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DOING RESEARCH IN VIOLENT SETTINGS: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND ETHICS COMMITTEES

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ABOUT THE PROGRAM

The Drugs, Security and Democracy (DSD) Program strives to create a stronger, more systematized knowledge base on drugs, security, and democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean; to build capacity—both institutional and individual—by supporting relevant research; and to encourage policy-relevant, evidence-based research that could lead to the development of alternatives to present-day drug policies. Support is provided for research across a variety of disciplines—anthropology, criminology, economics, history, international relations, journalism, legal studies, political science, public health, public policy, sociology, and other related fields—to create a network of scholars interested in developing alternative approaches to drug policy.

ABOUT THE SERIES

Over the last generation, activists, journalists, and researchers working in Latin America have increasingly faced the challenge of operating in areas affected by chronic police and non-state violence. Further, rising crime rates are leading a growing number of scholars to conduct research on high-risk topics, which involves gathering data on communities that experience conflict, writing and publishing on these difficult and sensitive issues, and developing and implementing programs to deal with the needs of communities affected by violence as well as the wider conflicts in which those communities are embedded. Despite these trends, the literature on safe practices for those working in high-risk environments remains thin. The DSD Working Papers on Research Security series seeks to address this deficit by examining a range of research security concerns, providing a framework to help those working in the region consider how they can enhance their own safety as well as the safety of their associates and research participants.

DOING RESEARCH IN VIOLENT SETTINGS: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND ETHICS COMMITTEES

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Conducting research “in the field” is a challenging endeavor. Many methodology textbooks point out the difficulties associated with choosing a setting, gaining access to the field, and developing rapport with the research subjects (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Having to do so in highly violent settings adds additional layers of complications, as the researcher must minimize potential risk to the research subjects as well as to him- or herself.

What makes a setting violent or dangerous? Such research situations can be placed into three categories:

- *When the information being collected would result in harm to the subject or researcher if disclosed outside the research.* Although the gathering of information on illegal activities immediately comes to mind as problematic, a variety of research topics could elicit information damaging to the research subject, such as those involving political opinions or work practices, and in fact, all information obtained during research has the potential to cause problems for the subject if disclosed or if the subject’s identity is revealed. Research in dangerous or violent settings, however, creates a higher than usual risk of

- harm, including emotional distress resulting from stigma or loss of standing, and real legal and physical peril.
- *When the risk of physical harm is high due to conditions in the research setting, rather than specifically the sensitivity of the information being collected.* Research may take place in settings of civil unrest or where general safety is compromised by high levels of crime or the presence of violent state actors, such as the police or military. Some examples are projects conducted during wartime or other types of armed conflict. In these settings, most of the people being studied already incur risk through their daily activities. Any additional risk their participation in the research may bring them comes not from the content of the information, but rather from the danger they may be in while in transit to meet with the researcher. In these types of settings, it is the researcher who faces the greater than typical risk of having to enter a dangerous setting.
 - *When the research concerns the study specifically of individuals or groups engaged in violent and/or illegal activities.* In such situations, the participants and the researcher may be at risk both from their involvement in the research of illegal or dangerous activities and from the possibility of physical or legal harm from the activity itself. Observing a lynching, for example, would be dangerous, first, because both the subject and researcher could face retribution if the identities of those involved were disclosed and, second, because of the violent nature of the lynching they had observed.

In any setting, researchers have ethical obligations to those they have chosen to study. In the broadest terms, this means guaranteeing participation will be voluntary and minimizing the risk of harm to the participants. These obligations are especially difficult to fulfill—even as they are, arguably, more urgent—when the research is conducted in violent or dangerous settings. Currently, all researchers whose work involves human subjects are required to have their project proposals evaluated by university research ethics committees, known in the United States as institutional review boards (IRBs), to determine whether these principles are being followed. Many in the social sciences, however, have argued that the procedures and policies followed by these committees can bring more rather than less harm to research subjects, particularly when the research is conducted in violent settings. Here we will look at these procedures and examine the ways in which the IRB

requirements facilitate or hinder the ethical treatment of subjects in violent research settings. We will also discuss what researchers can do to protect research participants when IRB requirements hinder such protection.

ETHICS COMMITTEES: HISTORY AND LEGISLATION

In the social sciences, most professional associations have codes of ethics that lay out researchers' obligations to their subjects regarding the guarantee of voluntary participation and the minimization of potential harm. They do not, however, take an active role in seeing that their members follow them. In the United States, as well as more recently in many other countries, the oversight of ethical conduct is performed by university research ethics committees, or institutional review boards (IRBs). Originally created to guarantee compliance with US government ethical guidelines for research receiving federal funding (Schrag 2010), the IRB has expanded and now typically provides oversight for the ethical conduct of all research performed in the university setting or by university-affiliated researchers, whether it receives federal funding or not.

IRB oversight originated in international and national legislation drafted in response to a series of celebrated cases of research subject mistreatment. The first of these was the disclosure during the Nuremburg Trials of abusive practices conducted on concentration camp prisoners by Nazi doctors. Inmates were subjected to cruel and inhuman treatment without their consent, including injection with infectious diseases and exposure to extreme temperatures (Rice 2008). The outrage generated from this disclosure led to the drafting of the Nuremburg Code in 1947 by the United Nations. It outlined a series of rights and protections for human subjects, including requirements for voluntary consent and a risk/benefit analysis of the research and the right of participants to withdraw from the research without repercussions (United Nations 1949).

In the following two decades, a number of cases of ethics violations in research came to light in the United States. Most notorious was the Tuskegee syphilis project, funded by the US Public Health Service, whose objective was to study the natural course of the untreated disease. Although no effective treatment for syphilis existed when the study began in 1932, the subjects were not treated even after antibiotic drugs became available. In addition, the subjects were poor African American sharecroppers from Alabama who had no understanding of the nature of the study in which they

were participating. The media coverage of this study, which was halted in 1972 along with others in which vulnerable populations were used as research subjects without informed consent (Rice 2008), spurred a national debate on the ethical obligations of researchers using human subjects. It led to congressional hearings in 1973 and a consensus that legislative oversight of the ethical treatment of human subjects in research was needed.

In 1974, the US Congress passed the National Research Act, which created the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects in Biomedical and Behavioral Science Research, a multidisciplinary committee charged with developing guidelines for the ethical treatment of human research subjects. In 1978 the commission produced the Belmont Report, in which the federal guidelines for the ethical treatment of human subjects were first laid out.

The Belmont Report outlined the three principles for the ethical treatment of human subjects that form the basis for federal oversight to this day: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. The principle of respect for persons refers to individual autonomy. Researchers need to guarantee the right of self-determination—that is, allow individuals to decide for themselves whether or not to participate in research—and requires additional measures to protect individuals with diminished capacity from exploitation. The principle of beneficence requires that research be designed to maximize benefit and minimize harm. The principle of justice refers to the distribution of risk across society, requiring that those members of society with the most to gain from research bear the risks of it equally. In other words, subjects should not be chosen because they are convenient or easy to manipulate because of their illness or socio-economic condition, but because of reasons directly related to the research.

The Belmont Report also defined the policies and procedures of the institutional review boards (IRBs) charged with overseeing all federally funded biomedical and behavioral research involving human subjects. Before it could proceed, any such research project had to be approved by an IRB, the criteria for which the report also defined. Rather than functioning through a centralized national committee, the IRB system that emerged would consist of autonomous local committees, established in universities or other research institutions. While all IRBs were required, at a minimum, to follow the federal guidelines for approving research, each could establish additional criteria.

After the National Commission disbanded, implementing the recommendations in the Belmont Report became the responsibility of the Office for Human Research, a division of the US Department of Health and Human Services. The current guidelines, Title 45, Part 46 of the Code of Federal Regulations (45 CFR 46), were established in 1981, and ten years later, sixteen federal agencies adopted subpart A of these guidelines, which are now referred to as the Common Rule. They continue to be reviewed and revised, most recently in 2009 (see <http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.html> for the most recent version).

ETHICS COMMITTEES: PROCEDURES

In compliance with the principles laid out in the Belmont Report, IRBs require researchers who are seeking approval for studies to document the ways in which their research guarantees respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Specific document requirements vary by university or research institution, but the criteria for approval of research by all IRBs are compliance with five elements: informed consent, confidentiality and privacy, cost/benefit analysis, written protocol, and site approval.

The criterion of informed consent complies with the first principle of the Belmont Report—respect for persons. Respect for the research subject requires that the researcher recognize the individual's autonomy exercised as his or her informed choice to participate in the research and to withdraw from research at any time without penalty. Fulfillment of this requirement is traditionally achieved with the presentation of a written informed consent form that specifies the objectives and activities of the research, including possible benefits and risks, which must be signed by both the research participant and researcher. For some groups, such as children and prisoners, whose full autonomy to decide whether or not to participate could be questioned, written informed consent must also be sought from whomever is regarded as legally responsible for the research participant. In the case of research with pregnant women, additional measures for informed consent are required, given that a third party (the fetus) may be affected and cannot give consent. In these cases, informed consent from the father of the unborn child may be also required.

Guarantees of confidentiality and privacy comply with both the principle of respect for persons and that of beneficence. Researchers must detail in their proposals how they intend to store and use individuals' identifying

information, guaranteeing it will not be disclosed to the general public and possibly result in harm to them.

Following on the principle of beneficence, IRBs require an analysis of the benefit of the research to be undertaken and any harm it could cause. The researcher examines the implications of the project for both the research subject and the society as a whole and provides recommendations for the minimization of any potential harm. As detailed in the Belmont Report, the principle of beneficence requires that the risks of the research be justified by the potential benefits to the individual and society.

To assess potential benefits and harms to research participants adequately, IRBs require researchers to provide written protocols describing exactly how human subjects will be participating in the research. The protocol details the source of participants and the method of selecting them, as well as the methods to be used in collecting data from or on them.

Finally, IRBs also typically require additional approval of the research from the site where it will be conducted. For example, for research conducted in organizations such as hospitals or schools, IRBs require the researcher to obtain approval from the authorities responsible for them. In the case of research conducted outside the United States, approval is usually required, where obtainable, from the host country. When a foreign site cannot provide such oversight, approval from the researcher's institution is taken to apply there.

ETHICS COMMITTEES IN PRACTICE

While the procedures for approval of research by IRBs are outlined by federal guidelines, each university IRB has considerable autonomy in making its own interpretation of these guidelines, including determining what kinds of research and researchers are subject to IRB approval. For social scientists, this has resulted in considerable variation in requirements for carrying out research and, in some instances, has even hampered the ability to do the research at all (Adler and Adler 2002; Becker 2004; Haggerty 2004). Although IRBs were originally designed to oversee ethics in both biomedical and behavioral research, their practice when evaluating and approving social science research has been much criticized. The criticisms can be divided into two areas. Some argue against the need for IRBs or any institutional ethics oversight for social science. Others recognize the need

for IRBs (or their inevitability) but claim their evaluation of social science research carries a biomedical bias.

Social scientists have questioned the need for federal oversight of research with human subjects since the inception of discussions about it. Kevin Haggerty (2004), for example, sees IRBs and their requirements as “ethical imperialism” that consistently encroaches on researchers’ autonomy through needless regulations. Others point out that the social sciences already regulate themselves through both the incorporation of ethics in undergraduate and graduate curriculums and the codes of ethical conduct devised by their professional associations (Becker 2004; Feely 2007). Still others claim that the risk present to subjects in social science research is minimal and does not warrant the need for regulation (Schrag 2011).

Those social scientists who recognize the value of IRBs but are critical of them argue that the current practices are based on a biomedical research model rarely used in the social sciences. They claim IRBs are typically made up of university faculty members overwhelmingly from the biological science and medical fields who have little if any knowledge of social science research and research methods. They argue that the IRB requirements of a written informed consent and a priori analysis of risk and benefits are particularly incompatible with social science research designs that utilize qualitative methods of interviewing, participant observation, or ethnography (Bosk and De Vries 2004; Bosk 2004). Blind adherence to the written consent requirement, they say, demonstrates IRBs have little understanding of social science—especially qualitative—methodology. In qualitative research, particularly ethnography, data are collected through long-term observation and interaction with research subjects. The level of access to research participants to collect data from them is determined by the level of trust between the researcher and subjects in a particular setting that could not develop without consent. Given this reality, many qualitative researchers view the requirement of written informed consent as superfluous and often nonsensical (Wynn 2011).

Considerable criticism of IRB procedures has also arisen in response to the requirement for a risk/benefit analysis. Since IRBs conduct prescriptive evaluations of research, researchers must present *a priori* analyses of risks and benefits, including discussion of methods and questions to be posed to research subjects. This is especially difficult in the case of qualitative research, which often follows an inductive logic that requires formulating

research questions and procedures for answering those questions while the research is taking place. Therefore, exactly who or what will be studied or what questions will be asked is not often known ahead of time. This ambiguity often makes an accurate determination of benefits and risk to the research subject difficult (Bosk 2004).

Added to the difficulty of determining potential harms is the difficulty of fulfilling IRB requirements to mitigate them. Haggerty (2004) argues that IRBs do not distinguish between the possibility and probability of harm, often requiring elaborate mechanisms to manage a possible harm (such as emotional distress) without having evaluated the real probability of such harm occurring. Thus, IRBs require a series of costly or difficult-to-provide safeguards and practices (such as access to psychological counseling) for any possible harm, regardless of its actual probability of occurring.

Beyond the criticisms of how the IRB carries out its procedures, many question whether the procedures themselves actually increase the ethical treatment of human subjects (Wynn, 2011; Adler and Adler 2002). L. L. Wynn's (2011) survey of ethnographers found most see IRBs as unhelpful in the task of protecting subjects. Others have argued that IRB requirements focus more centrally on legal protection of the university or research institution than on the subjects being studied (Adler and Adler 2002; Feely 2007).

IRBS AND RESEARCH IN DANGEROUS SETTINGS

When social science research takes place in dangerous or violent settings, the above criticisms of IRB requirements and procedures take on additional importance. The potential for harm to subjects in these cases can go beyond emotional distress or embarrassment to real physical and legal danger if the participants' identities are disclosed or the information they provide is revealed. Researchers must be especially concerned with managing risk to subjects. IRB requirements for approval of research can oftentimes be at odds with this obligation, however.

Most problematic is the requirement for the written informed consent form. As seen above, social scientists have criticized this requirement as cumbersome. When the research is conducted in a violent setting, it could be downright harmful. By documenting the voluntary nature of subjects' participation, written consent forms also provide a record of it—one that could be harmful if disclosed. For this reason, individuals who are to participate

may be reluctant to sign them. This is especially the case when the nature of the research is sensitive, and where collaboration with the researcher can be considered subversive or illegal if discovered (Haggerty 2004). In other instances, the IRBs' intention of protecting vulnerable populations, such as children, through stringent informed consent procedures may have the reverse effect. Adler and Adler (2002) give the example of an IRB having required parental consent in a study of gay teenagers who were not open with their parents about their sexual identities.

While the federal guidelines are somewhat flexible regarding the written informed consent form, allowing the researcher to advocate against its use in a particular research protocol (see paragraph 46.116 of 45 CFR 46 for instances of informed consent waivers), IRBs are, as mentioned, ultimately local autonomous organizations that may or may not agree with such an appeal. Much criticism of IRB process regards the strict adherence to bureaucratic requirements, such as the written consent form, even in cases where they may result in *more* risk to the research subject.

Another area in which IRB requirements may conflict with the ethical treatment of research subjects concerns the guarantees of confidentiality and privacy. IRB procedures require researchers to say how they intend to guarantee the confidentiality of their participants, typically by detailing the means of data security and storage they will use, as well as mechanisms for masking participants' identities during data collection and publication. These mechanisms should be communicated to research subjects as well, typically as part of the informed consent form.

This guarantee of confidentiality to subjects is far from complete, however. IRBs impose limits on the scope of this protection, however, and require that they be made clear to participants. In general terms, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed to those engaging in illegal or potentially harmful activities unless the researcher receives a Certificate of Confidentiality, which allows him or her to refrain from disclosing personal information and the identities of research subjects even when subpoenaed. Without such a certificate, the researcher has no such legal protection, such as that accorded to journalists. Even with it, the principle of beneficence obligates the researcher to report activities or information potentially harmful to the subject or other members of society, such as knowledge of a communicable disease (see <http://grants2.nih.gov/grants/policy/coc/>).

Although these certificates of confidentiality are available for social scientists, they are intended (as the example of communicable disease suggests) for biomedical research, and their approval is at the discretion of the National Institutes of Health. In practice, granting such certificates for social scientists is rare. Social science researchers, then, must make clear to research participants the real limits of promises of confidentiality—that is, they cannot guarantee that records will be kept from authorities if they are requested. These limitations became clear after a few high-profile cases involving refusals to divulge research participants' identities to US authorities demonstrated the lack of legal protection under US law of researcher-subject confidentiality (see Scarce 1994 and Brajuha and Hallowell 1986). In the case of Rik Scarce, this refusal resulted in jail time (Scarce 1994). As a result, neither IRBs nor professional codes of ethics such as that of the American Sociological Association require absolute protection of a research subject's identity in the face of legal authorities. As discussed above, managing risk to research subjects in dangerous places depends largely on the ability of the researcher to protect their identities. The lack of real guarantees of confidentiality for subjects imposes additional difficulties for researchers in violent settings, since fully protecting subjects identities can result in legal consequences for researchers.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS BEYOND THE IRB

The previous discussion makes clear that federal guidelines and IRB adherence to them often add to researchers' difficulties in violent settings. In their efforts to ensure ethical treatment of human subjects, IRBs impose requirements on researchers that often impede the conduct of their research and may increase rather than decrease the risk of harm to subjects (Adler and Adler 2002; Feely 2007; Becker 2004; Haggerty 2004). Nevertheless, it is important that researchers in violent settings comply with the federal ethical guidelines set forth in the Belmont Report, demonstrating respect for persons, beneficence, and justice even beyond what is required by the IRB. While IRBs focus on documentation, such as signed consent forms and standard protections of subjects' identities, the realities of ensuring research participant safety in violent settings are often more complex and nuanced.

Beyond fulfilling the requirement of obtaining written informed consent discussed above, what measures can researchers take to ensure informed consent in violent settings? Who should be informed of the research? Is a

conflict inherent between informed consent and protecting study participants in violent settings? Despite the many challenges and risks presented by the use of traditional consent forms in many violent settings, scholars must give research participants necessary information about the nature of the research and its possible risks to help them make truly informed decisions about participation. Consent in violent settings requires more than just a signature on a form. It often hinges on establishing trust between the researcher and research participant about the scope of the inquiry and how the data collected will be used. As Patrick Peritore put it in his description of interviewing political actors in Latin America,

Knowledge granted to a foreigner represents the alienation of control and power over the respondent's personal and social situation. Thus uniformly the researcher will be asked—What is the purpose of this research? Who is financing it? Why are you interested in this topic? What will you do with the data? (1990, 361)

In dangerous settings, accurately informing participants about research includes telling them not just about data collection methods and data security, but also how and for whom the data will be published. In fact, contrary to IRB concerns, participants may be less concerned with confidentiality and more with how the researcher represents them to different audiences. It is important to listen and assuage these concerns even if traditional conceptions of informed consent do not require doing so.

Another concern especially relevant in dangerous or violent settings is determining who requires informed consent. Many IRBs have wide definitions of research participants, often requiring informed consent or research approval from a host of actors, in particular those in positions of authority, such as hospital or school administrators. Critics argue that for sensitive topics, such approval serves as a restraint on data collection, given that those under the supervision or control of such authorities will be reluctant to speak openly for fear of reprisal. They claim that such disclosure requirements can put research subjects at risk and lament that these and other IRB demands for informed consent have made the use of deception in research unacceptable (Haggerty 2004; Adler and Adler 2002; Becker 2004).

While deception has been widely deemed unethical in social science (Erikson 1967; Miller 1995), debate about its pragmatic use remains active,

particularly when the purpose is to guarantee the safety of research participants (Herrera 1999; Pruitt 2008). In such cases, advocates use the term deceit rather than deception to distinguish acts of image management or less than full disclosure from the intentional misleading of research participants (Haggerty 2004; Kovats-Bernat 2002; Goldsmith 2003). J. Christopher Kovats-Bernat (2002), for example, relates how, to protect himself and his informants, he did not reveal himself as an anthropologist to various individuals in the field. Andrew Goldsmith (2003) discusses as well the need he felt to prioritize and present different facets of his persona, depending on whom he interviewed in the field. He often emphasized different professional attributes to public security bureaucrats than to the regular police officers, for instance. Not being forthcoming about the true nature of the research (or the researcher), especially when dealing with authorities, thus becomes a means of protecting subjects from official scrutiny (Milicevic 2010).

Although the prescriptive nature of the IRB's approval process requires researchers to conduct risk/benefit analyses of their work and outline all means of mitigating the risk of harm to participants before they begin their work, the unpredictable nature of research in dangerous settings makes it impossible to foresee and address all scenarios. Keeping research subjects safe from harm in dangerous settings requires constant evaluation of activities and interactions. As an outsider, the researcher often has limited knowledge of the complexities of the setting. Kovats-Bernat (2002) advocates a strategy he terms a "localized ethic," relying on the advice and recommendations of the local population in determining how to conduct the research so as best to guarantee both his own safety and security and that of the participants. This idea of deferring to local knowledge has been mentioned by others and is based on the recognition that it is the research participant, rather than the researcher, who best understands both the risks associated with participation and how best to mitigate them (Peritore 1990; Goldsmith 2003).

Another regard in which researchers must go beyond IRB requirements to fulfill their ethical obligations to their subjects is data safety, which in violent settings is synonymous with maintaining participant safety. The disclosure to state security agencies or other authorities of information given to the researcher could likely result in the participant's detainment, torture, or even death. While IRBs require researchers to detail their strategies for data safety, save for the concession of a Certificate of Confidentiality, neither researchers nor subjects have protection in the face of legal requests for

their disclosure. To protect data—and, by extension, research participants—effectively, a researcher needs to imagine and plan for the worst-case scenario. The field experience of Alexandra Milicevic in Serbia is a case in point. She conducted in-depth interviews of volunteers and draft dodgers from the Yugoslav War in the summer of 2000 during the totalitarian regime of Slobodan Milošević. While en route to Romania to meet with her dissertation advisor, she was detained and questioned for twenty-eight hours, and her taped interviews were seized by police officials. Her passport was also seized, and throughout the interrogation the police threatened her with the imprisonment of her family. After her release she learned the police had gone to her house and seized all of her research materials.

Although Milicevic was fortunate in that no lasting harm came to her or her research subjects, her experience shaped her future research in Serbia. She later suggested researchers be paranoid while in the field, relying on memory for sensitive data and keeping as few records as possible to protect participants' identities (Milicevic 2010). Other researchers also endorse the use of memory or field notes over recorded material (Peritore 1990; Jenkins 1984). Kovats-Bernat argues in favor of keeping field notes that are “once removed from the informants who provided the information on which they are based” rather than recordings that “can be replayed again and again . . . and can be damaging, incriminating, or fatal to the informant[s] . . . whose very voices or images are implicated in the recording” (2002, 216). Still others recommend careful storage of research materials under lock and key (Jenkins 1984) or with an attorney (Milicevic 2010), as well as frequently sending notes out of the field for safekeeping (Jenkins 1984).

Beyond ensuring the physical security of data, researchers must also be concerned with their virtual safety. Given the current climate of cyberspying and hacking, researchers should make no assumptions about the safety of data stored or sent electronically via the internet. For full protection, researchers should use data encryption or keep research data in files that are not accessible through the internet. While there is no way to guarantee data remain safe, the precautions outlined here will increase their security and, in turn, protect research participants.

CONCLUSION

All researchers are required, both morally and legally, to adhere to ethical principles when their research includes human subjects. Recognizing and respecting a person's right to participate voluntarily in research, minimizing risk and potential harm as a result of that participation, and distributing that risk fairly in society are specific means of upholding these ethical principles. Since the 1940s, legislation and administrative procedures have been adopted to ensure researchers do so. For many in the social sciences, however, the main mechanism of this oversight—the institutional review board or IRB—is seen as a bureaucratic encroachment on academic freedom and autonomy as well as an unsuccessful approach to improving the protection of human subjects.

As has been discussed here, social scientists often see IRB requirements as out of step with the type of research methods they use. Specifically, requirements for signed written consent forms are seen as problematic for qualitative researchers, who often do not know prior to entering the field which individuals will be participating in the research. Additionally, qualitative research often depends on the development of trust between the participants and the researcher, a process that is usually more time-consuming and complex than can be indicated in a standard informed consent form.

Often, complying with the IRB conflicts with guaranteeing the safety of research participants. For researchers in violent settings, minimizing harm to research participants is linked to maintaining their confidentiality even in the face of requests from legal and other authorities. IRB requirements of written informed consent and less than absolute guarantees of confidentiality can result in less rather than more protection for human subjects. Thus, researchers in violent settings must balance the requirements of the IRB against the realities of the field, often engaging in levels of deceit and data security not in complete accordance with the IRB.

So does the IRB do more harm than good for researchers and their participants in violent settings? Many social scientists would answer in the affirmative, citing IRBs' blind insistence on bureaucratic requirements as evidence they are more about protecting universities than protecting researchers or their human subjects. Given the very real possibility of harm to research participants in violent settings, however, it is imperative that researchers reflect fully on the implications of their work, both while in the

field and at the time of publication. IRBs are, in fact, limited in scope when it comes to negotiating all the ethical concerns in the field, given their prescriptive nature. IRB research review provides an invaluable opportunity, however, for researchers, especially those in violent settings, to engage in these reflections and develop strategies to protect most effectively those they intend to study. Rather than seeing them as a necessary evil, researchers should approach IRBs as collaborators; after all, both have the same objective.

Seen in this light, IRBs and researchers can work together to guarantee the ethical treatment of human subjects. For this to happen, however, IRBs need to be more attentive to the realities of social science research and, especially, to the challenges of research in violent settings. Researchers in turn can facilitate this understanding by actively engaging with IRBs, both by gaining a better understanding themselves of the regulations that govern them and increasing their membership on the boards. Ultimately, however, ethical treatment of research participants in violent settings is up to the researchers themselves. The nature of the field setting is too unpredictable for the prescriptive process used by IRBs to foresee all risks. Nevertheless, the same concerns present during the IRB process—respect for the right of voluntary participation and the protection of research participants from harm—are those that will best guide the researcher in violent settings to act ethically in the face of this unpredictability.

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