Preregister Your Ethical Redlines*

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First Draft: July 2, 2019

This paper makes the case for the preregistration of ethical redlines by researchers engaged in fieldwork in fragile or violent settings. To date, a small-but-growing literature has begun the important task of cataloguing the ethical challenges posed by such fieldwork, including issues of informed consent, power asymmetries, and subject safety. Solutions, however, have received little attention. Piggy-backing on the preregistration movement in political science and economics, the paper outlines the three-fold advantage of publicly identifying one’s ethical redlines before research begins. The paper also provides a template for engaging possible ethical issues emphex ante across four dimensions: (1) the individual researcher herself; (2) collaboration with research partners and policy-makers; (3) individual subjects; and (4) group rights, especially where demographically identifiable information (DII) can be combined with other streams of data collection to compromise group safety even if personally identifiable information remains protected.

*Prepared for the Advanced Workshop on Ethical Engagement in Conflict Research at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 9-10 July 2019.
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Two trends are currently wending their way through the study of political violence and, in particular, the conduct of fieldwork in fragile or violent settings. On the one hand, an important dialogue has now begun among (mostly) qualitative scholars about how to conduct ethical fieldwork in these contexts. On the other hand, (mostly) quantitative scholars have advocated for the entrenchment of preregistration of hypotheses, research designs, and analyses as the gold standard for conducting fieldwork (usually field experiments). To date, these trends have moved in parallel. Discussions of preregistration have occurred without any corresponding dialogue about how ethical considerations can (and should) shape our research strategies and data collection. At the same time, emerging debates about best fieldwork practices have so far overlooked how public preregistration of ethical “redlines” can clarify the ethical implications of one’s research while blunting the slide toward situational ethics ("e-hacking") while in the field.

This brief memo makes the case for adopting preregistration as one component of ethical fieldwork. It does not advance a code of conduct nor seek to police a particular set of beliefs. Ethical dilemmas are not always clearcut, and reasonable people may disagree on possible solutions. Instead, the memo proposes a framework for helping a researcher identify her “redlines” — the boundaries that delimit unethical conduct where risks begin to outweigh benefits. When completed prior to fieldwork, a public preregistration document acts as a commitment device while generating repetitional costs for deviating from initial plans. Extending well beyond current IRB requirements, this framework asks researchers to consider the ethical implications of their proposed fieldwork across four domains: (1) one’s own conduct in the field; (2) collaboration with research partners and policy-makers, including the post-fieldwork dissemination of findings; (3) obligations toward one’s research subjects; and (4) how one’s research affect group rights, particularly if a researcher proposes to combine streams of different data that might inadvertently compromise informed consent and subject anonymity. In offering this sketch, I draw primarily on my experiences working with the US military (especially the Air Force), governmental agencies (particularly USAID), various survey firms, my own (small) firm, and non-governmental organizations (especially Mercy Corps) in Afghanistan over the past decade. I also spent the past three years on Yale’s IRB.

1 The Problem of Ethical Fieldwork

Even researchers with a finely-honed sense of ethical responsibilities will encounter challenges when conducting fieldwork. Inexperience, the sudden onset of unexpected challenges due to the dynamic nature of conflict, career motivations, and often crushing time pressures to execute a planned research design can force researchers into ethical compromises. Most of these pressures are well understood, if not often openly discussed, among field researchers. I would add two additional sources of pressure that make the need for prereg-

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2 Nosek et al. 2018, Humphreys, Sánchez de la Sierra and van der Windt 2013.
First, collaborative fieldwork can generate unexpected pressure to take ethical short-cuts. While we typically view the field researcher as a lone Indiana Jones-type figure, scholars usually rely on local teams, collaborations with international organizations, and external funding agencies to carry out their work. Yet reliance on these partners can raise troubling issues. Reliance on others for shelter, mobility, or security can lead to the curtailing of freedom of movement that shuts down potential research sites, undermining research designs by creating selection effects. Sensitive research topics or questions may be tabled for fear of disrupting a collaboration, especially during its early stages. Alternatively, scholars may find themselves trapped by power imbalances and the need to sustain a partnership, leading to design compromises or the evaluation of simplistic interventions that (a) restrict your creativity as a researcher and (b) do not speak to important theoretical debates. Similarly, pressure from these partners may restrict the nature of the hypotheses to be tested and the range of alternative explanations considered. Access to the data for follow-on research and papers may be conditional on the nature of initial findings, creating skewed incentives for the researcher.

This loss of freedom may be particularly salient under two conditions. First, if researchers are seeking a durable partnership that will extend over multiple projects, then powerful incentives are created for playing by the outside partner’s rules. With more at stake, scholars may find themselves unwilling or unable to rock the boat, reluctantly making the necessary concessions to generate a steady stream of publications over the long term. Second, if scholars are not bringing resources to the table, either in the form of financial backing or additional capabilities (i.e. survey design), then they may be at the mercy of the external partner at both the design and implementation phases of research. Without skin in the game, researcher concerns may be dismissed; scholars may find themselves forced to accede to second-best practices or dubious ethical practices just to keep their position on the project. Under such conditions, where concessions are often piecemeal in nature, staggered over multiple decision points, and individually (somewhat) reasonable, scholars may belatedly realize that they have compromised their ethical principles while chaining themselves to research projects built around the external partner’s needs and ethical standards. Some concessions may be necessary, of course, but collaboration should not require ethical sacrifices.

A second danger lies in what anthropologists term “seduction.” Seduction refers to a process through which the researcher comes to identify with the identity, goals, and values of collaborators or the community under study. This can lead to the dilution of critical engagement or, in extreme cases, its wholesale abandonment, leading to the shifting of research goals and ethical redlines in support of the policy community’s specific goals. At its worst, seduction results in the loss of a researcher’s (ethical) independence. It is driven not by coercion or the instrumental aim of ensuring continued access to the policy process but because researchers believe that supporting their external partner’s ambitions

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3I believe the term was first coined by George Devereux, From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences (The Hague: Mouton, 1967).
are the right thing to do. The chance to play an outsized role in the policy process in an important struggle, whether against insurgent forces or more faceless forces like hunger and underdevelopment, can be exhilarating but also distorting. Ethical norms can quickly be viewed as cumbersome obstacles that need to be surmounted (or ignored) so that actionable research can be produced in real-time. Peer review and robustness checks, too, can be sacrificed in the pursuit of being and staying relevant for these audiences. Indeed, continued relevance can hinge on a researcher’s speed and timelines, creating incentives to sidestep normal research safeguards (whether the work is qualitative or quantitative). There is also a danger here that the researcher’s original questions or data analysis are abandoned in the pursuit of new ones deemed more relevant by the policy relevant community.

Let me provide a brief example from my own experience. As part of a Defense Department Minerva grant, I was provided with declassified airstrike data from Afghanistan and Iraq. The purpose of the project was to assess the effects of airpower on insurgent violence and civilian attitudes down to the village level. The results were dismal: airstrikes were associated with increases in the frequency and lethality of insurgent attacks in and around the bombed locations. I presented my findings to several high-level audiences both in the US and overseas. After one presentation, I was approached by a group of individuals who were unexpectedly excited by my findings. Why? The insurgent responses were so predictable in location and timing that they could be used to anticipate insurgent behavior, helping the Air Force sharpen its ability to target them. This could be hugely valuable on the battlefield, they noted. Would I be willing to run my analyses in near-real time to facilitate targeting sorties, in exchange for expanded access to (near) current data? I declined. I thought this crossed several ethical red-lines; I wanted to understand the violence, not engage in its actual production. But you can imagine the pull. Here was real influence over policy decisions on a large scale, the stuff that “bridging the gap” initiatives are designed to facilitate.

I’ve found that seduction is most likely under a certain set of conditions, including: (1) when the researcher genuinely supports the organization’s mission; (2) the partner organization lacks the resources, skills, or time to engage in the kind of analysis provided by the researcher, creating the opportunity for influence; and (3) when the researcher is funded by the organization or shares funding via a joint third-party. In short, while policy relevance is a worthy goal, we want to think hard about the kinds of guardrails we need to ensure our research remains ethical.

2 The Solution: Preregistration

As a bulwark against situational ethics and possible e-hacking under time pressures, I propose that researchers engaging in fieldwork in contested settings preregister their ethical redlines. Preregistration here consists of a formal declaration of ethical principles as well as issues that would cause the researcher to modify, or abandon, the proposed research agenda. Such a declaration could be folded easily into the preregistration template provided by the Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP, http://egap.org/register-your-design)
or American Economic Association [https://www.socialscienceregistry.org/]. Alternatively, it could be posted as a standalone document on the researcher’s own website.

There are two important aspects of this preregistration. First, the document should be formal and extensive. That is, the researcher should take this opportunity, in the quiet before the storm of fieldwork, to consider her principles across a range of issue areas (I sketch some of these below). Second, the preregistration of ethics works best when done so publicly, in a fashion that is accessible to other academics and stakeholders. A public statement has three advantages.

First, the public statement acts as a credible commitment device. Pledging to observe your redlines in a transparent and open way means that other researchers can assess your compliance with your own ethical guidelines. Deviations from these guidelines thus stand a higher chance of being noted. The prospect of being evaluated by one’s own ethical standard can generate external pressure to avoid e-hacking even in situations where the researcher faces no oversight (as is often the case in violent or fragile settings). In addition, it acts as another line of defense against pressures — from research partners, from locals, from third-parties — to engage in conduct that would compromise one’s values. As with research design preregistration, the public nature of the document (and the need to write detailed documentation on deviations from the plan) create a shield that prevents other actors from imposing new requirements or forcing changes, thus potentially avoiding compromising situations. In particular, pressure to conduct “side-analyses,” where researchers engage in perhaps ethically dubious side projects as a condition for access to data or resources, could be short-circuited by appeal to the public and sealed nature of the preregistration.

Second, a public declaration is a signaling device to research partners and collaborators about your expectations about how the fieldwork will be conducted. In fact, the public nature of the document likely reduces the number of points at which a researcher might be forced into making hard ethical choices. By signaling one’s ethical redlines, less scrupulous research partners may simply steer clear, helping eliminate partnerships that disintegrate over different ethical standards. With enough critical mass, the use of public declarations may in fact produce more defensible fieldwork in these settings by depriving bad actors of research partners altogether.

Third, public declarations represent a collective good for field researchers. By posting statements online, interested researchers, particularly those with little or no experience in these settings, can craft their own ethical standards from existing ones. Exploring other’s ethical standards may also raise new questions and dilemmas about one’s own research that can be thought through before heading to the field. And, if these preregistered statements are comprehensive enough, a set of “best practices” for dealing with ethical challenges

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4The open-source software DeclareDesign enables preregistration of the scholar’s model of the world (M), an inquiry (I), a data strategy (D), and an answer strategy (A). It potentially could be modified to report ethical redlines (E). See Blair et al. 2019.

5I personally would prefer to have the ethics statement and research design overview in the same document. This would reinforce the dialogue between ethics and design, underscoring that many design issues are deeply imbued with ethical considerations.
in the field may emerge, helping create shared standards in the absence of a common professional code of conduct.

3 What to Preregister?

There’s no way to preregister all ethical concerns or challenges *ex ante*. Some ethical challenges are context-specific; others are emergent, arising from the collision of particular challenges and personalities in the field. That said, there are clearly identifiable general categories of ethical issues that are common to all researchers, regardless of their specific research question or methodology. I offer the outline of one possible general framework below that raises issues across four specific areas: (1) the researcher’s own personal conduct and safety; (2) the treatment of research collaborators, including in-country partners and teams; (3) the treatment of research subjects; and (4) consideration of group rights and the emerging challenge of demographically identifiable information (DII).

3.1 Personal Conduct and Safety

In many ways, considerations of what constitutes “ethical” fieldwork are deeply personal. Yet we can still identify issues that all researchers will face that demand reflection prior to engaging in fieldwork. I propose four bundles of interrelated issues here. These are meant as illustrative rather than exhaustive, and provide a scaffolding for building one’s ethical framework.

First, field researchers need to conduct an assessment of the types and severity of risks they are willing to incur during fieldwork. Questions include: what physical and mental risks are you personally willing to collect and verify your data? Are you assuming the same risks as your colleagues and collaborators? Does your presence increase risk to others, whether your collaborators or subjects? What types are risk are considered beyond the pale? Are you willing, and do you have the capacity, to shut down a research project if an adverse event occurs? (And just how do you define an adverse event?) Are you the central authority figure for the project, or has responsibility been apportioned out among multiple individuals? Would you benefit from having an external party or organization make the decision about adverse events and whether to shutter a research program?

Second, researchers need to put their ethics into dialogue with their research designs. In particular, both qualitative and quantitative research design need to be evaluated in terms of the risk they generate for both yourself and those involved in the project. In what ways, for example, could your intervention (which might be something as simple as your presence) create negative consequences? What might those negative consequences be, and how far might they ripple out from the initial intervention? Is your intervention creating winners and losers on the ground, whether measured in terms of material gains or increased prestige (or both)? Are you upsetting existing power relations or exacerbating social and gendered fault-lines? And, equally as important, is the study sufficiently powered to be able to draw reliable inferences about the research question at hand? That is, at the
end of the day, does the study make a contribution to knowledge? Does the benefit of conducting this research, measured in terms of accumulation of knowledge, outweigh the risk of conducting it?

A third bundle of issues might best be characterized as the “dirty hands” problem. Researchers need to take a principled stance on how close they are willing to work to the policy process, and with what types of actors, to ensure that they are not surprised in the field. Are you comfortable working with classified data, for example? How willing are you to work with data that you didn’t personally collect and that may be have been acquired or constructed through ethically problematic means? What types of data, and what types of actors, are you unwilling to work with? How willing are you to let organizational needs and interests dictate your research question(s) and methodology?

Fourth, researchers should consider the extent of their ethical obligations to research participants and collaborators. Will the data collected be shared? If so, in what form, and how widely? Where do you strike the balance between the demands of replication and the need to safeguard anonymity? What do you owe participants and the communities where the information was collected? Will you offer financial compensation? If your data are shared, what are the possible negative consequences if it gets out “into the wild?”

3.2 Research Partners and Policy-Makers

Standard IRB applications exclude consideration of the safety of our research partners and, in particular, the individuals and teams we might employ on the ground. A more holistic understanding of our ethical concerns should extend to our collaborators, broadly defined. Core issues include: what risks do your local fixers, translators, research assistants, enumerators, and teams face if they work for you? What measures have you taken to mitigate these risks? How much autonomy do they have for making adjustments in the field in response to adverse events (e.g., changing research sites, shifting interviews to new settings, changing interviewees)? Are your collaborators paid, and it is a fair wage? What do you owe them if they are hurt while working for you? Are they working anonymously to reduce the risk they and their families face? What steps have you taken to preserve their anonymity? What is your stance on credit-sharing? Finally, how much deference, if any at all, will you accord to locals when conducting your risk assessment, when responding to adverse events, and when designing and implementing your research?

The nature of our relationship with partner organizations and policy-makers also occurs outside the IRB’s purview. Yet the structure of this relationship can generate ethical challenges or, if correctly specified, actually reduce them. Researchers collaborating with

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6 This last question taps into what I believe is a growing problem: the use of small-n surveys on vulnerable populations that are too-underpowered to be able to draw valid conclusions about the research question. Prohibitive survey costs are forcing scholars to “power-down” their surveys, which creates downstream problems in terms of the reliability of the conclusions reached. The same criticism holds for small-n interview and focus group work.

7 Here I have in mind interviews and surveys among captured insurgents (or suspected insurgents) who likely suffered abuse and lack due process.
non-governmental organizations, governmental agencies, or militaries (and their funding arms) need to locate their redlines early on and make them known to their research partners. Ideally, the scholar’s constraints are built into the research design, the fieldwork process itself, and the products that result. Key questions include? How willing are you to provide “off-book” analyses (e.g., those not covered in your preregistration plan or that emerge as a result of new opportunities in the field) to the research partner? How much of a role in the policy-making process do you want to have? Are you willing to do “off-book” analysis for non-publication? Are these ethical guidelines and redlines clearly communicated with your team members and research partners? Do you require partners to share the same ethical constraints to work with them? Will you consent to pre-publication review or the conditionality of data? Will you adopt safeguards such as planned obsolescence to prevent your findings from being injected directly into the policy process? Do you require your findings to be peer reviewed before offering policy advice? What does your public outreach look like, and is there a chance that your sources and methods could be compromised?

3.3 Individual Subjects

Much has already been written about the ethical treatment of subjects in conflict settings. Here I would simply note the need to move beyond the legalistic protections afforded by IRB protocols to broaden our understanding of how subjects should be treated ethically, including safeguarding their personal information. In particular, the issue of informed consent looms large among vulnerable populations in conflict settings. What does informed consent mean in your ethical framework? Can deception be used, for example, and if so, how much? What kinds of precautions will you take to preserve anonymity and confidentiality? What happens if interviews and surveys are public in nature? Can informed consent be obtained when access to a location is brokered by the controlling rebel organization or state? Are direct questions on sensitive topics appropriate, or do you need to consider indirect methods? What issues of personal history are off-limits? What is the risk that subjects will be re-traumatized through your interaction with them? Can you dampen the expectation among subjects that their participation will lead to material rewards, especially when you partner with an NGO or aid agency? How robust are your data protection measures?

3.4 Group Rights

One of the most important — and neglected to date — areas of ethical concern is that of group rights and demographically identifiable information. Nearly all discussions of ethics

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8The best discussion is found in [Raymond 2017]. He defines *Demographically Identifiable Information* as “either individual and/or aggregated data points that allow inferences to be drawn that enable the classification, identification, and/or tracking of both named and/or unnamed individuals, groups of individuals, and/or multiple groups of individuals according to ethnicity, economic class, religion, gender, age, health condition, location, occupation, and/or other demographically defining factors.”
focus solely on the researcher’s own collection of data (a “single stream” approach). We need to have awareness, however, of how our own data collection efforts can be merged with other, often independent, field research to create a new picture of a community or group that can increase their risk of harm. Ethics discussions, in other words, must shift from single to multiple stream in conception, and must anticipate how your data might fit in a mosaic with other sources that threaten these groups even if personally identifiable information is kept safe.

Imagine, for example, conducting a survey in which the ethnicity of the respondent is recorded. With standard sampling patterns, the village’s ethnic composition could be extracted with reasonable precision simply from the ethnic breakdown of respondents. Even if personal information is removed (e.g., names), the demographic characteristics of the selected village can still be gleaned from these interviews. In turn, these demographic data, including ethnic composition but also wealth and education indicators, could be married with other technologies such as remote sensing (especially satellite images and night light imagery) to provide a rich mosaic of village attributes without ever compromising confidentiality or informed consent. Unscrupulous actors in the midst of a civil war could use these data to facilitate targeting of rival ethnic groups or the coercive extraction of taxes. Humanitarian organizations could also use these merged data to steer their aid efforts. A researcher may find herself inadvertently helping pick winners and losers, and fuel conflict dynamics, if these DDI are utilized by other agencies and actors.

This concern is only likely to grow as researchers increasingly rely on multiple streams of “big data” to shape their research designs and data collection. Cell phone records, for example, are often specific enough to identify individuals through point purchasing patterns even if names and phone numbers are removed. Standard wealth indicators (“how many live in your home?” and “what is your roof made of?”) can be cross-referenced with satellite imagery to identify specific interviewee or survey respondents. Even social media or photographs taken from field sites can be investigated using open source techniques to identify locations (and individuals), potentially increasing the risk of discovery and harm. Moreover, the rate of data release — ACLED updates its event data weekly — means that we are closing the loop between inadvertent exposure of our subjects and groups and the prospect that such lapses can be exploited by (bad) actors in near-real-time.

Note, too, that the converging of these data streams raise a thicket of issues for prevailing notions of informed consent. Once we merge the original data (collected under informed consent) with other types of data where consent was neither asked nor given, we may invalidate the original consent. Individuals may also consent because they are unaware that their data will be merged or do not understand the potential risks posed when a data mosaic is constructed. In thinking through our ethical obligations, we must consider the downstream consequences for groups that may be affected by the proposed research, not simply individual subjects. This amounts to a fairly radical rethink of how both current IRB practices are structured and how we discuss ethical fieldwork in conflict settings.

[https://www.acleddata.com/data/](https://www.acleddata.com/data/)
4 Post-Fieldwork Review

Preregistration is not meant as a straitjacket. Nor should it rule out conducting fieldwork entirely. Instead, it constrains researchers by removing some discretion from their fieldwork while also alerting them to the ethical ramifications and tradeoffs of their intended research on a variety of actors. These preregistered documents should be revisited after each major round of fieldwork (i.e. with each new project). It may be that prior ethical redlines were irrelevant for a given context. Precautions about collecting data on victimization and harm may be relaxed, for example, if individuals prove far more forthcoming, and issues of harm less polarizing, than previously imagined. Of course, the opposite may also hold; with added experience, researchers may bring their ethical redlines forward. For example, a researcher may conclude that the use of direct survey (or interview) questions are too problematic, and rely solely on indirect measurement techniques instead. In short, preregistration should give rise to living documents that reflection evolution in our thinking about the challenges of a particular setting in light of new experiences.

5 Conclusion

This paper sketches a modest proposal: researchers in fragile conflict settings should preregister their ethical redlines in a public manner before fieldwork begins. Preregistration has numerous benefits for both the researcher and the broader research community. It also holds out promise of generating and sustaining more ethical fieldwork, whether in the form of interviews, focus groups, surveys, and randomized control trials. The intent here is not to impose a single standard of morality or ethics. Many of the ethical issues that arise in fieldwork are both context-specific and morally difficult; individuals acting in good faith may nonetheless come to different conclusions about how to approach their fieldwork in these settings. Nor does preregistration mean a recipe for paralysis. It does, however, mean investing substantial time and effort into thinking through ethical dilemmas, and devising possible answers to them, well before entering the field. While the up-front cost is real, so too are the advantages of prior commitment to a self-defined but public standard that can insulate researchers from many of the fieldwork pressures that might lead down a slippery slope of compromising one’s ethics.
References


