Research Ethics and Safety Handout

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Introduction

- ➢ This handout outlines a few selected tips and hints regarding research ethics and safety in social science fieldwork.
- ➢ The highlights are a guide to data protection and a short bibliography with relevant literature for further reading. I also note open questions and dilemmas that can arise in the field. The researcher should be aware of and prepare for them but their resolution depends on the local context and might vary (Cramer et al., 2011). Thomson (2009) provides a good synthesis of the various ways researchers dealt with ethical dilemmas.
- ➢ In cases of doubt, always contact your superior.
- ➢ The topic is not of any less relevance in a project on agrarian change. As Cramer et al. (2016, p. 155) write: "all those interested in field research, regardless of the topic, would benefit from engaging with the burgeoning literature on the methodological challenges of research in contexts affected by violence. Because research is not about violence does not mean that physical risks to researchers and research interviewees will not arise from the interaction between research and local political economies".

Data protection

Data protection is crucial to social science research in order to guarantee the confidentiality of our data and the participants' anonymity. It is therefore linked to research ethics and safety. Here are some tips and measures you can take to make sure your data are secure (check out the hyperlinks to learn how it is done):

- ➢ **Passwords**: Obviously, all your devices should be password protected by a safe [password](hence not "1234"), for which you can also use a password manager that will help you remember it.

➢ **Two-factor authentication**: This adds a second step in addition to your password, for example you may receive a text code when logging into your online accounts from another computer. See here how it is done. In Gmail for example, you can also download a list of ten backup codes to use when you are away from cell coverage (Koopman, 2017).

➢ **Internal hard drive**: Make sure you encrypt the internal hard drive of your computer itself (for example, in case your laptop gets stolen). Windows uses "device encryption" and Mac uses "FileVault", which you can activate both in your system settings.

➢ **External hard drives**: Also store and share our data on many external drives (from small USB disks to large back-up drives). They should also be encrypted. For this, the drive needs to be formatted in a specific way. Move all your data somewhere else temporarily as reformatting will erase the disk's content! Also inform yourself online about which format to choose since some are not compatible with other operating systems (see here for windows and here for mac).

➢ **Storage**:
   o When in the field upload your pictures and recordings as soon as possible on your encrypted laptop and encrypted drives because most cameras and recorders are not encrypted, which means that all your data can be copied by anybody who steals or finds your devices.
   o Make sure you have a backup of all your data on two different drives. In that case your data is safe even when your laptop is lost or stolen. Try to use a secure connection to make the transfer, such as a VPN or add browser extensions to increase security. Be aware that many online clouds (such as dropbox) are not secure and should not be used. If you do, add two-factor authentication (see above).
   o Once your data is backed up on two encrypted drives (e.g. your laptop and your University server), you should not forget to delete them from your camera or recorder as they are unprotected there. Similarly, Koopman (2017) writes: "When your write field notes by hand, snap a photo of them and save the images behind encryption, then destroy your hard paper copy."

➢ **Files**:
   o You can protect files and folders on your windows and mac. This way, you can protect recordings and pictures no matter which format they are.
   o PDF and Word (windows/mac), Excel (windows/mac) and PowerPoint (windows/mac) documents can very easily be password protected directly. This is especially important if your documents contain lists of interview respondents.

➢ **E-mails**:
   o When sending sensitive data via e-mail you can also encrypt the e-mail itself depending on your software (see here for Outlook). Alternatively, you can use a free third-party solution such as Mailvelope.
   o Encrypting emails is slightly more complicated since both the sender and the receiver need to be able to decrypt the e-mail. For this reason, it might be easier to put your data in a protected word document and send this while sharing the password via a secure chat.

➢ **Messaging**:
   o The following are free messaging apps that provide secure and encrypted services: Signal, Telegram and Viber. Threema and Wire come at a small cost.
   o Note that there is an option to self-destruct your messages with a timer. Make sure to enable that function if you need it.

- ➢ **Phones**:
    - o Be wary of phones. Koopman (2017) notes: "You can now record long interviews on most phones. But if you at all suspect that the content of that interview could be misused in any way, by anyone, and particularly by armed actors, use a small digital recorder instead."
    - o In addition, she urges us to "Get away from your phone. Simply turning off your phone is not enough; hackers can still record ambient conversations. A safer bet is to keep the phone outside of the room. (Remember to also take along another timepiece if you usually depend on your phone for that.)"
- ➢ **Further information**: For further tips and a glossary explaining key terms go [here](). For tips and experiences from an anthropologist professor go [here](). See also Aldridge, Medina and Ralphs (2010) for guidelines regarding the security of qualitative data.
- ➢ **Open questions/dilemmas**:
    - o What would be a safe online server to upload data to that works with a slow internet connection (VPNs normally require a good internet connection)?
    - o There is a trade-off between picture/sound quality and data protection. While you can and should immediately upload your files on an encrypted device and erase them on the original, they cannot easily be put on a safe server if the file size is too large. This means that you are not likely to transfer your data to the university server. However, if your luggage is stolen, your data is gone. On the other hand, by reducing the size you lower the data quality. MP3 sound formats are generally of good-enough quality and picture sizes might require a lower resolution than you would like.

Do no harm

- ➢ "Scholars who engage in intensive fieldwork have an obligation to protect research subjects and communities from repercussions stemming from that research" (Parkinson & Wood, 2016, p. 22).
- ➢ The do-no-harm principle concerns research participants, assistants as well as the researchers themselves. Make sure to protect your own safety.
- ➢ Hilhorst et al. (2016) provide comprehensive security guidelines for fieldwork in complex and remote areas; see also Mazurana and Gale (2013) for practical tips.
- ➢ In very sensitive research (e.g. on sexual violence) that might prompt respondents to relive trauma, researchers should complete appropriate trainings to deal with respondents' reactions (Cronin-Furman & Lake, 2018; Thomson, 2013).
- ➢ **Open questions/dilemmas**:
    - o Certain topics (e.g. regarding conflict or corruption) might be highly relevant to your research and even to the research integrity as social scientists have to think critically and cannot ignore the historical, socio-economic and political context in which their study is embedded. On the other hand, such topics can be highly sensitive and warrant self-censorship. What can still be asked and defended (and possibly even published) as part of this project and under this research permit without doing harm? This demands knowledge of the local context and discussion with your peers and supervisors (both from a local and an outside perspective).

   o Similar dilemmas arise with abuses and repression witnessed. Ethical principles of do-no-harm might collide with the duty to report and document these as silence might mean to assist the perpetuation of abuse.

Anonymisation

➢ It is essential to anonymise all your data as soon as possible.

➢ This goes beyond replacing names but also taking out other identifiers (e.g. a description of their house or living location). This asks for great care and creativity (Fujii, 2012).

➢ During interviews, some respondents might ask who else you talked to and what they said. The content of other conversations should never be disclosed, and neither should the names of private respondents you talked to as this might put them in jeopardy and violates their anonymity. When it comes to stakeholder representatives (especially NGOs or government agencies), it can be harmless to mention that you talked to them or will talk to them if it is suggested to do so but as a general rule it is always safest to guard their anonymity as well.

➢ **Open questions/dilemmas**:
  o As visits might be highly visible and authorities might even sometimes tell you who to talk to, it is difficult to safeguard the anonymity of your respondents locally. While there is always a risk of this, you should do the most you can to accommodate the interviewee's wishes and comfort. In addition, you can suggest a private place to meet. This often means going to their home or meeting very early in the morning (Thomson, 2010).
  o It has been argued that names (and other easy identifiers) of respondents should not be noted in sensitive contexts – neither during the interview, in fieldnotes or transcripts (Thomson, 2010). Is this appropriate and should a research not have the attribution key saved for the project?
  o Is it appropriate to publish the name of the villages? In some sensitive contexts, researchers anonymised the villages as they are tight communities with strong social control that prevent true anonymity.
  o Which identifiable characteristics should be deleted? They can easily give away the identity of a participant, especially in conjunction with other information. On the other hand, they can provide important socio-economic information for the interpretation of the data (e.g. number of children or being widowed).
  o Can outcomes of group discussions with anonymised participants be published? The village will be recognisable and local authorities and villagers may know exactly who participated.

Informed consent

➢ Obtaining informed consent from research participant is a basic principal of ethical research. See here for tips and a practical discussion.

➢ Nevertheless, this can be difficult in certain contexts (Fujii, 2012), especially when participants are urged to do participate by local authorities.

➢ At the very least, the researcher should make sure to not pressure respondents in participating and actively appease them that there is no problem in withholding participation. The authorities should not be informed of the respondent's decision.

➢ Further, if indirect signs (verbal or non-verbal) of disapproval are shown, the researcher should also have the courage to stop the interview if appropriate.

➢ Even if informed consent has been granted, the researcher has the responsibility to ensure the safety of the participants in the long term following the do-no-harm principle and might self-censor certain data if deemed too sensitive (Parkinson & Wood, 2016).

➢ Throughout, participants should be reminded that they can withdraw the consent at any time or for specific questions. Ideally, one should ask again for consent towards the end of the research period when multiple interviews are undertaken (Thomson, 2009).

➢ Crucially, participants should be clearly informed, amongst others, of the nature of the project, the confidentiality/anonymity granted, compensation (or lack thereof) provided and eventual use of the data. Researchers should also mention that while anonymised, responses themselves can be quoted and published.

➢ In addition, Thomson (2010) noted that it can be useful to demonstrate the recorder so that respondents understand that there will be a permanent record of the conversation (some might not know how it works).

➢ Consent can be given by signing a written consent form or orally. In any case, it should be explained orally before each interview.

➢ While written consent forms can underlie the issue even more, this might not be appropriate for qualitative research, especially in sensitive contexts as both the respondent and the researcher will need to keep a copy – thus jeopardising the anonymity of the participant in the long term.

➢ **Open questions/dilemmas**:
   o In many cases, respondents hope to get some material benefit from participation even if that has been repeatedly declined (Cronin-Furman & Lake, 2018). This somewhat limits free consent in a context of high inequality.

   o In addition, compensation itself is an ethical question and should be clarified at the outset. In social science research, this is very often somewhat attenuated by providing a small non-monetary token of appreciation like soap or food.

   o It has been suggested to outline possible risks in the consent form. However, what does this mean in sensitive context where sanctions might be levied and how does this bias the responses?

   o Is it still ethical to cite somebody from field notes, if they want to say something without the recording but don't explicitly withdraw consent? Of course, it would be best to ask right then but what if you forget? At the very least it should be noted in the field nots so that later you still know to which comment it applies

   o What about informal conversations where people might not be aware that the researcher compiles notes afterwards? This is an important part of ethnographic and observational research, but the consent issue is debatable.

   o During group discussions some participants are too early and some very late – when is a good time to start? While new arrivals should be briefly informed of the recording and the anonymity granted, do they also have to be informed about the project, compensation, use of data etc. again (which will take time and interrupt the flow)? And what about uninvited bystanders who show up, speak, but might not know that they are being recorded?

Research assistants

➢ The role of research assistants and translators is often crucial in fieldwork (especially for outsiders) but rarely discussed and acknowledged (see for example Deane and Stevano, 2016, and Middleton and Cons, 2014).

➢ This demands fair pay and acknowledgement (see guiding questions below).

➢ On the other hand, it can be advisable to withhold the names of the research assistant in cases of sensitive research in order to protect them from any possible repercussions stemming from the publications. In this case, it is probably best to discuss this issue directly with the persons involved and possibly with your superiors.

➢ Further, the expectations, working conditions and legal framework in the relationship between researchers and research assistants is often poorly specified. It is therefore advisable to sign a contract or memorandum of understanding with the research assistant, outlining inter alia pay, tasks (e.g. with or without transcription), confidentiality requirements and data ownership issues. The following templates provide useful examples: University of Augsburg and Stanford University.

➢ **Open questions/dilemmas**:
   o Working hours and conditions during fieldwork are highly flexible and unregulated. This can lead to dissatisfaction. It is best for both sides to outline their expectations at the start and to establish some ground rules for joint respect (e.g. regarding privacy, off-duty hours etc.).
   o Research assistants might be put into a difficult situation regarding sensitive data and when pressured might also feel the need to give up some data (Leegwater, 2015). Trust is key as well as an open discussion regarding sensitive issues and the clear understanding that the assistant bears no responsibility regarding the data.
   o The do-no-harm principle is especially relevant in relation to research assistants as they might be put in danger as a result of the research (even when the research has left the country). The same dilemma regarding research integrity and self-censorship applies.

Guiding questions

The following guiding questions summarise the most important ethics and safety issues that you have to account for. It is important to ask yourself these questions when doing fieldwork. They guide is taken from Cronin-Furman and Lake (2018, p. 612, table 1). Goodhand (2000) also outlines key points to do no harm.

Before heading to the field

➢ Have you done your homework? How well do you understand the political context you'll be working in? Have you reached out to others who have worked in your research site to ask about the ethical challenges they faced? How would you handle the challenges they faced if you encountered them in your own work?

➢ If your research involves vulnerable human subjects, have you thought through how necessary their firsthand testimony is for your research design? And if others have worked on similar questions, are you confident that your project adds something valuable to offset the potential harm?

➢ Who will you reach out to if you need to discuss ethical issues that arise during your fieldwork? What will you do if you feel your research is endangering someone in ways that you didn't

anticipate? What ethics issues are you concerned about that were not raised in your human-subjects review? How will you deal with these?

➢ Have you decided how you will handle requests for financial or other assistance from research subjects? What types of researcher–subject relationships are you comfortable with? How will you weigh your perceived objectivity as a researcher against your ability to provide sometimes life-saving support to someone in need? Are you comfortable with the data security measures that are necessary for your project? Have you created a data security and backup plan?

In the field

➢ Would all of the practices you are employing be considered ethical in your home country?

➢ Would you be comfortable with someone treating you or your loved ones the way you are interacting with your research subjects and partners?

➢ Are you confident that you're really getting informed consent from your participants? Have you encountered difficulties in explaining your project or your role to your research subjects? Do you need to rethink your description of your project to ensure that participants understand the information they are getting about who you are and what your research is for?

➢ Have any of your research participants asked you for medical, material, or professional assistance? Do you think these requests influenced their willingness to talk to you? Does this alter your recruitment strategy in the future or how you approach research participants going forward? Should it affect how you interpret your data?

➢ If you are working with a partner organization, are you aware of how (and what) they are communicating with research participants about your project? Do staff members appear to be more attentive to meeting your research needs than they are to the well-being of research subjects?

➢ If you are employing local staff, what factors did you consider when negotiating a rate? What are your research assistants and collaborators contributing to the project? If a colleague at your home institution were performing this role, would they deserve an author credit? If not, how else can you appropriately and adequately compensate your local colleagues' time and labor?

After coming home

➢ Have you ensured that your research subjects and partners are comfortable with the ways in which they are attributed and acknowledged in your work? Have you given credit where credit is due? And have you thought beyond the requirements of your IRB to consider whether additional confidentiality measures might be necessary? For example, where appropriate, have you removed dates and place names, as well as other identifiers, to ensure that individuals cannot be linked to a particular interview or sentiment?

➢ Have you made a plan to ensure that your research results are disseminated back to the affected community in ways that are meaningful or valuable to them? What would a valuable dissemination strategy look like in the context in which you are working?

Bibliography

The following literature provides a very useful overview of research ethics and safety when doing social science research, especially in sensitive contexts. Some of it has been referenced above. For an excellent literature review see (Campbell, 2017).

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