Research in conflict zones: ethics and accountability

by Jonathan Goodhand

This article focuses on the ethical challenges arising from research in areas of conflict.

Drawing upon experience gained from community-based research in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Liberia, it challenges the conventional academic argument that insecurity makes it impossible to secure valid data and that serious research has therefore to wait until the fighting stops. Too often such arguments have been used by humanitarian agencies to rationalize their limited investment in social analysis and learning. It is increasingly recognized by both analysts and practitioners that there is a need for a more proactive approach leading to relevant interventions based on rigorous and in-depth analysis.

Of the three main sets of challenges faced by conflict zone researchers - practical, methodological and ethical - this article focuses on the last. It looks at the moral decisions that often confront the researcher, the danger that one may actually be doing harm and how to develop an ethical framework for decision making. Despite the humanitarian community's recent focus on ethics and humanitarianism, the emerging literature on war zone research makes scant mention of ethical challenges. Just as aid agencies are increasingly invoked to 'do no harm' and develop an ethical consciousness, so conflict zone researchers similarly need to develop a robust ethical framework to ensure that they do not inadvertently 'do harm' and that they remain open to opportunities to 'do some good'.

Nature of modern conflict

The wars in Afghanistan, Liberia and Sri Lanka combine a number of features common to many of today's conflicts and illustrate many of the challenges likely to be faced by conflict zone researchers. Although Afghanistan and Sri Lanka are 'hot wars' and Liberia is considered a 'post conflict' context, all are characterized by ongoing militarized violence, widespread human rights abuses and a culture of impunity. Militarized violence has taken a variety of different forms including conventional warfare, predatory warlordism, terrorist bombings and suicide attacks and ethnic cleansing of civilian populations. Such conflicts are protracted and extremely resistant to external attempts at resolution. The Afghan and Sri Lankan wars have been going on for 20 years.

If researchers and analysts are not prepared to engage until the guns fall silent, knowledge and understanding tend to be stuck at the pre-war level. Responses based solely on an understanding of pre-war society which fail to account for the fact that society has moved on are likely to be inappropriate. Afghanistan is a classic example of a conflict zone that in the last 20 years has virtually dropped off the 'research map'. One could argue that, as a result, action has got ahead of understanding.

Research is unlikely to be viewed by local actors as neutral or altruistic

It is possible to conduct research in such environments. Armed with an understanding of the patterns and dynamics of conflict, researchers can make informed decisions about when, where and how to do research. Conflicts are often characterized by dynamic and mutating patterns of violence. These may be spatially, temporally or seasonally determined. For example, fighting in Afghanistan tends to follow a seasonal pattern, with the spring and summer being the periods of greatest intensity. In Sri Lanka, violence has tended to be concentrated in the north east. Research is possible with the right local knowledge, contacts and access through local partners and a flexible approach to adapting research methodologies.

Perverse outcomes

Research may have unexpected negative outcomes. Research, like any other form of intervention, occurs within an intensely political environment and is unlikely to be viewed by local actors as neutral or altruistic. Researchers, like aid agencies, need to be aware of how their interventions may affect the incentive systems and structures driving violent conflict or impact upon the coping strategies and safety of communities. The process of conflict manipulates information by promoting and suppressing voices. Researchers are part of this 'information economy'[1] and should realize that research necessarily involves making political and ethical choices about which voices are heard and whose knowledge counts.

Humanitarian agencies need an ethical framework to maximize their ability to meet humanitarian needs and minimize the potential for aid manipulation.[2] Social analysis aiming to enhance agency responsiveness to conflict-affected communities needs to be based on similar ethical principles. Researchers could learn from current developments in the humanitarian field where the development of ethical frameworks, codes of conduct and the reframing of assistance within a rights-based approach has occurred in response to the new challenges presented by contemporary conflicts. Conflict zone researchers have moral responsibilities for their interventions and may inadvertently do harm by infringing the security, privacy and well-

being of the subjects of their research. Ethically-informed decision making must encompass the motives and responsibilities of the researchers as well as the indirect and direct impacts of research on people in war zones. We need to develop positive guidelines which include 'do's' as well as 'don'ts'.[3] The most appropriate decisions are likely to be made when ethical issues are thought about prior to starting research. Researchers are most likely to 'do harm' when they do not anticipate likely ethical challenges

Security risks

Safety is a fundamental issue for both communities and researchers. In many cases the only practical and safe way of gaining access to 'live' war zones is through aid agencies who are already working on the ground. This may create its own set of challenges.

Reflection on *how* you conduct research, to *whom* you talk and *what* you talk about is essential to avoid putting communities at risk. Participatory methods which involve large gatherings of people represent a high-risk strategy in areas subject to aerial bombardment. It is not always easy to separate out combatants from the broader group or to distinguish between the spontaneous views of the gathering and propaganda. Combatants may use public meetings (as the author experienced in Sri Lanka) for their own propaganda purposes. Negotiating with the gatekeepers to a community is a highly sensitive process as identifying certain individuals as leaders may endanger them. Insurgents systematically target and attempt to remove local leadership, which may represent a threat to their power base. In Afghanistan, for instance, dealing exclusively with the 'white beards' in a village may upset the political equilibrium between them and the local commander. An understanding of who wields power and the local dynamics of conflict is an essential starting point for informed security decisions.

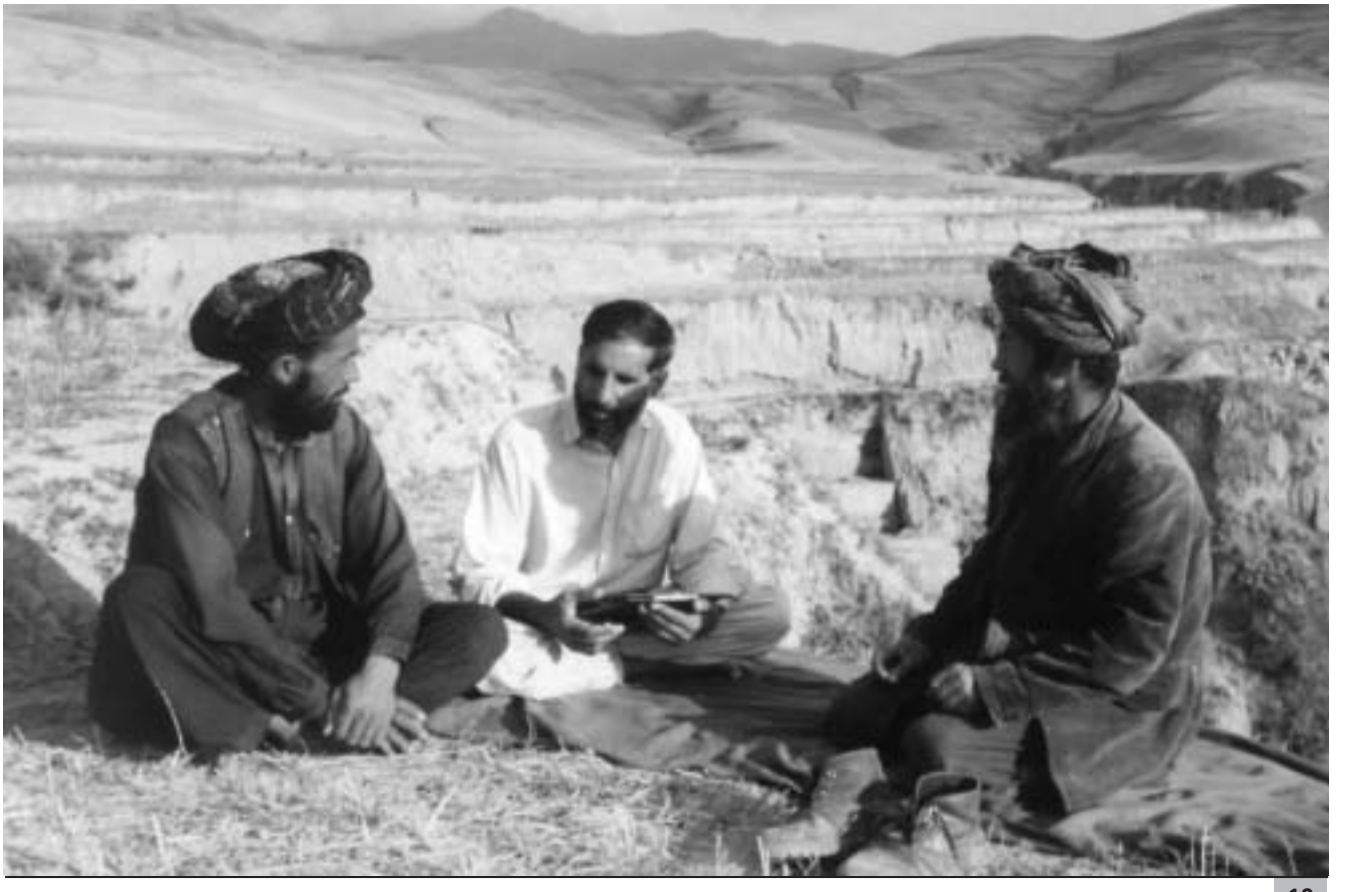
When choosing subjects for discussion, researchers must identify which are more sensitive than others and likely to endanger research subjects. For instance, in one village in Sri Lanka, after the first day of the research, the LTTE warned all villagers to stop talking about caste issues. In another village in Afghanistan, direct questions on the subject of the opium economy were inadvisable. Some subjects may be taboo because they are too risky while others, though sensitive, may be approached indirectly. This requires a highly developed sense of political judgement.

Researchers have to be constantly aware that while they are present for only a short time, their questions and the discussions they provoke may reverberate for a long time afterwards.

A further set of security risks relates to the researchers themselves. It is unethical to involve researchers who are inexperienced and unfamiliar with working in areas of conflict. There is a need to constantly assess whether the results of the research warrant the risks involved. If social learning is the objective and the research is likely to lead to tangible benefits to those being researched, the level of acceptable risk may be higher than for a more academic research exercise without any planned follow-up.

Confidentiality

The politicization of information means that communities seeking to avoid risk often adapt a strategy of silence. Militarized violence, including demonstration killings and ethnic cleansing, are employed in order to cow populations and enforce a culture of silence. Keeping a low profile and 'minding one's own business' may become an essential survival strategy. Researchers need to be aware of the 'information economy' and be sensitive to the needs and fears of



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conflict-affected communities. Confidentiality should be a primary concern. Privacy and anonymity should be respected during and after the research.

There may be a tension between the need for confidentiality and maintaining a strategy of silence in the face of pervasive human rights abuses. Similar dilemmas face aid agencies and critics argue that there can be a dangerous affinity between aid and silence. Researchers need to think carefully about how they bear witness to abuses and pass on information to those trying to address them without endangering the subjects of the research.

Expectations

The risk that researchers will give false hope to communities is not confined to conflict research. The danger may be even greater in situations of widespread distress and few external means of support. This makes it crucial that the purpose of the research is explained clearly and consistently to community members at all stages of the research process. Unrealistic expectations can be avoided if researchers work with operational agencies to ensure that findings are closely tied to subsequent actions. In such cases, however, there needs to be extremely clear communication between researchers and agency(ies). Poorly briefed researchers can inadvertently have a negative affect on community-NGO relations, which may have taken several years to develop.

Implicit messages

Researchers need to be sensitive to the implicit messages they are sending out, avoid giving the impression that they are legitimizing warring groups and analyse who may or may not be gaining political capital out of their activities. They need to ask themselves if the process of negotiating research access through warring parties confers legitimacy on them, whether the security of national researchers is as highly valued as that of expatriates, whether a blind eye is being turned to abusive or predatory behaviour and whether conducting research in an area controlled by only one side of the conflict may be construed as a signal of 'battlefield bias'.

Opening old wounds

For traumatized individuals and groups, silence may be a coping, not just a survival, strategy. Researchers may inadvertently re-open wounds by probing into areas respondents may not wish to talk about. Dialogue must always be based on mutual consent. Researchers need to show restraint and know when to stop. There is a growing literature on trauma counselling which points to the dangers of individualized western models that are divorced from the social context and may undermine coping strategies rather than support them.

Practical responses to ethical challenges

While bearing in mind that universal guidelines are likely to be of limited value, as ethical decision making is so context specific, there are practical precepts for conflict researchers.

a) 'Do no harm'

Negative impacts can to a great extent be minimized in advance by:

- sensitive selection of mature researchers aware of ethical dilemas
- getting the right balance of insider and outsider researchers with relevant language skills and religious and ethnic backgrounds
- predicting likely ethical issues
- awareness of implicit messages given as a result of selection of research areas
- a detailed analysis of how the research is likely to be affected by, or affect, the local conflict.

During the research period researchers need to :

- blend in with their surroundings, keep a low profile and not attract unwelcome attention to the research subjects or themselves
- constantly monitor the security situation and analyse risk, particularly by listening to local informants
- obtain informed consent
- honestly examine the power relationships between researcher and research subjects
- explain clearly the objectives of the research
- develop methodological flexibility and adapt methods appropriate to the security risk and need for confidentiality
- appreciate the value of restraint: to know when it is time to stop

After the research it is important to:

- feed back, in so far as security considerations allow, the results to research subjects
- build links to local partners and plan follow-up activities so the research is not purely an extractive exercise.

b) 'Do some good'

It is vital to keep a sense of proportion about the potential for researchers to have positive impacts beyond the immediate objectives of the research itself. A sense of humility is a necessary starting point. Researchers' capacity to 'do good', in terms of influencing the wider conflict environment, is likely to be extremely limited. However there are a number of ways in which research may have positive knock-on effects, which could be built upon and amplified by researchers.

It may be trite to state that truth is the first casualty of war but the fact remains that research can play an important role in countering myths and stereotypes, identifying information blockages and giving voice to the suppressed. If research can help us better understand the complex information economy in war zones, this will be a major contribution to more informed and appropriate responses.

Ethically-based research may have a number of positive effects on conflict-affected communities. In Liberia research subjects were very positive about the opportunities it provided for analysis and sharing of common problems and issues.[4] In Sri Lanka community members stated that the presence of researchers made them feel safer. When linked to sensitive and ongoing support, participatory research can be a starting point for a process of capacity building and empowerment.

However, there are dangers inherent in such approaches in complex and politicised environments. First, they depend on a nuanced understanding of the local context and with which institutions and individuals the researcher should align themselves. Second, local perceptions of the researchers' neutrality are likely to be affected which may ultimately prevent them from gaining access to conflict-affected areas. Researchers thus

need to be careful when pursuing multiple objectives and be aware of the trade-offs that might ensue.

Conclusion

War zone researchers should be aware of the danger of 'conflict fetish', the automatic assumption that violence is the problem and the only lens through which to look at people's lives. Those affected by conflict frequently remind researchers and aid workers that there are other aspects to their lives, that war is not the only point of reference.

Researchers can and should engage in areas of conflict for they have an important role to fulfil. They need to accept that conflict heightens and amplifies the ethical challenges faced by all researchers and that without a sufficient level of ethical understanding and deliberation research can do more harm than good. There is a need therefore to develop frameworks to assist researchers committed to ethical decision making.

Mapping out some of the ethical challenges and responses is a starting point for producing such a framework. Much remains to be done to develop ethically-based frameworks and codes of conduct for researchers in war zones. 'Universal' and 'technical' guidelines will have limited value. Ethical decision making is inherently highly context-specific for it addresses profoundly political questions, about power, information and accountability.

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3 P Sellick 'The ethics of conducting research with children in conflict-affected areas: issues from Afghanistan and Tajikistan'. Draft paper for conference on Researching on Humanitarian Assistance in Conflict Areas. University of York, May 2000.

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