COVID-19 and Conflict Research Spaces

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ABSTRACT The intersection of conflict research and research ethics is already a complex and fraught one, particularly in exchanges between researchers from the Global North and researched communities from the Global South. There are many examples (and years) of exploitation, fraud, and violence in these exchanges, and more recent scholarship on fieldwork ethics has established new norms of reciprocal exchange rather than exploitation in these relationships. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, asymmetric access to health care, and global vaccine inequality has added yet another layer of complexity here. How do we continue move forward with the push to make our research exchanges ethical while dealing with the additional complexity of the pandemic? In this article, I reflect on the ethics of these exchanges and concerns around security for interlocutors in replacing in person fieldwork with virtual fieldwork, drawing from examples of my own doctoral dissertation research in the Pacific region of Colombia, which was interrupted by the outbreak of COVID-19. In this article, I describe how a turn to the digital archives helped mitigate additional ethical and security concerns that arose as a result of the pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

The intersection of conflict research and research ethics is already a complex and fraught one, particularly in exchanges between researchers from the Global North and communities from the Global South. There are many examples (and years) of exploitation, fraud, and violence in these exchanges, and more recent scholarship on fieldwork ethics has moved to establish new norms of reciprocal exchange rather than exploitation in these relationships (Hancock 2019). However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, asymmetric access to health care, and global vaccine inequality has added yet another layer of complexity. How do we continue move forward with the push to make our research exchanges ethical while dealing with the additional complexity of the pandemic and its legacy?

In this article, I discuss some of the long-standing issues between conflict research, research ethics, and fieldwork ethics, highlighting my own experiences with these issues within the context of my doctoral fieldwork research. I then touch on the layer of complexity added to these issues by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was compounded, particularly for early-career scholars, by the actions of university systems and funding bodies. I further probe the ways that the pandemic produced unexpected security situations in my field work sites in Colombia, which forced me to make changes in my dissertation plan. Here, ethics around protecting the security of my interlocutors meant that I made a shift to the archives to complete the project. In this article, I reflect on the ethics of these exchanges and concerns around security and well-being for interlocutors in replacing in-person fieldwork with virtual fieldwork, drawing from examples of my own doctoral dissertation research in the Pacific region of Colombia, which was interrupted by the outbreak of COVID-19.

In this article, I describe the challenges of changing a doctoral project amidst rapidly shifting contexts as well as additional layers of ethical and security concerns when it came to doing conflict research during the pandemic. I also discuss how my turn to the digital archives created new theoretical and epistemological possibilities not only within a particular case study or empirical chapter but throughout the whole project. It also allowed me to mitigate safety concerns while continuing to be able to center the voice and strategy of communities I worked with in some ways, even when I could not directly communicate with them. However, I also stress that these archives were not a replacement for fieldwork—they resulted in a different project than I originally set out to complete.

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CONFLICT RESEARCH, COVID-19, AND RESEARCH ETHICS

Unfortunately, there is a long and, in some cases, infamous, history of the ways that researchers from the Global North have perpetrated harm and violence against the communities from the Global South that they study or research. Some of these contexts are obvious examples of harm and violence, including in the ways that communities are forced to translate their experiences of violence to make organizations from the Global North aware of problems or the potential for harm (Gillooly 2021). But more insidiously, there is a *norm* in social science research that often does not credit the communities through the study of which some scholars, most often from institutions in the Global North, have acquired prestige and built careers. Meanwhile, the lived realities and experiences of these communities remain very much the same, or those relationships are abandoned once the book project, thesis, or article of said researchers are finished. We are beginning to see a shift in this, for example, some social sciences scholars now list communities as coauthors on work (Bouka 2018; Hancock 2019) but there is still much to contend with, and such efforts have very often been meant with pushback from academic hierarchy (Ponomariov and Boardman 2016). Is it enough? How do we even engage with this conceptualization of what "enough" might be?

In conducting the fieldwork that I had begun in 2017 for my doctoral dissertation research in Colombia, I had already grappled with questions of ethical exchange between myself and the communities I worked alongside. Within the larger hierarchy of academia, I felt relatively powerless at the time, as many doctoral students do. But within the context of my fieldwork, I was a white woman from a very wealthy country, with a powerful passport (the United States) and with the backing of a wealthy and well-recognized university system. In comparison to some (but not all) of the communities and social leaders I was working alongside, I had more political access and clout with their own political representatives than they did.

These communities had welcomed me into their spaces and shared their time, knowledge, and experiences with me. Without getting too much into the larger systems and dynamics of exploitation, like the fact that many of them had been displaced from their land by multinational development firms based in or affiliated with the United States or that their families had been torn apart by the rhetoric and realities of the War on Drugs, a foreign policy strategy driven also from the United States, I understood that I needed to give something in return for their generosity, especially considering the fact that their context and history makes it very difficult for them to trust outsiders. I did things that I felt were responsibly within my skill set to offer: I proof-read grant applications, translated others into English, and worked on political accompaniment projects with some communities and organizations. This is not to say that this was enough, as I mention earlier. But they were conditions of reciprocal exchange that I and community members I worked with discussed and decided on together.

Working in contexts of uneven power dynamics is already complex. Furthermore, the academic system, and particularly the Institutional Review Board (IRB), is often ill-suited to providing social science researchers with the guidance on how to avoid perpetrating harm in contexts of social-science-based conflict research. Existing concerns in the conflict research field have always included potential harm and security issues for both researchers and their interlocutors (concerns for both physical safety and potential retraumatization), questions around the extraction of knowledge between scholars and communities, and the use of local researchers on contracts for larger-scale fieldwork projects (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; J. Krause 2021; Sultana 2007). These concerns and debates have been made even more complex by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and its legacy (P. Krause et al. 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, essentially all fieldwork and ethnography suddenly stopped. In response, many scholars attempted to adapt to a new reality. A wider conversation around crowdsourced digital ethnography resources, transitioning or changing large scale-research projects, and the use of "local" research assistants as contract workers for fieldwork projects was ongoing (Bond, Lake, and Parkinson 2020; Eggeling 2023; Fosu 2024; MacLean et al. 2020). Still other conversations, particularly in the conflict research sphere, where my work was located, was focused on the unintended consequences that the outbreak of COVID-19 would have on already-fraught contexts and concerns over new intersections of vulnerability as well as rapidly shifting security changes (Baczko and Dorronsoro 2020; Farfán-Méndez and Vizcarra 2024; Tironi and Kelly 2020).[1] These thoughtful conversations around ethics in conflict research, from a variety of methodological viewpoints, but most concentrated in considerations of fieldwork in conflict research and ethnography more generally, is perhaps one of the most positive outcomes from the COVID-19 outbreak.

But at the same time, reactions from within the social science research, fieldwork, and conflict studies communities to the COVID-19 outbreak revealed just how much farther we have to go in constructing ethnical and reciprocal research relationships between the Global North and the Global South (Rudling 2021). Researchers from the Global North were evacuated by elite universities or their embassies, others were told to get on the first flight home by those same institutions, and others were told that if they did not leave field sites immediately, their university would pull their health insurance coverage. The Fulbright research program was criticized for its handling of evacuations and putting grant winners in precarious situations (Weiland 2021). It is becoming increasingly clear that this has had clearer consequences for groups of people that were already more vulnerable, particularly women at an early career stage (Ali and Ullah 2021; Baron Cadloff 2022). However, researchers from the Global North such as myself *could, and, in fact were told, that they must* leave the less safe, "othered" sites of field work (Scauso et al. 2020). Our interlocutors, in most cases, could not, despite the fact that they were often at far more risk.

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to reveal even wider gulfs in the complexities of these relationships between researchers and communities. In some communities, food shortages from global shutdowns and government absence caused panic and suffering in countries such as Bangladesh, Colombia, Ghana, Kenya, and some regions of the United States (Egger et al. 2021; Gundersen et al. 2021). In others, armed groups that controlled territory used COVID-19 to impose harsher lock down measures than those implemented by any government: leave your house and you die (Sanchez Parra 2021). As the spread of COVID-19 worsened around the world, many of us saw the unforeseen security consequences of that spread as well, such as increases in state surveillance and the digitalization of suffering, including, but not limited to, parts of Africa and Latin America

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(Mwambari, Purdeková, and Bisoka 2022; Okech, Mwambari, and Olonisakin 2020).

ETHICS AND SECURITY OF CONFLICT RESEARCH DURING COVID-19

As time wore on, more issues arose linked to the spread of COVID-19. As lock-down measures continued, universities seemed unwilling to give doctoral students (guaranteed funded) extensions—so for many of us, the clock was still on. How were we to finish qualitative, fieldwork-based, or ethnographical projects when we were not allowed to leave our houses, let alone go to our field sites? Here, I describe the dual issues I have attempted to elucidate thus far in this article: (1) the security consequences that my interlocutors were dealing with as a result of pandemic lockdowns and consequently how I changed my project and (2) how I was to conduct this project in a way that was ethical with the added complexities of COVID-19 in Colombia.

Here I begin with a description of the security consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak and government measures in Colombia. The Colombian government was fairly quick to react when the first cases of COVID-19, introduced by travelers returning from Western Europe, were identified (Reuters 2020). Regional lock downs, quarantines, and curfews were put in place and extended repeatedly, particularly as cases increased in large cities like Bogotá (Villegas Arias 2020). Conversely, multinational companies continued extractive projects in Indigenous territory in April 2020, as the rest of the country was essentially shut down (Fernández, Scauso, and Stavrevska 2022).

Within this context and my own participation in strict lock down in Bogotá, I began to hear troubling news from some of my interlocutors on the Pacific Coast. Armed groups were taking the opportunity offered by government lock down measures to impose even stricter ones and, in other cases, go through the homes and cell phones of community members to monitor what they were up to and who they had been talking to on the popular and widely used messaging application Whatsapp (Human Rights Watch 2020).[2] The inability to leave led to several intersecting and overlapping consequences for my interlocutors. Loss of income for many who worked in the informal economy led to an increase in food insecurity, many did not have reliable internet access at home or access to mobile data, and there was an increase in targeted threats and killings by armed groups in the regions where I worked. By May 2020, I decided that I could finish my bureaucratic and government interviews virtually but that other than checking in on my interlocutors in communities in the Pacific, I would not be able to do any more interviews and should keep my contact with them to a minimum to avoid getting them in trouble by having a record of talking to a foreign researcher in their phone. The IRB generally does not address how to handle these rapidly shifting and unforeseen situations, even with an initial data management plan.

SHIFTING TO THE DIGITAL ARCHIVES

How would I be able to finish this dissertation, which was supposedly featuring these communities, if I could not even speak with them? Obviously, the dissertation I finished was not the dissertation I set out to write, but what was doable (Dodez 2021). However, a conversation with Marino Córdoba, the president and founder of the National Association for Displaced Afro-Colombians (AFRODES), shifted my perspective. He generously offered me access to the digital media archives of AFRODES, saying that "something in there might help." This exchange was, in part, the result of a relationship that AFRODES, as an organization, and I had built over years (Jiménez Arrobo and Beltrán Conejo 2021).

These digital archives contained over 1,000 pages of news articles and press releases featuring AFRODES and their work going nearly two decades back. From this rich archival text, I was able to see a clear delineation of a strategy by AFRODES to create a network of transnational solidarity since its inception. I found lists of United States Congress members who had voted to add human rights provisions to military aid packages to Colombia, voted against a development palm oil project that had ties to paramilitary groups, and itineraries of Congress members who had not only visited Colombia but specifically the Pacific region, such as Representative Hank Johnson, primarily due to the lobbying of AFRODES and the transnational solidarity they had developed within the United States. I also found connections between AFRODES and the Congress of Independent Unions, one of the biggest labor union confederations in the world. This rich and exciting archival text, as well as the interviews of Congress members and other international organization staff that followed it, turned into what may be my favorite dissertation chapter.

A turn to the digital archives presented (in part) a solution to the ethical constraints that I was struggling with due to rapidly changed security landscapes. Using these archives allowed me to continue to focus on the communities I had been working with: they showed me shifts around political and ethnic consciousness raising in Colombia and created space for a shift in my research question that endured across the larger research project. This turn to the digital archives, in conjunction with supplementary interviews, allowed me to demonstrate the agency of particular Afro-Colombian activists and organizations as they used their international and transnational relationships of solidarity to create political leverage with their own national government. This understanding, deepened by the turn to and new focus on the archives, had epistemological implications for my project on peacebuilding and transitional justice—understanding this strategy led me to also theoretically distance the state in my project. This opened new questions for me: in the chapter, I explore questions concerning international peacebuilding aid, the differences between advocacy and solidarity, and the influence that they have on constructing international or transnational ties of political consciousness. It also allowed me to investigate new conceptualizations of transnationalization and how it happens.

In a concise example, after over three years of lobbying efforts spearheaded by AFRODES and Consejo Nacional de Paz Afrocolombiano (CONPA), the Colombian government agreed to allow ethnic inclusion in the 2016 peace accords between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The subcommittee was made up by Black and Indigenous leaders who put together Chapter 6 of the 2016 peace accords, known as the "Ethnic Chapter." In particular, the text of the Ethnic Chapter covered the implementation of the agreement, with a particular focus on territorial and ethnic perspectives, also known as "ethnic mainstreaming"; specific and tangible protections of rights and a priority for ethnic autonomy in their ancestral territories; and mechanisms for direct participation and prior consultation with ethnic communities throughout

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implementation (Góngora-Mera 2019). AFRODES successfully mobilized transnational networks of solidarity based on shared ethnic identity to successfully lobby for their inclusion in the peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC, the process of which I was able to track through the archives.

In summary, my turn to the archives, based on the security and ethical constraints present as a result of COVID-19, offered new theoretical considerations that resulted in original and interesting research findings while simultaneously allowing me to continue centering the communities with whom I worked or had planned to work with in some way. It mitigated the additional layers of concerns that the COVID-19 pandemic created while allowing me as a doctoral candidate to work with the constraints of the system I existed within. However, as is the case with *all* archives, these only show a part of the story, the work, and the larger complexity that different activists they themselves were working in. Although the archives provided a valuable perspective that I had been missing in my work thus far, they were not a replacement for fieldwork. Using existing data meant accepting a fundamental change in my project as a whole and understanding that there are some perspectives that are missing.

CONCLUSION

My identity as a researcher throughout my doctoral program had always been closely tied to doing fieldwork. The COVID-19 outbreak and the widening gap of insecurity and inequality it presented despite initial calls of the virus being "the great equalizer" forced me to reevaluate that identity within the context of the framework of fieldwork ethics I held so dearly (Fernández, Scauso, and Stavrevska 2022; Mein 2020). Contexts of security and violence have shifted dramatically in ways that may never have happened were it not for COVID-19. Some field sites that were once accessible now are not and may not be for years to come (Hussain 2021).

As we navigate a world that has been irreversibly changed over the last three years or so, we must also reevaluate the way we do research, fieldwork, and the way we construct those research relationships (Rudling 2021). Doctoral researchers are often sent into the field with little training on fieldwork ethics, research ethics, or any type of discussion on how to not do harm to others. They are often allowed to do research in semiactive or active conflict zones without training on how to keep themselves safe, let alone how to do research justly.[3] This is a failure on the part of the discipline. Scholar-activism has typically been isolated by the field of political science, deemed too subjective, not rigorous enough, or not generalizable. Perhaps one of the positive outcomes of COVID-19 can be our reevaluation of that stance as a discipline—scholar-activism could be a different way to construct transnational solidarity such that while we win awards and our careers grow based on our research of communities at the margin, their lived realities improve as well rather than staying the same (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020).

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues of conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. For example, one of the field sites I had originally chosen for my doctoral project is still no longer accessible for the type of project and questions my work was based due to how patterns of control of nonstate armed actors shifted as a result of security policies during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Private communication of the author, May 2020.
3. This is beginning to change—for example, Milli Lake and Sarah E. Parkinson began the Advancing Research on Conflict Consortium (ARC) at the London School of Economics, which offers doctoral researchers resources on how to conduct fieldwork in violent areas, but this resource is an exception rather than the rule.

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