

Ethics of Educational Research in Crisis-Affected Environments¹

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Summary

This article provides an outline of ethical dilemmas while conducting research in conflict-affected and crisis settings. We contend that the growing portfolio of research in education in emergencies disproportionately underplays concerns about underpinning ethical sensitivities and needs for researchers' professional development.

Keywords

Research Ethics, Education and Conflict, Humanitarianism, Accountability

Introduction

Conducting research in conflict- or disaster-affected settings poses major ethical and methodological challenges relating to the vulnerability of both participants and researchers. Concerns have been raised that research participants in crisis-affected environments may experience distress caused by repeated requests to take part in research studies (Collogan, Tuma, Dolan-Sewell, Borja & Fleischman, 2004) or that research interviews can expose participants to the risk of 're-traumatisation' (Newman & Kaloupek, 2004). In all cases, participants in crisis contexts bear the effects of trauma and anxiety, which may have had debilitating effects on their decision-making capacity (Collogan et al., 2004) or on their ability to consent to research involvement (Alderson & Morrow, 2014). Additional ethical issues relate to participants' competence to consent to research involvement due to their age or other circumstantial factors (Furey & Kay, 2010). Particularly, when children are involved in humanitarian education research, these tensions become more complex and ethically unsettling. Children's participation in research activities can potentially expose them to physical and psychosocial risks given their experience of violence or disaster as well as the usually adverse conditions of living in crisis. In addition, researchers without the required knowledge and understanding of ethical complexities may inadvertently use what may be considered intrusive, exploitative, and coercive approaches while discussing sensitive issues with children in crisis-affected contexts. Although quality research is vital to enhance the delivery of life-saving interventions, the protection of human subjects should be the highest ethical priority to mitigate security risks and the general volatility of events in humanitarian settings (Wood, 2006).

Official approval by an appropriate research ethics committee is widely recognised as central to any rigorous field research involving human subjects and is commissioned within academic settings (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001). With such mechanisms, even though safety, confidentiality, and anonymity of the research participants are an integral part of the ethical review, the attention is primarily on institutional safeguarding (e.g. risk of reputational damage, staff safety, and liability

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concerns). Conventional research methodologies that are practised in stable contexts often inadequately inform understandings of ethical dilemmas and field sensitivities in crisis contexts. Additionally, field research conducted by humanitarian organisations and agencies may not always prioritise ethical accountability due to the urgency of rapid response and immediate needs of the affected populations. Informed consent, balancing burdens and benefits, participant selection, and potential coercion are some of the most common issues humanitarian researchers may face during fieldwork (O'Mathuna, 2009). This implies the need for adequate training of field teams in research methods and close collaboration with experts to support the design, implementation, and analysis of research (Ford, Mills, Zachariah & Upshur 2009). Nevertheless, the limited access to safeguard protocols and the lack of clear guidelines on ethical obligations may only serve to increase risks of potential harm to research participants, to the safety of researchers, and to the funder's reputation (Ford et al., 2009).

Conducting educational research in conflict and protracted crises is challenging in terms of gaining access to the field, safety of researchers and research participants, and ethical dilemmas about documenting traumatic experiences of crisis-affected people. This paper aims to explore the key issues educational researchers face during data collection activities in crisis-affected environments, particularly the tensions between their role in safeguarding research participants and their level (or lack thereof) of professional development about how to carry out ethical research in humanitarian contexts. We discuss various constraints that educational researchers experience while working in complex, remote, and hazardous places, marred by insecurity, financial limitations, and tight timeframes. These pressures may put participants' welfare at stake amid the desperate need to acquire empirical evidence to inform humanitarian work. Finally, we highlight the important role of local researchers in shaping the research agenda and methodological approaches in crisis-affected settings.

Barriers to Ethical Research in Unstable Settings

Humanitarian agencies are increasingly engaged in research in conflict-affected settings, in recognition of the need for more robust evidence to inform advocacy, humanitarian policies, and delivery of assistance, including education. However, international organisations engaging with research consultants do not always have adequate security measures in place to ensure their safety in the field (Gallagher, Haywood, Jones & Milne, 2010). Where the focus is on efficiency and cost-effectiveness, research contracts may be awarded to researchers who may not be adequately trained in terms of conducting appropriate ethical appraisal of research studies in crisis settings. The responsibility to ensure high ethical standards in humanitarian research is often not perceived as being part of agencies' core mandates (Ford et al., 2009). Yet, researchers may be required to enter areas that are physically dangerous, politically unstable, or where outbreaks of contagious diseases have occurred.

While operating in remote, unstable settings, they might not always have the opportunity to report emerging research issues to their immediate supervisors, and even when they manage to do so, they might not receive prompt feedback. In certain instances, they may feel under pressure to engage in what may be regarded as ethically unsettling decision-making about the research approach and data collection tools in order to respond to time constraints. For instance, failing to provide respondents with sufficient time, resources, and tailored support to enable them to participate in research may jeopardise their meaningful participation. Moreover, inexperienced investigators dealing with sensitive topics may expose participants to risk of physical harm, stigma, and reprisal during or after data collection activities, particularly when operating within short time frames. Thus, researchers' inadequate professional conduct may contravene power dynamics in the context of their research (Goodhand, 2000), exposing themselves, research participants, and the entire educational community to unintended harm.

Finally, educational researchers may often go through extended periods of loneliness while carrying out field research and adjusting to new cultural settings. They are likely to experience emotional challenges, including fear and pity observing the effects of humanitarian crises on affected populations (Wood, 2006). The isolation experienced in conflict and emergency environments may sometimes affect researchers' ability to maintain the confidentiality of their sources (Jacobsen and Landau, 2003). They may also feel stressed and pressured to cope with tight deadlines and negotiate with donors' directions towards specific procedures and outcomes measures, which may or may not be aligned with the actual needs, aspirations, and perspectives of aid recipients (Stockton, 2006).

The literature does not provide clear indications on how to manage researchers' security and welfare, other than developing a rigorous understanding of the context, culture, and the actual risks facing the researcher and the research community (Goodhand, 2000). Risk and vulnerability assessments, *inter alia*, are not always sufficient measures and must be coupled with previous professional experiences in conflict and emergency environments. While it would be unethical to involve inexperienced researchers independently in humanitarian contexts, continuing professional development and critical awareness of specific harms and benefits are crucial for even experienced researchers before their involvement in new projects in emergencies (Goodhand, 2000).

National representatives, including civil or military authorities, may provide relevant contributions to field research. Being knowledgeable of the context and its complexities, local actors may also help researchers to identify relevant issues, which are worth exploring. Continuous coordination with the Ministry of Education may help researchers gain access to crisis-affected educational settings; in some particularly volatile contexts, it would be counter-productive to undertake fieldwork without the Ministry's approval and support. However, it is also important to recognise that state authorities may sometimes be hostile to the population affected by crisis for various reasons such as political, religious, and ethnic differences. In any case, the establishment of carefully selected in-country research teams can help researchers to better understand local contexts and ethical practices, and to pilot research tools. Such collaboration can benefit research by helping to avoid inadvertent cultural faux pas which may offend local communities (O'Mathuna, 2009).

Despite the solidarity advantage of collaboration between international and local researchers, just like anyone else, 'insider' researchers may represent confirming or contradictory positions about the political dimensions of the crisis. Another risk of being too dependent on local researchers is selection of particular research sites and communities based on their personal affiliations, which can potentially exclude diverse voices in the study. Though complete avoidance of this scenario may be difficult, it is important to maintain neutrality and rigour to a maximum level through honest reporting about researchers' positionalities, preconceptions, and biases. Finally, the involvement of local researchers may also help 'outsider' researchers to gain insights into local history, cultural, and social dynamics through conversations and team work as well as build trust with the participants and secure informed consent in a reasonably short time frame. At the same time, we argue that the presence of 'outsider' researchers may contribute to identifying key concerns independently, while challenging some cultural assumptions and socio-political prejudices held by 'insider' researchers.

Conclusion

Personal integrity, honesty, and methodological rigour are essential components of quality research in humanitarian settings. Despite the growing body of research that explores the educational challenges in crisis contexts, considerable gaps remain in knowledge about how to assess and mitigate research risks and maintain high ethical standards while conducting research in these situations. There is an urgent need to scale up opportunities for professional development of researchers who work in crisis contexts. As with any area of research involving human participants, educational research in

humanitarian settings should also be conducted with methodological rigour, following high ethical standards. As there is a growing involvement of independent consultants conducting research in conflict and crisis settings, there is inadequate vetting of ethical procedures concerning research studies on emergency education. It is therefore essential that commissioning agencies establish a mechanism for independent ethical appraisal of all contracted research, and that individual researchers demonstrate clearly how relevant ethical guidelines were followed in the research. Finally, adequate training on research procedures can help researchers anticipate and address various dilemmas but ultimately ethical research relies on researchers' experience, judgment, and interpretations of complex situations (Wood, 2006). It is through this self-reflection process that educational researchers should strictly adopt high ethical standards and non-harmful field strategies while carrying out research in crisis-affected environments.

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