

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 ten years. Adhering to commonly held ethical principles such as beneficence, justice, and respect for persons is particularly important and challenging in research on violence. This letter argues that practices around research ethics 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 empirical evidence from both within and outside of political science around risk assessments, mitigating the risk of distress and negative psychological outcomes, informed consent, and monitoring the incidence of potential harms. An analysis of published research on violence involving human participants from 2008 to 2019 shows that only a small proportion of current publications include any mention of these important dimensions of research ethics.

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Over the past ten years, there has been a proliferation of research involving human participants on the topic of violence. Since 2008, the percent of articles in six top political science journals that study violence and involve human participants has doubled, from about 3% to more than 6%.¹ The boom of field research on violence has been fueled by a number of goals: the desire to test the “microfoundations” of theories about the causes and consequences of conflict (Kertzer, 2017), the growing demand for research designs that identify causal claims (Gerber, Green and Kaplan, 2004), and concerns that the perspectives 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 policies to mitigate and prevent violence.

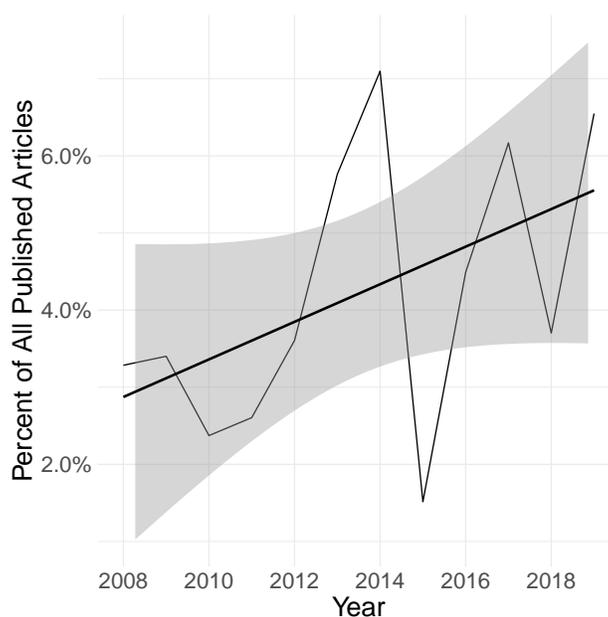


Figure 1: Percent of all articles published in six top political science journals that study political violence with human participants, 2008-2019

Yet the fact that many researchers have good intentions does not imply that doing research on violence is ethical. 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 Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) – and suggests practical solutions that could help

¹Journals included in the review include the American Political Science Review, American Journal of Political Science, Journal of Politics, World Politics, Journal of Peace Research, and Journal of Conflict Resolution.

researchers better adhere to them. Most of the ethical principles that we discuss are derived from the Belmont Report (1976). The core principles that inform federal policy and regulations for research with human participants are beneficence, justice, and respect for persons. Our practical suggestions are not exhaustive, and are generally ways to validate and monitor assumptions related to ethics rather than “solve” ethical dilemmas. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to research in violent contexts (Wood, 2006). However, these practices might help researchers adhere more closely to maximizing the benefits of their research, protecting participant autonomy, and minimizing harm to participants and field staff.

In the rest of this letter, we describe practices in four key areas that could improve adherence to ethical principles, primarily by increasing the transparency of research methods around ethics. We highlight practices that other researchers have developed both within and outside political science and use examples from our own fieldwork in Zimbabwe and Mexico, carried out with a number of collaborators. During the time of our combined fieldwork between 2013 and 2020, political violence in Zimbabwe primarily took the form of state repression. In Mexico, the violence most relevant to our research is perpetrated by criminal groups, state security forces, and vigilante groups.

The first family of practices describes better documenting risk assessments. The second concerns avoiding distress and negative psychological outcomes like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. The third highlights ways to assess the adequacy of the informed consent process. The fourth considers the challenge of monitoring negative consequences during and after project implementation. The overarching logic behind our suggestions is to make research ethics more transparent and empirical, so that it can become a part of the peer review process and is seen as a subfield of research methods to incentivize the development of increasingly robust practices.

1 Credibly and empirically assessing risks

The first area of research ethics that can be addressed with better practices is risk assessments. Every research project that goes through an IRB must assess the potential risks and benefits of the research. There is widespread consensus that research involving human participants should not put participants at an unjustifiable risk of harm. The recent APSA ethics guidelines underlined this principle, calling for researchers to “generally avoid harm when possible, minimize harm when avoidance is not possible, and not conduct research when harm is excessive” (American Political Science Association, 4 Apr 2020). There is also an increasing recognition that it should not put collaborators, particularly research implementers and academics living in violent contexts, at risk.

In the social sciences, risk assessments are not always empirically rigorous and are almost never replicable. Although we go to enormous lengths to empirically validate other aspects of our research methodologies, the process of assessing risks for IRBs or funders is more likely to be based on undocumented assumptions and general impressions. Risk assessments rarely make it into articles or online appendices, as documented in Section 5.

It is difficult to overstate the harm that can be caused by inadequate or biased risk assessments. Eck and Cohen (2020) discuss a study in Ethiopia in which 20% of female participants reported being beaten by their male partners because of their participation. Eriksson Baaz and Utas (2019) discuss a case in which militant groups tortured a research facilitator and killed his family member because of his participation in a research project. Risk assessments must be thorough enough that research involving such excessive harm is never carried out.

Making risk assessments part of publications that use data collected from participants living in violent contexts could move us closer to the goal of minimizing minor harms to participants and never inflicting severe harm. For example, in a 2019 article that uses original survey data from a lab experiment conducted in Zimbabwe, author two discusses in the article and appendix 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 punishment for participation in the research was justifiably low (SELFCITE). In this case, the existence of a high quality Zimbabwean human rights monitor and established political polling enabled her to make that assessment with a degree of confidence. Others can question whether the documented risk assessment was sufficient – and our point is exactly that this description should be transparent enough that it can be reviewed by other scholars. We know anecdotally that other researchers are doing similar or better risk assessments in their own projects. However, when these are not reported in research outputs there are no common norms around risk assessments. If scholars begin to expect that they need to document risk assessments in publications (and not just in IRB applications, which are almost never made public) it will create incentives for thorough and accurate assessments.

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

The risk of distress, lasting negative affect, and other adverse psychological outcomes has rightfully become a major concern in violence research. “Re-traumatization” is often used as a shorthand by social scientists for various forms of distress. Yet the empirical basis for assessing and avoiding the risk of distress and other adverse psychological outcomes or any positive psychological benefits in political science research is surprisingly small.

Over the past 25 years trauma psychologists have taken an empirical approach to the risk of negative psychological and affective consequences of participation in research. Researchers have embedded questions designed to assess the incidence and severity of different harms in instruments used with trauma survivors. 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).² Two systematic reviews on the risk-benefit ratio of participation in trauma

²Newman et al. (2001) have developed a 60-question survey module to assess a wide range of immediate reactions to research protocols.

research have concluded that while many participants do report harm, those harms are often offset by perceived benefits and in most studies regret is rare (Jaffe et al., 2015; McClinton Appollis et al., 2015). Finally, though there have been few studies that use credible methods like randomized controlled trials to test for longer-term effects of research participation (McClinton Appollis et al., 2015), one review of studies on trauma in psychiatry that have tracked research participants over time concluded that there are few signs of long-term negative effects (Jorm, Kelly and Morgan, 2007).

There remain many open questions around the emotional and psychological risks of political science research. A first-order question is how well the empirical findings from trauma research in psychology and psychiatry generalize to political science. Almost all of the studies in existing meta-analyses were conducted with American or European participants, while much political science research on violence is conducted outside of these “WEIRD” (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) contexts (Henrich, Heine and Norenzayan, 2010). Furthermore, do questions about sensitive political attitudes or batteries on violence exposure used by political scientists carry the same risk of distress as the questions asked in trauma research? Second, there are open questions that apply to both fields. Are certain types of participants more likely to experience severe or prolonged harms? If certain groups are at higher risk of distress or increases in negative psychological symptoms, is it 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 so that the risk of mild distress is minimized, and severe harms are avoided? This should be a growing area of methodological innovation in political science.

A second and complementary approach to minimizing the risk of negative psychological outcomes involves the provision of psychosocial support. It has become fairly common in political science to set up a psychosocial referral system for participants, but in the way that it is commonly practiced it does not do enough to protect participants from harm. In many contexts, quality services are unavailable or prohibitively costly. Furthermore, political science researchers often lack the

training to identify culturally appropriate resources, so there is a non-trivial chance that we would identify inappropriate resources or make errors when deciding who to refer for support. Finally, it is often impossible to determine whether psychological distress was caused by the research or not. Most fundamentally, providing assistance to people who have been harmed by a study is clearly inferior to avoiding that harm in the first place.

On a related note, mitigating potential distress or secondary trauma experienced by research staff is not yet a part of most IRB reviews but is increasingly a concern for researchers working on violence (Hoover Green and Cohen, 2021). Members of research teams, which are typically recruited from similar populations to facilitate community entry, have often had personal experiences with violence. Both emotional distress and secondary trauma are real risks for research staff in violent contexts.³

We identify two low-cost practices to help minimize the risks of negative psychological outcomes. First, more consistently measuring experiences of distress during interviews, and when possible, symptoms of negative psychological outcomes in the period following participation, would enable researchers to better understand and avoid these risks. In some cases we have asked interviewers to assess whether they think participants are experiencing distress (SELFCITE). In one of our Mexico studies – a field experiment that involved three interviews and a community discussion – we tracked PTSD symptoms over three rounds of measurement so that we could test whether participants with symptoms reported 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 (SELFCITE). The marginal cost of a few additional interview questions is small, as such questions can be added to the end of existing interviews or in the “back-checking” that is common in large-scale surveys.

³Principal investigators and university-based research assistants are certainly part of the research team, and may also experience distress and secondary trauma. See Wood (2006) and Krause (2021) for insightful discussion of these issues.

Nevertheless, these experiences also left us with questions. Is it better to rely on research staff or participants themselves to assess research-related distress? To what extent might social desirability or performance pressure lead either group to under-report distress? Might open-ended questions help capture unanticipated harms, or are batteries of closed questions like those used in trauma psychology sufficiently comprehensive? More rigorous research is needed to develop and validate measures appropriate for social science research on violence. Having a more robust body of evidence on harms and benefits would enable us to better identify the practices that are least likely to have negative psychological consequences. This evidence could be quickly generated if questions about psychological distress were regularly embedded in research protocols.

Second, psychosocial support professionals can be enlisted at early stages in fieldwork to prevent and mitigate the risk of distress and more extreme negative reactions. Building on practices described in Paluck and Green (2009), in our qualitative study in Mexico we worked with a local trauma specialist and certified counselor to train our interviewers on how to identify and prevent severe distress. Additionally, this specialist provided interviewers with techniques to cope with secondary trauma, and served as a counseling resource during and after the fieldwork. For the field experiment involving discussion groups, we hired two counselors who regularly work with local survivors of violence to ensure that our team had the skills and motivation to identify and avoid stimulating distress. In our case, these strategies were not costly: we offered the trauma specialist a \$200 honorarium, and the decision to hire counselors instead of standard research facilitators required no additional resources. In contexts where mental health professionals are very scarce, it may still be feasible to have a mental health professional with experience in the specific cultural context review the research protocol or offer remote support.

3 Assessing whether consent is really informed

The principle of respect for persons implies that people should be free to make an informed decision about whether or not they want to participate in research. IRBs typically require a standard set of information to be provided: What tasks will participants perform? What are the potential risks and benefits? How will privacy be guaranteed? Potential participants in violence research are often told that the study involves discussion of sensitive topics, and that they might become upset. They have the chance to ask questions before they make a decision. This process is supposed to provide a full picture of participation so individuals can make an informed choice.

However, in most cases we know little about whether consent is actually informed. Consent scripts are typically short, and the subject of the interview is often described in one introductory paragraph. For example, the consent forms that author two used in Zimbabwe 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.” The script also states that participation might make them upset and that the interview will ask about emotional topics. Is this sufficient? Clearly, a brief description cannot capture the full content of an interview, discussion, or survey.

Violence researchers could do more to assess the adequacy of the consent process. The main concern in the informed consent process is that participants have enough information to make a personal decision that they would be satisfied with if they had complete information. To this end, trauma researchers often include questions about regret regarding participation. In our research we have simply asked participants if they are happy or unhappy that they consented at various points in the study process, and what they are happy or unhappy about, in order to monitor the adequacy of the consent process. If the vast majority of participants say that they are happy with their decision, it suggests that the consent process is adequate. This also allows us to pre-specify thresholds at which we would determine that the study is not adequately informing participants.

For the recent field experiment that we carried out in Mexico, we specified that if more than 5% of participants were telling us that they were not happy, 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 regretted their participation. After a half-day community discussion and second 20-minute interview, 0.3% expressed regret. By a final 20-minute follow-up interview, no participants expressed regret (SELFCITE).

Another empirical approach to assess informed consent involves asking participants factual questions about the consent process. The Afrobarometer surveys, for example, ask participants who they think the sponsor of the research is. Additional factual questions could test if and how participants understand important conditions of the consent process. Do participants understand that they can stop the interview or skip questions? Do they remember identified risks? Do participants see their participation decision as one over which they have individual autonomy, or do they experience it as determined by a local elite or relative (Wessells, 2009)? Ultimately, assessing the quality of the informed consent process should be another area of methodological development.

4 Monitoring the actual incidence of harms

Actively monitoring for harms, particularly any forms of coercion or retribution, during and after research participation is arguably the most important and challenging of the four practices we discuss. Potential harms include negative psychological experiences, breaches of confidentiality, and retaliation for study participation against participants or research staff, among others. Robust measurement of potential harms and management systems to quickly communicate information and adapt research protocols are obvious practices that could help researchers prevent potential harms that some violence researchers are already using. Reporting on observed harms is also an accepted standard in medical trials, and has been adopted as an item in the CONSORT reporting guidelines.⁴ It would also build on recent efforts to measure and report on harms to research teams

⁴For more on the CONSORT group, see <http://www.consort-statement.org/>.

in authoritarian settings (Grietens and Truex, 2019). However, the rate of unintended consequences and how they were monitored is rarely reported in social science research outputs.

Researchers can monitor for unintended consequences in follow-up surveys with participants or through debriefs with research staff. In our Mexico experiment we asked participants in the follow-up calls 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 designs permit this kind of follow-up. In particular, this type of follow up cannot be done for anonymous studies. In cases where we could not directly follow-up with participants, we have relied on local contacts 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 and other harms that occur on a very personal level.

Monitoring harms can enable researchers to stop research projects if early data shows that research-related harm is occurring. For low-level harms, it may be appropriate to resume the research with modifications, but when harm is excessive, the research should be indefinitely stopped. More generally, the incidence of harms should be reported in publications. If research has 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, reporting monitoring practices and incidences of harms enables ethical practices to become a more robust part of the peer review process to create incentives for researchers to use appropriate methods in their research.

5 Assessment of current reporting practices

How transparent are research methods related to ethics in violence research involving human participants? We had a team of five undergraduate and Masters-level research assistants code 172

research articles on political violence that involved human participants published between 2008 and 2019 in six influential political science journals.⁵ Our research assistants used a coding guide to identify any mention of research ethics in six categories in the article or appendix: IRB review, risk assessments, consent processes, harms observed, risk to research teams, and any other information related to ethics. Each article was double-coded to get an estimate of accuracy: the inter-rater reliability scores varied from 0.84 for the undefined “other” category to 0.95 for an indicator of whether the IRB number was reported in the publication.

A few points are worth keeping in mind when interpreting this review. First, the RAs were given very inclusive coding guidelines: if an article or appendix mentioned anything about risks associated with the research project, it was coded as “yes” in the risk assessment category. Similarly, if it mentioned anything about informed consent (including just a passing comment that consent was obtained) it received a “yes” in the informed consent category. Thus, this is not an assessment of whether existing research is employing the practices we recommend. Second, this is not an analysis of whether existing research is violating ethical practices. We believe that many researchers are doing more to adhere to ethical principles than they report in their articles and appendices. Our goal is to assess the extent to which basic elements of research transparency around ethical practices have been voluntarily adopted in a setting where the stakes of ethical practices are high.

In general, methods related to ethics are rarely reported in publications. Figure 2 shows the proportion of all articles based on research with human participants on violence published from 2008-2019 that provided at least some discussion of our six areas of transparency.

The first column in each category shows the percent of all identified violence articles with human participants that provides an IRB number, discusses risks considered, reports on observed harms, discusses risk to research team members, gives details of the consent process, or provides any other discussion of ethics. In total, just 11% of articles report anything related to observed

⁵We selected journals based on their influence and likelihood of publishing articles on political violence. Our review covered the *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, *World Politics*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, and *Journal of Peace Research*.

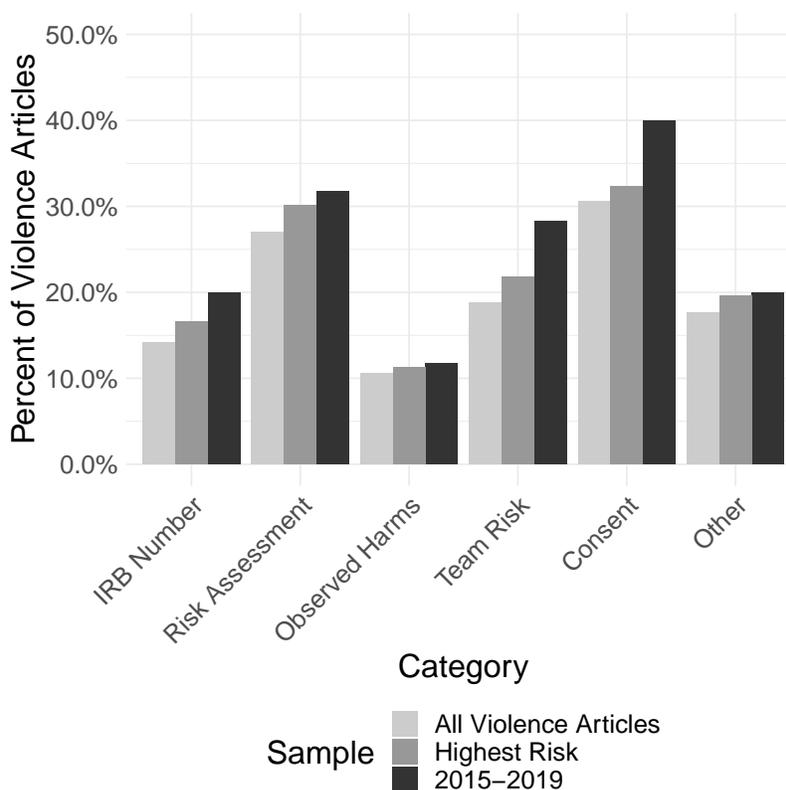


Figure 2: Percent of articles that study political violence with human participants that mention types of research ethics considerations, 2008-2019

harms (the lowest incidence), and 31% mention a consent process. Again, it is important to keep in mind that we coded these categories as “yes” if an area of ethics was even mentioned in passing (i.e. that consent was obtained, some risk was considered, etc.) – a much smaller proportion of the articles provide enough description to let readers assess whether the practices were adequate. The percentages of articles mentioning ethics are slightly higher when we exclude relatively low-risk research, such as public opinion surveys on foreign conflicts or research on less sensitive topics like clientelism in non-democratic regimes (Bar 2). Finally, Bar 3 shows that articles published in the last five years generally has more discussion of research ethics, particularly around risk to research team members and the consent process. Nevertheless, in all cases it is clear that discussion of research ethics in publications where ethics is clearly a first-order concern is far from the norm.

6 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 principles we have widely accepted as a research community. At their core, these suggestions are 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 ethics. They complement a recent list of questions on ethics that reviewers should ask for research in violent contexts (Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018), a suggested template for “ethics appendices” recently proposed primarily for randomized controlled trials (Asiedu et al., 2021), and updated submission practices at journals like the American Political Science Review. We also see our suggestions as being in line with the ethics guidelines adopted by the American Political Science Association (American Political Science Association, 4 Apr 2020). In particular, these guidelines call for researchers to identify and justify potential harms in presentations and publications. We suggest practices that would help the answers to some of the questions raised by Cronin-Furman and Lake (2018) and the assessments under the new APSA and APSR ethics guidelines to 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; Open Science Collaboration, 2015).

In no way do these practices make ethical decisions in violent contexts easy. Is it ever worth putting a participant at some risk of harm in order to learn something about political violence? Can we ever assess risks with sufficient confidence to make research design decisions, given that violence changes unpredictably and is often shrouded in uncertainty? These questions weigh ethical imperatives against each other – the societal goal to use research to tackle the most important

problems that society faces, the imperative to do no harm, and the need to take action with imperfect information. But making the decisions more evidence-based and transparent through methodological innovations might help us move closer to the best balance of these principles.

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