks, and researchers should also strive for non-maleficence, or to do no harm. The principle of justice mandates that costs and benefits of research should be distributed fairly among all potential participants. Finally, the principle of respect for persons mandates that participants should be free to voluntarily decide whether or not to participate based on researchers' truthful representation of the research. This third principle is the basis for the informed consent process. In addition to these principles laid out in the Belmont Report, a number of violence scholars have pointed out that the protection of research staff, including interviewers, advisors, and other local collaborators, is also a first-order ethical imperative (Paluck, 2009; Lü, 2015).

In the rest of this note, we describe practices in four key areas that might improve the adherence of our field to these ethical principles, primarily by increasing the transparency of research methods around the ethics. We illustrate some of these practices using examples from our own fieldwork in Zimbabwe and Mexico. During the time of our combined fieldwork between 2013 and 2020, political violence in Zimbabwe primarily took the form of state and state-sponsored repression carried out against opposition supporters and affiliated social movements. In Mexico, the violence most relevant to our ongoing research projects since 2017 is perpetrated by criminal groups, state security forces, and vigilante groups. The research projects that we will discuss below were carried out with a number of other collaborators who worked with us to develop these ideas, including other faculty and graduate students, implementing partners, and academic advisors based both in the US and in the two field research sites. We also highlight practices that other violence researchers have developed in recent projects both within and outside political science.

The first family of practices describes better documenting risk assessments and evaluations of

the potential harms and benefits of research in violent contexts. The second concerns mitigating the risk of distress, lasting negative emotions, and at an extreme increases in negative psychological outcomes like PTSD symptoms and depression. The third highlights ways to empirically assess the adequacy and appropriateness of the informed consent process. And the fourth considers the challenge of monitoring for negative consequences during and after project implementation. The overarching logic behind many of these suggestions is to make research ethics more transparent and empirical, so that it becomes a more standard part of the review process and is seen as a rich area for additional methodological research that will help us come up with increasingly robust practices.

1 Credibly and empirically assessing risks

The first shortcoming of existing practices that we think can be addressed with better practices is the transparency of risk assessments. Every research project that goes through an Institutional Review Board must assess the potential risks and benefits of the research for participants. The need to assess the severity and probability of plausible risks and benefits stems from the beneficence principle of the Belmont Report. There is widespread consensus that research involving human participants should not put participants at an unjustifiable risk of harm. There is also an increasing recognition that it should not put collaborators, particularly project implementers and academics based in violent contexts, at a higher risk of harm than they would face in their everyday lives.

In social science research, we suspect that this risk assessment process is not always empirically rigorous and it is almost never replicable. Although we go to enormous lengths to empirically validate the substantive claims in our research, the process of assessing risks for IRBs or funders is more likely to be based on undocumented assumptions. Risk assessments rarely make it into articles or even online appendices. This problem is exemplified but by no means limited to a recent experiment around protests in Hong Kong (Cantoni et al., 2019). The experiment involved an intervention designed to change participants' protest attendance. We are not privy to the information

that was provided to the University of Munich, Stanford, UC Berkeley, and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology IRBs or human subjects committees that approved this project. However, in the published article and online appendix, there is no discussion of research ethics and in particular no reproducible assessment of the risks that participants might have faced as a result of the intervention. How did the researchers assess the risk that protest participants could face sanctions? What pieces of data, such as key informant interviews, media articles, or human rights reports, were those assessments based on? Without this information in public outputs of the project it is impossible to replicate one of the key assessments that should determine whether the research is ethically justifiable or not.

Making risk assessments part of publications that use data collected from participants living in violent contexts would help move us closer to honoring the principle of beneficence. For example, in a 2019 article using data from Zimbabwe, author two used a section of the methodology discussion in the article and the appendix to discuss how consultations with local collaborators and the quantitative data on state repression collected by a domestic human rights monitor led her to assess that the risk of retribution for participation in the research was justifiable (Young, 2019). In this case, the existence of a high quality Zimbabwean human rights monitor and a Zimbabwean advisor with extensive experience carrying out surveys on political behavior enabled her to make that assessment with a relatively high degree of confidence. Documenting that process enabled other scholars to question whether the sources of data were really credible, or whether she was mistaken in her assessment of key risks. In the pre-analysis plan for a lab-in-the-field experiment in Mexico, we include an ethics section in which we discuss our risk assessment based on past research in the region, piloting, and ongoing consultation with members of the local government, civil society and the Catholic Church. In that study we sought the assessments of local institutions and organizations with widely different and sometimes conflicting missions and approaches to ensure that we were hearing about potential risks from a broad range of perspectives.² Others can question whether

²We consulted on risk and partnered with the following actors and organizations for recruitment: the municipal gov-

these processes are sufficient – and our point is exactly that this description should be transparent enough that it can be reviewed by other scholars. We also do not mean to suggest that the way that we have assessed risks in these projects is unique or more robust than what other conflict scholars are doing: we know anecdotally that many researchers are doing similar or better risk assessments in their own projects. However, these are almost never reported in public research outputs, so there are no common norms or expectations around risk assessments. If scholars begin to expect that they will need to document such risk assessments in publications (and not just in IRB applications, which are almost never made public) it could create incentives for more thorough and accurate assessments of risks.

2 Measuring and mitigating the risk of distress and negative psychological outcomes

The risk of distress, lasting negative emotional states, and negative psychological outcomes has rightfully become a major concern in research with participants affected by violence. Re-traumatization is often used as a shorthand by social scientists for various forms of distress and negative emotional experiences and is a common focus of questions about research risks from reviewers both in IRBs and in political science colloquia. We believe that this first step of dialogue should more often lead to a second step in which researchers use empirical evidence to assess whether studies cause distress or at an extreme longer-term psychological harms to participants, and conversely whether there might be emotional or psychological benefits for participants.

Over the past 25 years trauma psychologists have taken an explicitly empirical approach to the ethical questions raised by the risk of negative psychological and emotional consequences of research with human participants. Empirical researchers have embedded questions designed to

ernment (the municipal president's office, geographically diverse *encargados del orden*, the public security commission, and the Women's Center for Integral Justice), local universities, non-governmental organizations (with a range of focus on violence prevention, women's rights, and LGBTQI+ rights), and programs run by the Archdiocese of Morelia.

assess the incidence and severity of different types of harm in instruments used in research with survivors of trauma. This literature tends to separately consider the risk of emotional distress during the research procedures, and the risk of longer-term negative outcomes (Legerski and Bunnell, 2010). To measure emotional distress, psychologists have asked participants in trauma research whether they felt upset, distressed, anxious, or bothered by emotional reactions, either in general or compared to their day-to-day life (Carlson et al., 2003; Cromer et al., 2006; Carter-Visscher et al., 2007).³ On the other hand, there is a large body of evidence suggesting that participation in research on trauma is seen to have positive benefits by many people who have experienced trauma (see, for example, a meta-analysis involving 70 samples with more than 70,000 participants in trauma research in Jaffe et al. (2015)). Finally, there have been few studies that have used credible methods like randomized controlled trials to test for longer-term effects of research participation, like increases in PTSD symptoms or depression (Jorm, Kelly and Morgan, 2007), but some have found evidence that participation in interviews on trauma caused no increases (Gould et al., 2005).

Yet, there are open questions around the emotional and psychological risks of political science research. A first order question for political scientists is how well the empirical findings on the risks associated with trauma research in psychology generalize to political science. Do questions about political attitudes, or short batteries of questions about experiences of traumatic events, carry the same risk of distress as the types of questions asked in trauma research in psychology? Second, while trauma psychologists have painted an overall empirical picture of the risks of distress and negative psychological symptoms, there are many open questions that apply to both fields. Are certain types of participants more likely to experience severe or prolonged distress? So far, the evidence in the trauma literature seems to be mixed – even traits like severity of PTSD symptoms do not always predict study-related distress (Newman and Kaloupek, 2009). If certain groups are at higher risk of immediate distress or longer-term increases in negative psychological symptoms, is it

³Newman et al. (2001) have developed a 60-question survey module to assess a wide range of immediate reactions to research.

high enough to justify the violations of autonomy and justice that making them ineligible for the study would entail? Finally, what are the best ways to design questions or interview protocols, such as debriefs, training protocols for interviewers, or language that emphasizes autonomy – or the right for participants to opt out or ask questions – so that the risk of distress and negative psychological symptoms is minimized? The same review concludes that negative emotional and psychological outcomes are highly sensitive to differences in research conduct (Newman and Kaloupek, 2009). This should be a growing area of methodological innovation in political science.

A second and complementary approach to minimizing the risk of lasting negative emotions and thoughts involves the provision of psychosocial support to participants who want it. It has become a fairly common practice to set up this type of referral system in political science, but in the way that it is commonly practiced we do not believe that the current practice of referring participants to psychosocial assistance does much to bring research in violent contexts closer to the goal of non-maleficence. For one, in many contexts, high quality services are not widely available, or are costly. In some cases researchers can help provide transportation or pay professional fees, but this is not feasible at a large scale for most research budgets. A second issue with this practice in political science is that the researchers themselves often do not have the training to identify high-quality counseling services, so there is a non-negligible chance that we would identify an inappropriate resource or make errors when deciding who to refer or not refer for counseling. Most importantly, providing assistance to someone who has been harmed by a study is clearly inferior to avoiding that harm in the first place. While it is critical to have a plan in place to help people who are adversely affected, it is much more important to take steps to better understand and avoid the negative effects in the first place.

On a related note, mitigating potential distress or secondary trauma experienced by research staff is not yet a part of IRB processes but is increasingly a concern for researchers working on violence. While many believe that the risk of secondary trauma in conducting qualitative interviews, in our experience, enumerators who are tasked with conducting relatively short and closed-question

surveys also report that respondents often open up and talk more about emotionally-charged experiences with violence and crime than the survey instrument allows. Furthermore, members of our interview teams have often had personal experiences with violence similar to those of the participants. Both high emotional distress and secondary trauma are real risks for research staff in violent contexts.

We have found two practices to be useful in identifying and minimizing the risks of distress and negative psychological outcomes. First, as noted above, we believe that more consistently adopting the practice of measuring experiences of distress during interviews, and when possible, symptoms of negative psychological outcomes like PTSD in the period following participation in a study, would help violence researchers better understand and avoid these risks. In some cases we have asked interviewers to assess whether they think participants are experiencing severe distress or PTSD symptoms (Young, 2019). In two of our Mexico studies – an in-depth qualitative interview and a lab-in-the-field experiment that involved three interviews and a community discussion – we measured PTSD symptoms in our recruitment and follow-up questionnaires so that we could test whether it was associated with higher levels of distress during the study, and whether PTSD symptoms were affected by participation in a small-group discussion about crime. We do not find evidence that participating in community discussion groups on crime led to an increase in PTSD symptoms in the full sample, or in the subsample of participants who reported some level of PTSD at baseline. We also find no evidence that participants who reported more PTSD symptoms at baseline were more likely to regret having participated in the study (we discuss regret in more depth in the following section) (Baron et al., Unpublished). A few other studies have tested whether participating in research on political violence might increase distress or negative psychological outcomes (Blair, Littman and Wolfe, Unpublished), but the having a more robust body of evidence would enable us to better identify the types practices that are least likely to lead to negative psychological consequences.

Second, local counselors and other social support professionals can be enlisted at early stages in fieldwork to prevent and mitigate the risk of distress and more extreme negative reactions. In an

intensive qualitative study in Mexico we used the support of a local trauma specialist and certified counselor to help train our interviewers on creating an interview container to prevent severe distress. Our key concern was for our interviewers to be able to identify relevant signs of distress, and respond to them in culturally appropriate ways before the participants were more significantly affected. Second, this specialist was able to give the interviewers basic techniques to cope with secondary trauma, and serve as a counseling resource for them during and after the fieldwork. In addition to the support of an individual trauma specialist, we offered a list compiled by a social worker of available and affordable psychological support and counseling services in the Mexico City area, where our research team is based. For the lab-in-the-field experiment involving discussion groups, we provided information on local organizations that could help participants deal with trauma to all participants. The fact that two of our discussion group facilitators were trained psychologists who regularly work with survivors of violence in the area also helped us ensure that our team had the skills and motivation to identify and avoid stimulating distress or lasting psychological outcomes. The quality and accessibility of counseling and trauma support varies widely depending on the research location. However, to the extent that they exist, using them to proactively prevent possible negative psychological effects seems equally if not more important than providing them after a participant experiences distress.

3 Assessing whether consent is really informed

The principle of respect for persons highlighted in the Belmont Report implies that people should be free to make an informed decision about whether or not they want to participate in studies represented honestly by researchers. IRBs typically require a standard set of information to be provided: What will research participants actually do? What are the potential risks? What are the potential benefits, to the participant and to other groups in society? Is participation anonymous or confidential, and how will those assurances be implemented? People being invited to participate in

research on violence are often told that the research will involve the discussion of sensitive topics, and that they might become upset as a result of the interview. Participants are supposed to have the chance to ask questions before they make a decision. Ultimately, this consent process is supposed to provide participants with a full picture of participation in the research so they can make an informed choice.

However, in most cases we know little about whether consent is actually informed. Consent forms or scripts are often short, and the subject of the interview is typically described in a single introductory paragraph. To give an example, in research in Zimbabwe the consent forms that author two used informed potential participants that the interview will ask them about “politics”, “elections”, and “voting” and in Mexico we ask about “security” and “justice” in the context of “current events” – topics that communicate that participating in the interview carries risk but still use quite general language. The consent form also states that participation might make them upset and that the interview will ask about emotional topics. However, is this sufficient? Clearly, a brief description cannot capture the full content of an interview or discussion group. This question may be particularly acute with the semi-structured interviews involved in many types of qualitative work, where even the interviewer cannot completely predict the direction that the conversation will take.

When working with populations affected by violence, researchers could do more to assess the adequacy of the consent process in practice. The main concern in the informed consent process is that participants have enough information to make a personal decision about the research that is consistent with their preferences – the decision that they would still be satisfied with after they have participated and have complete information about the research process. To this end, in our research we have simply asked participants if they are happy or unhappy that they consented to participate in the research at various points in the study process, and what they are happy or unhappy about.⁴ These questions allow us to monitor at multiple stages the quality of the consent process. If the

⁴The research in trauma psychology discussed in the previous section also often includes similar questions about regret regarding participation in the research.

vast majority of participants are saying that they are happy with their decision, it suggests that the consent process is adequate. It also allows us to pre-specify thresholds at which we would determine that the study is not doing an adequate job of informing participants.

For a recent lab-in-the-field experiment that we carried out in Mexico, we set this threshold at 5% – if more than 5% of participants were telling us that they were not happy with their decision, for whatever reason, we specified that we would pause the study and retool the consent process to provide more information on the elements that unhappy participants were mentioning. After a first 20-minute interview, 0.6% of participants told us that they were unhappy they had participated. After a half-day community discussion and second 20-minute interview, 0.3% were unhappy to have participated. By a final 20-minute follow-up interview, no participants regretted their participation. Only one participant said that they regretted participating because the research made them upset, while participants who were happy they had participated attributed their happiness to a belief that the research could help their community, a belief that it could help outsiders understand their situation, or to the pleasure of talking about their experiences (Baron et al., Unpublished). In other work in Zimbabwe, author two found that regret varied between 4% at baseline and 0% in subsequent waves of a panel survey on repression and protest (LeBas and Young, Unpublished).

We recognize that participants' responses to whether they are happy or unhappy to have participated in the study could be affected by social desirability bias, and that distinct research contexts will call for different language on participant satisfaction. Interviewers may alternatively ask respondents to reaffirm their consent at the end of the study or communicate if they would like to exclude parts of their interview now that they are fully informed. More carefully assessing the quality of the informed consent process should be another area of methodological development for research with human participants.

Another empirical approach to assessing the informedness of the consent process involves asking participants to provide factual beliefs about the information during the consent process. The Afrobarometer survey, for example, asks participants who they think the sponsor of the research

is – a key piece of information that shapes participation decisions in many contexts (Corstange, 2014). In Zimbabwe, for example, it is an ethical issue (as well as a data reliability issue) that 42% of respondents in the last Afrobarometer thought that the survey was being sponsored by the Zimbabwean government or a political party. Additional factual questions about the consent process could be developed to test how participants are really understanding technical language about data storage and access. Do participants understand that they can stop the interview, or skip questions? Do they remember the risks identified? We ultimately see factual questions like these as complements to a topline question asking people if they are happy or unhappy about their participation decision after having complete information about the study. Methodological developments in this area would complement ongoing efforts by groups like the Qualitative Data Repository to develop innovative ways to better obtain informed consent.

These suggestions for how to empirically assess informed consent also help researchers implement consent as an ongoing process, as has been argued by feminist scholars. Measuring both participant satisfaction and factual understanding of the elements of informed consent are two simple and non-intrusive ways to assess the quality of the informed consent process at different points in a study.

4 Monitoring the actual incidence of potential risks

Actively monitoring for potential risks, particularly any forms of coercion or retribution, during and after research participation is perhaps the most important and challenging of the four practices we identify. It is common for unanticipated risks to emerge during implementation. Robustly measuring the incidence of potential risks and building management systems to quickly escalate information about them are obvious practices that could help researchers respond to and prevent potential harms that many violence researchers may already be using. However, the rate of unintended consequences and how they were monitored is rarely reported in research outputs.

Researchers can monitor for unintended consequences in follow-up surveys with participants or through debriefs with research staff. In our Mexico lab-in-the-field experiment we explicitly asked participants whether they experienced retaliation, emotional distress, or any other negative consequence due to participation in discussion groups on crime and responding to crime. However, not all research budgets or design choices permit this kind of follow-up. In particular, this type of follow up cannot be done for anonymous studies, and thus the ability to monitor risks directly with participants over the longer term comes at the cost of a greater risk of participation. In cases where we could not directly follow-up with participants, we have relied on local contacts who had also participated in recruitment and pre-visit security assessments to check on major risks. After an anonymous lab-in-the-field study in Zimbabwe, for instance, author two asked community mobilizers whether they had heard of anyone suffering negative consequences as a result of the study. This type of monitoring is likely to pick up major events like retaliation or retribution, but less likely to detect emotional distress that happens on a very personal level (Young, 2019).

Monitoring for negative, unintended consequences can also be reported in a transparent manner in publications. If research practices have any unintended consequences, transparency is the fastest way that violence researchers as a field can learn about them and prevent them in future studies. In addition, as in the section on risk assessments, reporting monitoring practices and incidences of risks enables ethical practices to become a more robust part of the peer review process that creates incentives for researchers to use appropriate methods in their research.

It is also important to note that actively monitoring risks can help researchers adapt protocols to minimize additional harm within a single project before it occurs. For the lab-in-the-field experiment in Mexico, we identified a field team lead whose responsibility was to assess actual and potential risks and communicate with PIs to make decisions about security. Additionally, at the end of each discussion group or qualitative interview, we asked all interviewers and facilitators to complete a discussion observation questionnaire that included questions about potential risks. Large-scale projects such as the EGAP Metaketa IV on community policing have similarly had

explicit requirements that adverse events be reported to PIs within a specified time frame (Blair et al., 23 Jan 2020). Decisions to modify protocols to minimize unexpected harms can only be made if information reaches researchers in real time and are easier to make if there are clear delineations of responsibility for risk-related decisions and thresholds for action.

5 Conclusion

There are no silver bullets in research in violent contexts. We have suggested a few practical steps that can be taken to help researchers better adhere to the ethical principles that we have widely accepted as a research community. At their base, these suggestions are all practices that increase the ability of researchers to monitor their own projects for implementation failures and unintended consequences around research ethics, and to increase the transparency of decisions around ethical principles. In this way, they are very much in line with other recent writing on research ethics that suggests a list of questions that reviewers should ask for research in violent contexts (Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018). We suggest practices that would help the answers to some of those questions become more empirically grounded. There is no reason that research ethics should not be an area of methodological innovation and research, just as other forms of research transparency have become in recent years as scholars have developed better methods for detecting p-hacking, pre-registration, and replication (Humphreys, De la Sierra and Van der Windt, 2013; Simonsohn, Nelson and Simmons, 2014; Collaboration et al., 2015). We hope that others will find these ideas to be useful, and also inadequate, such that the small body of research on practices to implement ethical principles might become more integrated into the mainstream methodological literature.

In no way do these practices make ethical decisions in violent contexts easy. Is it ever worth putting a participant at some risk of retribution from a violent actor in order to learn something about political violence? Can we ever assess risks with sufficient confidence to make research design

decisions, given that violence tends to change unpredictably and is often strategically shrouded in uncertainty? When we intervene in the world, either by manipulating outcomes in an experiment or less intentionally by conducting an interview or publishing a research finding, are there certain outcomes, such as choices where the probability of severe harm like death or imprisonment is involved, that we as researchers should always try to avoid influencing? These questions weigh ethical imperatives against each other – the societal goal to use research to tackle the most important problems that society faces, the deontological imperative to do no harm, and the need to take action even if we lack perfect information. But making the decisions more evidence-based and transparent through methodological innovations might help us move closer to the right balance of these principles at the margins.

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