THE ETHICAL CHALLENGES OF FIELD RESEARCH IN THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

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The Syrian refugee crisis has displaced more people than any conflict since the Second World War and garnered a great deal of attention among researchers from numerous disciplines. In political science, scholars have conducted field research around the crisis on a wide range of topics including the dynamics of activism[1] and protest[2] within[3] and outside[4] of Syria; host community sentiments[5,6] and behavior[7] toward Syrians; the response of host states;[8] Syrian refugees' challenges and responses, including strategies of service access[9] and Syrian community problem-solving;[10] consequences[11] and challenges[12] of the large-scale immigration of Syrians; and Syrians' attitudes,[13] framing,[14] perceptions,[15] and narration[16] of the conflict.

The emerging body of research is driven not only by the topic's pressing importance, but also by the often-unexamined motivator of the accessibility of research participants, which is largely due to their vulnerability and limited mobility. Researchers' goals are often feasible with Syrian refugees, more so than with alternative participant populations, because many Syrians are geographically concentrated, are registered in humanitarian databases, and have grown acclimated to participation in data collection by humanitarian NGOs. This relative ease of access makes research on Syrians practically easier and also more ethically fraught. In this piece, we would like to take a step back to look at the particular ways research on displaced Syrians presents distinct ethical

and research dilemmas to which political scientists must pay closer attention. While this article is by no means an exhaustive review of the concerns and challenges political scientists face in conducting research on Syrian refugees, we seek to discuss the most pressing issues researchers headed to the field should consider and advisors with graduate students conducting fieldwork should be aware of.

WHY DO RESEARCHERS HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO REFUGEES?

In this article, we build on the work of other political scientists who have focused on ethics of participant safety and confidentiality, and data security, particularly in non-democratic or fragile contexts and with vulnerable communities.[17] Moving beyond the "do no harm" principles that form the foundation of much of institutional ethical commitments, research on refugees and forced migrants must confront what Jacobsen and Landau call the "dual imperative": namely, satisfying the demands and expectations of your academic discipline, while also producing knowledge that improves policy and advances the interests of refugees.[18] The balance that scholars strike between the two imperatives varies but no scholarship on displaced Syrians in political science can disregard either objective.

Two factors make the ethical challenges of field research in refugee crises particularly fraught, both of which are pressing in the contexts within which Syrian refugees find themselves today. First, the challenges

of ethical research (doing no harm) are especially daunting because researchers intervene in the lives of people whose fates are being actively negotiated, and often, in ways that cannot be wholly anticipated. As Knott notes, based on her experience conducting field research in Crimea, this is especially true in dynamic and unpredictable contexts where the political sensitivity of particular issues can change rapidly and in ways that make it more challenging to know what is safe to collect and publish.[19]

Second, beyond simply avoiding doing harm, researchers working in refugee crises must confront the unsettling fact that we benefit from others' suffering; even when we have done nothing to cause or exacerbate that hardship, we nonetheless profit from it. Whatever motivations drive us to conduct fieldwork, we take the opportunity that refugee crises provide to benefit professionally, and thereby financially. The link between other people's misfortune and our own welfare puts a responsibility on us to shape our projects in ways that not only contribute to social science, but also directly or indirectly promote refugees' well-being.

We separate the ethical challenges of field research in refugee crises into three categories, based on different stages of the "life cycle" of research projects. For the purposes of the article, we find this simplification of the research process useful, although we recognize that these stages overlap and interact in practice. First, we discuss ethical implications of how scholars formulate research questions. Second, we consider the conduct of research, focusing particularly, but not exclusively, on field methods. Third, we look at the ethical challenges tied to writing and disseminating findings. Although a wealth of ethics discussions focuses on research conduct, less work has focused on writing and dissemination, and the ethical implications involved in formulating and developing research questions are often ignored altogether.

ETHICS OF FRAMING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Political scientists are well aware that the "cases we choose affect the answers we get,"[20] but have given less consideration to how the questions we choose affect the ethical implications of our work. Questions framed to engage debates within the academic literature may be misleading or even have actively harmful effects in a context such as research on Syrian refugees. This comes to bear in two main ways.

First, scholarship often shapes the politics of the issues it addresses, and uncritical formulation of research questions may perpetuate or reinforce harmful discourses and frames for interpreting and designing policy. In the context of the Syrian refugee crisis, scholars must take seriously how Syrians themselves explain and understand their conflict and ensuing displacement. For instance, if a scholar is interested in whether or how sectarian frames have affected the conflict, it is important to address how even the framing of the project may serve to perpetuate a narrative of the conflict promoted by the Syrian regime itself, and rejected, if not actively resisted, by many civilians and activists.

Second, in defining subjects of inquiry, researchers need to be mindful to not adopt and reproduce policy categories, such as that of refugee, without reflecting on who and what they elide or obscure. An uncritical use of the category of "refugees" in place of more precise language, such as "Syrians" or even "Syrian refugees," risks perpetuating prejudiced and harmful images of refugees as a homogeneous mass, undifferentiated by diverse experiences and frames for viewing their lives. Emphasizing the "refugee-ness" of Syrians may obscure other axes of identity, such as distinctions of class, urban/rural background, gender, and sexuality, that affect how Syrians experience displacement.

In parallel to how the general term "refugee" can elide the diversity and humanity of people it refers to, the terminology may ignore that Syrian refugees are

often hosted within communities that have pre-existing displaced populations—most prominently but not exclusively Palestinian refugees.[21] For example, a study that focuses on a well-defined population of Syrians in Lebanon should acknowledge that it does not address all refugees in Lebanon, because it does not include the Palestinians, Iraqis, or other displaced groups in the country. This is not to say that one cannot study Syrian refugees without also studying these other groups, but it is important to keep in mind that research on one group, hopefully in pursuit of improving those people's situation, may have adverse consequences for other groups if their existence or concerns are supplanted.

ETHICS OF CONDUCTING FIELD RESEARCH

The conduct of field research generally receives the most attention from institutional ethics reviews and guides on research ethics. First and foremost, scholars should only include refugees as research participants if the research questions focus on institutions and conditions specifically affecting refugees or programs and policy intended to improve the health and well-being of refugees. A useful parallel for considering the need to include refugees as research participants can be found in ethical guidelines for research with prisoners.[22] Many refugees face numerous forms of economic, social, and legal vulnerability that compromise their ability to make informed voluntary decisions to participate in research. When a researcher arrives, even with their best attempts to disclose their intentions and affiliations, they bring with them forms of social and institutional power. For people facing severe hardship, for whom humanitarian aid is a critical source of income, if they believe that there is even a small chance that refusing to participate will adversely affect their aid benefits, they may not be able to offer meaningful consent for a research project. For these reasons, it is critical that the *relative ease of access* to refugees not be taken as *sufficient justification of research* with refugees.

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In some situations, consent may require repeated conversations to ensure people have sufficient freedom to refuse participation, which is problematic when people with power over potential participants' well-being are present. It is common for researchers' first interactions with Syrians to be mediated through contacts. The first meeting between a researcher and potential participant may occur in the presence of authorities such as staffers from NGOs or international organizations, or a local figure like a camp boss. Any consent given in these initial meetings should be considered provisional, and data collected in these interactions should be minimal and non-sensitive. Meaningful consent should then be obtained in a follow-up meeting or interview, where Syrian participants have a greater ability to refuse without concern for how doing so might affect their relationship with relevant authorities.

None of these concerns implies that refugees' agency in this process should be sidelined. Trusting participants' agency and knowledge about their situation also requires that researchers treat participants as autonomous individuals who understand and can actively engage with discussions around consent. In many cases, Syrians *want* to tell their stories and are aware of what particular sets of questions or interventions they would like to participate in and how. As Malkki notes, it is critical that refugees not be reduced to pure victims unable to tell their own stories—what she terms "speechless emissaries"—who must have their stories told for them, whether by humanitarian actors or supposed refugee experts.[23]

Research in refugee crises also poses intersecting challenges for anonymity and the protection of research subjects, particularly because refugees are often embedded within large humanitarian and security infrastructures. This is undeniably the case with the Syrian refugee crisis, where a wide array of

actors, including local authorities, humanitarian organizations, security and intelligence services, and national governments, are involved in the governance and control of displaced Syrian populations. Researchers need to be mindful of how their presence in a particular locality or settlement is likely to be monitored by local authorities, security services, and potentially local informants or undercover intelligence agents. Although it cannot be confirmed, the authors' fieldwork suggested that Syrian agents keep tabs on refugee organizing in Lebanon. Moreover, there is suggestive evidence that Syrian agents seem to work in tandem with some Lebanese authorities. While the history and presence of the Syrian intelligence services is more marked in Lebanon than in Jordan or Turkey, it is likely that similar dynamics are at work in other host contexts.

ETHICS OF DISSEMINATION

Finally, ethical concerns and challenges remain even as a researcher concludes a project's primary fieldwork. As others have noted, the increased use of technology in the modern field site[24] means that scholars must be attentive to the ways in which their data is vulnerable to access and subpoena[25] by state and other authorities even after they have completed data collection. Second, sustained contact with participants over social media or electronic communication platforms can compromise participant anonymity and even confidentiality when the number of participants within a certain area is relatively small.[26]

This is tied to a broader question of how to balance anonymity against the needs for descriptive richness and analytic transparency in empirical work. The researcher must paint a picture of the research site with sufficient detail to be analytically and descriptively compelling by providing, for instance, the locality's size, demographic makeup, main economic activity, dominant social and political actors, and proximity to the capital. Standard anonymization procedures would require omitting or

changing the names of the locality and research participants. When using quantitative data, a researcher should post replication data online after publication, with all rows stripped of information that directly identifies respondents, but leaving in place a wealth of information about each respondent necessary for replicating the analysis and assessing its rigor.

In both of these scenarios, readers from outside the context, such as academics in Western institutions, will unlikely be able to deduce the identity of research participants. However, exactly those actors from whom researchers seek to protect participants, such as local intelligence agencies, may often have both the greatest incentive and ability to de-anonymize participants, particularly in the case of qualitative analysis.[27] This leaves open the question of how to balance the protection of respondent anonymity with the requirements of transparency and descriptive analysis. Researchers must acknowledge that whatever they choose to publish cannot be guaranteed to stay anonymous, and therefore take responsibility for considering risks of de-anonymization when choosing what to publish and disseminate.

As junior scholars engaged in the production of knowledge on the Syrian refugee crisis, we face these challenges within our own work and hope that we have been able to strike an appropriate balance between our commitments to Syrians, as our research participants and as a group whose collective narrative we participate in writing, and our desire to contribute to a field of scholarship. In that respect, we hope to engage more political scientists in thinking through these challenges and ensuring that the body of work we are collectively pursuing contributes to social science, minimizes risk and harm caused by research, and contributes to better programming and policy responses to the refugee crisis.

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