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Ethical considerations of disaster research in conflict-affected areas

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Abstract

Purpose – Debates on the ethics of disaster and humanitarian studies concern unequal relations in research (among research institutes/researchers/stakeholders); the physical and psychological well-being of research participants and researchers; and the imposition of western methods, frameworks and epistemologies to the study of disasters. This paper focuses on everyday ethics: how they need to be translated throughout the everyday practices of research and how researchers can deal with the ethical dilemmas that inevitably occur.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper analyses the process of addressing ethics-related dilemmas from the first author's experiences researching disaster governance in high-intensity conflict settings, in particular drawing from 4 to 6 months of fieldwork in South Sudan and Afghanistan. In addition, ethical issues around remote research are discussed, drawing on the example of research conducted in Yemen. It is based on the personal notes taken by the first author and on the experience of both authors translating guidelines for research in remote and hazardous areas into research practices.

Findings – The paper concerns translating ethics into the everyday practices of research planning, implementation and communication. It argues for the importance of adaptive research processes with space for continuous reflection in order to advance disaster studies based on (1) equitable collaboration; (2) participatory methodologies wherever possible; (3) safety and security for all involved; (4) ethical approaches of remote research and (5) responsible and inclusive research communication and research-uptake. Openness about gaps and limitations of ethical standards, discussions with peers about dilemmas and reporting on these in research outcomes should be embedded in everyday ethics.

Originality/value – The paper contributes to discussions on everyday ethics, where ethics are integral to the epistemologies and everyday practices of research.

Keywords Disaster research, Everyday research ethics, Methods, Safety and security, Remote research

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In 2020, we joined hundreds of scholars in signing a manifesto for inclusive disaster and risk research. The manifesto, *Power, Prestige and Forgotten Values: A Disaster Studies Manifesto*, advocates "rethinking our research agendas, our methods and our allocation of resources" (Gaillard, 2019a). This reflects a wider move in the field of disaster studies to "examine our own practices in terms of how equitable and ethically justifiable they are" (Alexander *et al.*, 2021, p. 16). The manifesto situates the ethics of disaster studies in debates over its decolonization. It is important to acknowledge here that major disaster studies scholars and institutions are

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found in the majority world [1]. Critical disaster studies have been pioneered by La Red in Latin America, and the early proponents of citizenry-based disaster risk reduction (DRR) in the Philippines have been at the cradle of the global DRR movement. The Periperi U network of disaster scholars has spread from South Africa across the African continent, and the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network (ADRRN) gathers researchers and practitioners from 20 countries across the Asia-Pacific region. Nonetheless, decolonization and concomitant concern over inequitable relations between and among research institutes, researchers and other stakeholders; the physical and psychological well-being of research participants, collaborators, assistants and researchers; and the imposition of methods, frameworks and epistemologies to the study of disasters crafted in minority world organizations continue to be of chief importance. A failure to engage with these concerns may perpetuate power imbalances and lead to re-traumatization or research fatigue (Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018; Patel *et al.*, 2020). All research endeavours have to balance the benefits of the research against the personal and political risks and ramifications of the research process (Cutcliffe and Ramcharan, 2002; Hilhorst *et al.*, 2016; Liamputtong, 2007; Paradis, 2000).

This paper contributes to debates on ethics with a focus on the implications of research practices for research participants, i.e. for the people, places and dynamics under study. Researching disasters often means working with people who are vulnerable at different levels. Populations affected by disaster can be traumatized, researchers can put themselves at risk, and research activities can interfere and affect post-disaster operations (Hunt *et al.*, 2016; Kathleen Geale, 2012; Kelman, 2005; Sumathipala and Siribaddana, 2005). As such, researchers can be part of disaster risk *creation* (Lewis and Kelman, 2012; Wisner and Lavell, 2017). The research they do can also have emotional, psychological and moral impacts on the researchers themselves due to their proximity to death, injury and the pain and suffering of others.

This paper is about ethics in the everyday practice of disaster studies. It is mainly based on experiences of disaster studies in conflict-affected countries, where an estimated one-third of disasters happen (Caso, 2019). Yet, it is equally relevant to more peaceful settings. The emergence or creation of disaster risks and the various responses to disasters throughout the disaster management cycle are profoundly political processes (Hilhorst, 2013; Olsen *et al.*, 2003; Wisner, 2012), riddled by everyday social dynamics, tensions and conflict (Desportes *et al.*, 2019; Hilhorst, 2013; Mena and Hilhorst, 2020a; Peters and Kelman, 2020).

The paper provides three possible contributions to ongoing debate and practice. First, we see ethics as integral to epistemological choices, research design, implementation and research uptake (Fujii, 2012; Hilhorst *et al.*, 2016). For many scholars, ethics are an add-on that stand apart from core research strategies. In that tradition, ethics lie in the realm of conditions to be met and checks to be done by research ethics committees, for example concerning rules of informed consent and data safekeeping (Fujii, 2012). A systematic review of the ethics presented in articles researching humanitarian settings, including disaster responses, revealed that in almost half of the articles, the ethics section focused only on review processes prior to the start of the project (Bruno and Haar, 2020). An exception is found in disaster medical sciences (Liamputtong, 2007; Ramcharan and Cutcliffe, 2001), where the ethics sections in publications are also about clinical trials and other aspects of implementation. Ethics, then, are often treated in terms of the formal approval required for data collection to commence. Without underestimating the importance of this formal aspect of ethics, we believe that all decisions evolving throughout the research process, big or small, should be taken from a consistent ethical perspective.

Second, we recognize that ethics are not self-evident in translation. Equally valid ethics-related claims may beg contradictory courses of action, and there may be situations where ethics-related standards cannot be met. This is particularly pertinent for studies that take place in disaster settings that are in disarray. Ethical choices are negotiated and "red lines navigated" (Glasius *et al.*, 2018), but that does not make ethics a discretionary, voluntary aspect of research. As we will elaborate, one of the most difficult research decisions is where

to draw the line with regard to ethics, and to what extent ethics can be adapted to the research setting. While there are no magic bullets for many of the everyday ethical dilemmas that researchers face, we propose that opening these dilemmas up to peer scrutiny is crucial in striking the balance between overly rigorous or overly loose approaches.

Third, we believe that safety and security risks are crucial in approaching ethics. Whereas this holds true for many types of research, disaster-affected areas are especially prone to safety and security risks. Despite the importance of safety and security, ethics-related protocols rarely pay attention to these aspects.

Rather than interrogate the philosophy or theory of ethics, this paper discusses ethics from an experience-based, everyday perspective. We will delineate how ethics play a role in the different aspects, dimensions and phases of research. We then zoom in on the ethics of data gathering, based mainly on research experiences in conflicted-affected areas of South Sudan and Afghanistan. This is followed by a section on the ethics of remote research, given that disaster studies sometimes focus on areas that are not accessible for face-to-face data gathering.

Process and methodology

This paper is the outcome of a long process of engagement of the authors with the everyday ethics of disaster studies. Both of us have had a history of more than a decade of disaster-related research before working together, and have shared an interest in the ethical aspects of safety and security of fieldwork. Author 2 had already published initial guidelines on this topic in 2005 (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2005) in order to support the fieldwork of her students, and author 1 had been a trainer on these issues for practitioners.

In 2016, we embarked on a 5-year research project about cases where disaster and conflict coincide. During the preparatory year, we published the "Security Guidelines for Field Research in Complex, Remote and Hazardous Places" (see Hilhorst *et al.*, 2016). The guidelines promote an approach that considers ethics-related components of research throughout the whole research cycle and as part of the general safety and security schemes of research projects. The guidelines are available in English, French, Spanish and Arabic [2]. The guidelines underpinned the preparation and implementation of fieldwork, leading to a further translation of the guidelines in practice.

This article reviews and reflects on the subsequent experiences of research conducted by the first author on disaster governance in high-intensity conflict, specifically in South Sudan and Afghanistan. Difficulties in getting access to Yemen led to the decision to conduct remote research, which resulted in a series of notes and exercises on doing safe, secure and ethical remote research. In order to bring these experiences into conversation with the wider community of disaster scholars, the review is grounded in a literature review on the subject, covering dilemmas of fieldwork research and research of disasters, ethical concerns of research, and literature on the process of addressing ethic-related regulations, protocols and approaches in disaster studies.

Ethical considerations in disaster research

This paper focuses on the ethical aspects of research in disaster studies. However, we set this within the observation that there are many ethical concerns pertinent to the academic world more broadly. Inequities in publishing or access to published work are one example.

Ethical considerations should pervade the entire research process (Bank and Scheyvens, 2003; Sriram *et al.*, 2009). From the composition and division of roles in the team, the preparation, the ethics review, the implementation process and the roles of research participants (Hilhorst *et al.*, 2016; Scheyvens and Storey, 2003). Ethics must also be considered during writeup, publication, communication and research uptake moments of research (Hilhorst *et al.*, 2016; Sriram, 2009).

The *composition and division of roles in the research team* is a major issue in research (McGinn *et al.*, 2005). Unfortunately, this is frequently done even before a conversation on ethics has started, especially in cases where research is compelled by disasters related to sudden-onset hazards. Sometimes these inequalities are defended on the grounds that local researchers do not have the capacity to carry out the research by themselves, which is highly problematic. The related discourse of "capacity building" is derogatory, prone to depriving people of their agency and ignoring the rich variety of different capacities present everywhere (Hilhorst, 2018). In international teams, *capacity sharing* can be a far more appropriate phrase and that sharing is two-way. Sometimes we share and give advice, sometimes we learn and ask for advice, allowing the research process to be co-led.

Moreover, there is a widespread misconception that disaster studies relate mainly to technocratic, professional exercises in finding answers to evident and objective research problems (Hilhorst, 2003). In reality, the framing of research questions is a highly sensitive exercise that can steer the research process and preclude certain outcomes over others. As Olsen *et al.* (2003) pointed out, simple questions such as "what happened" and "what will happen next" are highly political and the answers will differ widely depending on whom you ask (Desportes and Hilhorst, 2020). The definition of the research question is equally political and can steer power imbalances by defining what is worth being studied and how. Even more so if one reflects on the power that funding organisations have when deciding what to research and where, which is also at times related to geopolitical agendas of some countries or funding agencies.

Ideally, the research team is in place before questions are formulated, but in practice, international research processes often start prior to the involvement of national or local counterparts, who then have no say in setting the research agenda. National researchers then come to the research when the most important decisions have already been made, setting the relationships and leading to the "dehumanization and the erasure of researchers from the Global South" (GIC Network, 2019). This problem is related to practices in research financing, where research must be defined in great detail, precluding the organization of research in more open-ended, dialogue-based ways where key decisions on the agenda can be made after the start of the project, involving a wide variety of stakeholders. It is important that lead researchers negotiate such flexible terms (or circumvent rigid ones in more informal ways).

In the *preparation phase of the project*, methodologies are designed that largely define the framework within which the relations with research participants are shaped (Kindon *et al.*, 2007). Participatory methodologies have demonstrated many benefits to involving research participants as much as possible in the design, implementation and validation of the research (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). Methodologies are of course largely dictated by research questions, but one could argue that all types of research could build in space for participatory methodologies, where the aim is to do research *with* instead of *on* people. Even in the case of large-scale surveys, one could, for example, organise validation workshops with a selection of research participants. There are reasons for caution with participatory methods, especially in conflict-affected settings, related to the need to examine things that are outside of people's direct experiences (cf. Bourdieu, 1990), to avoid identifying outcomes that reflect the biases of the research facilitators and/or political elites participating in the process (Humphreys *et al.*, 2006), and to minimize the risk of feeding into existing tensions. In our experience, however, too often researchers do not even consider participatory methodologies in places affected by high levels of conflict or consider them too risky (Norman, 2009). Complex research environments present an excuse to make more routine methodological choices, but there are sufficient positive examples of participatory research in "red zones" (Haar *et al.*, 2013) to suggest that it is the mindset and habits of researchers, rather than assumed risks in these environments, that are the most pressing obstacles to participatory methodologies. There is also a need to reflect more on the process of decolonization of our

methodologies, from the definition of what real knowledge is, the methods to collect and analyse information, to advance in the recognition of the importance of alternative and indigenous approaches to research and knowledge sharing (Smith, 2012).

The process of *obtaining authorization from ethics committees* is often challenging in disaster studies, especially when disasters happen in volatile areas. Hunt *et al.* (2016) found that the appraisal of urgent research into so-called sudden-onset disasters is deficient when research ethics committees are not familiar with the particularities of disaster studies (see also Falb *et al.*, 2019). A more fundamental issue is that ethics reviews are based on the assumption that research is planned in advance and will be implemented according to the plan, and so ethics reviews can be one-time stops before data collection starts. This assumption does not hold for most types of research, and certainly not for research happening in the dynamic setting of places affected by disaster and conflict. When disasters happen in areas of political and social fragility, not all of the risks can be known in advance (Hunt *et al.*, 2016). Hence, ethical considerations must be revisited regularly and adjusted throughout the research process.

There are many ethical considerations regarding the *communication of research*. How is knowledge communicated with – or indeed by – research participants, and with other actors? One of the issues with regard to publishing research is the imposition of English in disaster studies, and the lack of accessibility and the status of non-English journals. In addition, power imbalances may be reinforced by the dominance of English keywords such as "resilience", "vulnerability" or "risk" (Chmutina *et al.*, 2020). The question of who writes the academic publications is also relevant. It relates to existent inequities in accessing journals and to inequities related with bibliometric measures of published work, as some researchers and institutions have better access to mechanisms to foster their outputs Also to the inequities in the political economy of publishing where many researchers cannot afford to contribute their free labour to enable publications that private publishing companies profit from (Alexander *et al.*, 2021).

It is equally important to reflect on who decides on the messages and recommendations of research, and by what means is research communicated to different audiences. For instance, research communication, ranging from blogs to journal articles, is all too often done in English and little or no effort is made to validate research with or communicate findings to the affected people and research participants in languages and formats that work (Hilhorst *et al.*, 2021).

With regard to *research uptake*, it is important to think through the ramifications of the applied nature of much of disaster studies. Commonly, disaster studies seek to influence the management or response to a disaster (Kelman, 2005), whether directly, through dialogue and the formulation of recommendations, or indirectly by posing questions or just by being around (Hilhorst *et al.*, 2016; Kelman, 2005). It is questionable how much scholars are responsible for actions taken following their research (Kelman, 2005, 2007) or how they address problems of epistemological reductionism (Mena, 2019). However, they are usually involved in the choices surrounding who formulates recommendations for whom, and which audiences are empowered with the knowledge generated. Research, moreover, can also be directed towards policy rather than towards communities of practice or to people at risk of or affected by a disaster.

Everyday ethical consideration of disaster research in conflict-affected settings

As Kelman argued (2007, p. 1), ethical considerations "are not abstruse philosophy suitable for only learned debates in academic institutions . . . [but] day-to-day concerns which must be considered on the ground, including by researchers who are conducting field work". In this section, we will reflect on some of the ethical considerations we have experienced researching disaster situations in conflict-affected situations.

As explained earlier, we were part of a team working on safety and security guidelines for research in remote or hazardous areas. When we started this work in 2005, we quickly realized that safety and security is closely intertwined with the ethics, epistemologies and methodologies of research. The wellbeing of the researchers and their informants and the reputation of host or supporting organisations are also all interconnected. As written in the guidelines and other publications (see Hilhorst *et al.*, 2016; Scheyvens and Storey, 2003; Sriram *et al.*, 2009), research depends on people, and researchers have a special responsibility to treat people with respect and refrain from endangering their security. This is, in the first place, an ethical issue, but it is also true that treating people with care and respect helps to build the trustful relationship that is needed to obtain reliable information and to motivate people to share their stories (Fujii, 2012). Fostering respectful relations has a direct bearing on the researcher's security as it enhances their access to security information and can mean that people are more likely to help if the researcher is in danger. The conduct of those engaged in the research project, including researchers, assistants and participant organizations, will also have a direct bearing on the reputation of the research.

People living in conflict-affected scenarios are typically vulnerable to multiple situations and hazards, and research practices can impact these people to the detriment of their lives and livelihoods, including their personal safety. In such contexts, which are often authoritarian, information gathering for research purposes can lead to research participants being accused of dissent or even treason. In places with high levels of poverty, research facilitators, interpreters or assistants are often considered wealthy or to have valuable social connections, prompting requests that can make research associates uncomfortable among their own people. Also, in conflict-affected settings, people can be distressed or traumatised by conflict, displacement or disaster. Questioning them about these sensitive topics can add to their distress, for example asking them to recall traumatic events or to consider possibilities that were not part of their existing frames of reference (Patel *et al.*, 2020; Sumathipala and Siribaddana, 2005). These are just some examples of the sensitivities related to research conducted in places affected by conflict and disaster that makes an ethical approach to research essential.

Every time that we conduct fieldwork research [3] we develop a plan informed by the guidelines mentioned above. This plan includes a risk assessment that always considers ethical concerns. Normally, our research plan includes assessing all possible physical and psychological threats to people involved in the research (such as illness, harassment, accidents, physical or sexual assault), threats to property (theft or vandalism for example) and any other possible hazard related to the places or activities to conduct. We also assess our level of vulnerability and that of others involved to determine the likelihood of being affected by those hazards and their likely impact. Lastly, we design and coordinate a set of actions aimed at reducing risks.

Importantly, ethical considerations should also contemplate power relations and imbalances, our positionality, and the potential harm that our actions and interactions can create or exacerbate. Researching disasters and humanitarian action (and the very same practices of humanitarian and disaster governance) are rooted and tinted in colonial practices and mentalities (De Waal, 1997; Donini, 2012; Gaillard, 2019b). Therefore, as part of the ethical considerations of research, we need to include a personal commitment to observe any form in which we unconsciously could promote, validate, nourish or commit any of the ethics-related problems mentioned above.

Dealing with ethical dilemmas or shortcomings

When we prepared the guidelines, we noted that ethical standards for research do not provide guidance on dealing with ethical dilemmas nor the ethics-related components of research.

Ethical standards are usually very directive, without recognising that the do's and don'ts may lead to contradictory demands on researchers and that not all settings are equally amenable to all of these guidelines. In our experience, it is important to be open about these situations, deliberating with peers before making decisions that veer away from the ethical optimum, and always enabling the evaluation of decisions by narrating them in detail in research reports. To illustrate this point, we borrow here (in an edited form) some considerations from the ethics section of the dissertation of author 1 of this article, particularly about how he dealt with informed consent and confidentiality during his research in Afghanistan and South Sudan (see Mena, 2020a).

One of the key aspects of ethical standards concerns the principle of *informed consent* from all research participants, including their right to withdraw from the research whenever they want to. However, in the research in South Sudan and Afghanistan, as in many other places, consent could not be obtained in writing in many of the cases, as people were either illiterate or reluctant to sign documents. In places under conflict people often fear signing documents, especially if they are in a language that they do not speak well. Sometimes, the contrary might happen too. People might feel compelled to give consent and participate in our research because that is what figures of authority (bosses, leaders, others) ask them to do, even if they would like not to participate [4]. Thus, consent was mostly granted verbally after a conversation with research participants, clearly explaining the objectives of the study, how data will be treated, analysed and used, and stressing the right not to participate and the right to withdraw at any moment, and that those decisions will also be confidential. If consent is granted, this was then re-stated verbally once the recording started.

Moreover, in places affected by high levels of conflict or when working with vulnerable population, recording is at times not allowed. This affects consent as this cannot be recorded. It also affects the process of collecting data, especially considering that sometimes it was not even possible to take handwritten notes. Several techniques were used to address this limitation in an ethical manner. The main technique was to memorize the information collected, which involved taking a course on techniques to memorize information, which includes re-stating aloud the main ideas expressed by the respondent without echoing or repeating their ideas, or establishing mnemonic patterns in the discourse. Then, after the meeting and with the consent of those involved, notes were written down. It was also offered to the participants to read the notes before processing and to analyse them or to have a subsequent meeting to double check that the ideas had been understood correctly.

While anonymity and confidentiality are easy to offer to research participants, keeping that promise is not, particularly in places affected by conflict. During the process of conducting fieldwork in South Sudan and Afghanistan, Mena was often asked to show the research to authorities, including documents on the computer, pictures on the camera, notebooks, and voice recordings. This happened at checkpoints, in the offices of authorities, or as "standard procedure" in the terminology of military and other armed actors. In places affected by civil war or conflict, there is usually suspicion of what foreigners are doing in the country and for what purpose (Nordstrom and Robben, 1995; Sriram *et al.*, 2009). Because the role of researchers is not well understood, authorities regularly thought that Mena was working as a journalist, human rights observer, or spy. As a result, considerable effort had to be dedicated to managing perceptions of the research. This included careful assessment and management of online profiles and social media interactions, such as biographical pages on the university website, social media accounts, and the publication of blog posts.

Maintaining the anonymity of all research participants was complex and required proper planning and preparation before embarking on research. Several steps were taken to ensure this, including encrypting sensitive information. In all writing and notes, code names or pseudonyms were used for research participants and places. Although the technique was far

from perfect, attempts were made to erase the traceability of people when using the snowballing technique to locate research participants. One way to do this was not to interview the person to whom one was referred, but to ask that person for someone else who could be interviewed. The aim was to obscure direct ties between people. This obviously resulted in reduced access to research participants. This was one of the issues where it was most delicate to maintain a balance between the objectives of the research and the methodological, ethical, and safety and security considerations.

An ethical approach to research is a continuous process, not just something that is declared and designed at the beginning. It requires reflecting on ethics before, during and after a research project. This approach proved to be essential in disaster- or conflict-affected scenarios, where the volatility of the general context rendered many decisions or plans obsolete in a short period of time. Beyond such situations, ethical considerations should always be a process comprising discussion and reflection with other people, chiefly with other members of the research project, including colleagues, direct supervisors and other advisors.

Safety first for researchers, research assistants and informants

When we worked on the guidelines, we found that the usual ethical standards for research did not incorporate safety and security concerns. We then formulated some working principles for ethical research in complex settings. The second principle, right after "respect the dignity of research participants", was "safety first for researchers, research assistants and informants". As we elaborated in the guidelines:

> Safety of researchers, assistants and informants is a top priority. In any situation, "rules of engagement" have to be discussed and roles and responsibilities must be clear. This is especially important in cases of emergencies, such as evacuation, hospitalization or repatriation. The presence of the researcher in the field can have repercussions for the security of other people. Researchers have to be aware of this and act in accordance, to avoid endangering assistants, key informants and people from the wider community.

Note that safety and security concerns go far beyond the safety of the researcher, which is at the heart of most safety regulations of universities today (Hilhorst and Mena, 2017). There is a tendency among universities, especially in the minority world, to develop elaborate safety protocols that focus on the safety of their employees with the aim of reducing liability. Where universities have insurance schemes, these are usually restricted to their own employees, and no facilities exist to insure the risks of national co-researchers. In our guidelines, the safety of research participants, research assistants and other stakeholders is an important responsibility of researchers related to the ethics of research.

The multiple considerations made by Mena about anonymity and confidentiality were made in respect of the rights of research participants and safeguarding their identity for security purposes. Several additional measures were taken. First, research participants were free to choose the location of the interviews, except when these places could pose a risk to them or others. Second, research assistants' safety and security were carefully considered, for example, by assessing the ways in which their involvement in the research could pose problems for them. Many interpreters and other assistants came from the same or similar locations and regions where research was conducted. While that brings many advantages, it also complicated matters due to their personal relationships with some of the participants, particularly in ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. In addition, biases during the translation or interpretation process could arise.

Safety for research participants also extended to other actors facilitating the process, particularly during the fieldwork phase. For example, in some countries the risk of kidnapping is high. These kidnappings usually occur while travelling from one place to another, which also entails great risks for the driver of the vehicle. Mena carefully planned his

traveling, taking into account safety concerns for researchers and drivers alike. A sound security scheme reduced the risk of these situations which, in turn, meant significant personal preparation and planning of the actions to be done every day, including routes to take when moving to a place.

Dealing with safety and security also required careful preparation. Before conducting the research, Mena built his practical experience in the psychology of emergencies and psychological first aid by taking several courses and working as a disaster responder. This helped in adjusting interviews, questions and practices in ways that would not cause trauma to research participants. It also provided training in recognising signs of trauma, anxiety or fear, and terminating or adjusting interviews when necessary. Similar practices were maintained in relationships with research colleagues and assistants, including interpreters. Another important preparation concerned interviews with residents of the visited places to learn about local customs, norms and traditions, including greetings, dress codes and interactions with their surroundings.

Ethical considerations of remote disaster research

Many of the current critiques in relation to the need to decolonize disaster studies focus on unequal collaboration agreements between the main researcher and local researchers or research assistants (McGinn *et al.*, 2005; Sriram *et al.*, 2009). This is especially the case where the main researcher finds it impossible or undesirable to access the research area. Apart from tricky questions around the ownership of the data, many safety issues are involved because risks that cannot be adequately managed are outsourced. This is a practice that we also call risk dumping.

The most urgent ethical question is whether local researchers can or should be exposed to conditions deemed too hazardous for the main researcher. When it became clear that Mena was not able to obtain a research permit for research in Yemen, the possibility of hiring a local researcher was explored. However, after talking to researchers and key informants, it was found that local researchers would be exposed to multiple risks, and hence we explored altering the research design to enable remote research without research *in situ*.

Remote research – research without face-to-face interaction with research participants – is not only employed in crisis-affected research settings but also where researchers seek to reduce their ecological footprint or where resources for fieldwork are limited. It has also become more common during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moderated remote research tools have been developed where the "researcher talks directly to the participants through an interface which is tested to yield rich and qualitative feedback" (Bolt and Tulathimutte, 2016). However, the use of technology also needs to be approached with caution (Mena, 2020b).

Remote research also requires ethical considerations (Mena and Hilhorst, 2020b). Firstly, it must be asked whether the research question is appropriate for remote research. Some questions require particular nuance or depth that cannot be attained without direct observation. Many routes can be explored to validate data, for example, using newspaper articles, geographic information systems or satellite images, secondary sources, or consulting other researchers familiar with the area. However, there may also be situations where triangulating and validating findings is too complicated as there is a general lack of data sources.

Research ethics can be complicated when research is conducted remotely. Whether data are collected through video-based conversations or by using a third person to conduct the interview, it is important to consider whether informed consent genuinely has been obtained and how confidentiality can be guaranteed. Face-to-face interaction allows participants' body

language to be read to detect discomfort. It also allows researchers to build trust with research participants. It is in this context that researchers must make efforts so that remote interviewing processes avoid creating anxiety or discomfort. For example, in a blog post we addressed this consideration reflecting on how "sitting too close to your camera can make your presence intimidating, whereas keeping some distance and not filling the screen allows the participants to see your hand movements and background. Participants will see everything, for example when you stop being attentive because you want to check some information on your phone. It is therefore important to be mindful of your actions and to try to remain focused and engaged" (Mena and Hilhorst, 2020b, online).

Moreover, we need to think about how the research is in the interest of the research participants. Without the engagement and personal attention of a real encounter, the question about how participants feel that they benefit from or participate in the research is a valid one. Researchers often seek to "leave something behind" – stories, information, advice or perhaps volunteer work for a group of people or NGO – to "give back" to the research participants. Remote research needs to find ways to move beyond the mere extraction of information that so clearly signals the possible asymmetric power relations between researchers and researched. There is a risk that remote research may have a numbing effect on the sensibility that the researcher needs to have to understand this is about vulnerable conditions, the loss of livelihoods and lives, injuries and the reality that disasters are created by structural poverty, inequality and political decisions.

In our experience it is possible to study some disasters remotely, but just as researchers have to adapt to remote research, so do universities, research institutions, supervisors and donors. Budget lines might include funds for better computers, webcams and video-based solutions.

Remote research can also be seen as an opportunity to do research differently and to reflect on the global impact of our practices. For example, in an era where the need for travel must constantly be weighed against the harm of adding emissions related to climate change, we can now think of expanding the geographies of our research and reaching people in regions and places that were not possible to reach before. For many students and researchers with limited budgets, remote research also can be a means to reduce the costs of research. However, as mentioned before, all these benefits and the use of remote research need to be weighed against ethics-related risks and recognize that there will be people out of reach and there is a risk of only reaching those in position of power.

Conclusion

This paper has addressed ethical issues of research in disaster studies. It is partly based on our experience reflecting and operationalizing ethical considerations associated with the study of disasters in places affected by conflict. Disasters in conflict-affected areas are particularly complicated and unpredictable. However, in our experience, these settings magnify patterns and problems that can be found in any disaster situation and hence this paper is relevant for disaster studies in general.

Ethics play a part in every phase and dimension of research, including the formation of the research team, the phrasing of research questions, preparation and planning, data collection and analysis, research communication and research uptake. Ethical consideration should take place throughout the whole research process. This is a major step away from current practice where ethical considerations are often considered part of the preparation leading to permission by an ethics review committee before data collection starts. In the paper we showed how, in research in Afghanistan and South Sudan, the principles of informed consent and confidentiality were shaped throughout the research and needed constant reflection and adaptations by the researcher.

Indeed, taking the view that ethical considerations need be embedded in the entire research process leads to a different conceptualization and operationalization of research. Linear notions of research processes where important decisions regarding the research questions and the design of research are taken before a research team is formed strongly contribute to the current inequalities found in disaster studies where co-researchers are usually marginalized in the research process. Such linear notions also inhibit continuous reflection on ethics throughout the process. Research, not only in disaster studies, is oftentimes open-ended and unpredictable. Recognising that research gets shaped through the process and that designs must adapt to context will cast a different light on how we deal with ethics. Hence, a focus on ethics and equality will have repercussions for reorganizing funding and the process of ethical reviews to make these appropriate for dialogue-based and adaptive research processes.

This is especially the case for ethics related to safety and security. Unequal access to security among main researchers, co-researchers and research participants is a largely neglected aspect of disaster studies.

Researchers are often unable to access the places where disasters have occurred, resulting in the development of collaborative work with other actors or the implementation of remote research. The COVID-19 pandemic has come to reinforce remote research. In this paper we reviewed some ethical considerations of remote research and how to address them.

As this article highlighted, disasters and conflict settings can be highly dynamic, requiring us to rethink how we design, apply, adapt and communicate the ethical dimensions of our research work on a day-to-day basis.

This article has sought to contribute to the collection of experience that can build on collective and collaborative knowledge on the ethics of disaster studies. Further research is necessary to determine how ethical considerations may vary between disciplines present in the study of disasters, or according to different methods or specific contexts. Also, to determine how the ethical aspects of research can be considered in the localisation and decolonization agendas of disaster studies or added to the curricula of programs that teach about disasters. Furthermore, engaging with these matters is imperative for everyone in the field. As Fujii (2012, p. 722) eloquently puts it:

> If scholars and graduate students are uncomfortable with navigating the many ethical challenges that arise when conducting research with human beings, we must remind ourselves that to enter another's world as a researcher is a privilege, not a right. Wrestling with ethical dilemmas is the price we pay for the privileges we enjoy. It is a responsibility, not a choice, and, when taken seriously, it may be one of the most important benefits we have to offer those who make our work possible.

Notes

1. "Majority world" and "Minority world" are terms increasingly used in place of terms such as "developing/developed" countries, the "west/rest" division, or the geopolitical "global south/north" approach. While these terms mostly refer to countries, they also recognize that inside each country, it is possible to find people who represent the minority of the world, commonly characterized with high levels of income and formal education.
2. Available at https://ihsa.info/security-guidelines-for-field-research-in-complex-remote-and-hazardous-places/.
3. Although we use the term "fieldwork" and it is mentioned in the Guidelines, we are aware of the debates pointing to the colonial roots of the term, seeking to represent external, far away, and exotic places, creating a sense of otherness (see Ferguson and Gupta, 1997; Gefou-Madinaou, 1993; Nordstrom and Robben, 1995; Pole, 2005; Said, 1989). Alternatively, is possible to use the concept *in situ* research, which is Latin for "on site".
4. We thank the reviewers who provided important feedback on this section and the article in general.

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