

Preregister Your Ethical Redlines: Vulnerable Populations, Policy Engagement, and the Perils of E-Hacking*

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This essay makes a modest proposal: scholars who conduct fieldwork among vulnerable populations in fragile settings and who seek to influence policy should preregister their ethical redlines. Public preregistration can help avoid shifting ethical standards (“e-hacking”) during fieldwork while improving our baseline risk and harm assessments among participants and their communities. The essay identifies the causes and varieties of “e-hacking” before providing a conceptual framework that helps researchers locate their ethical redlines at five different levels of analysis. Eight concrete suggestions are then provided for turning ethics into action to improve our efforts at both ethical fieldwork and policy engagement.

Key Words: preregistration; ethical redlines; fieldwork; vulnerable populations; responsible engagement; risk assessment

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In a burst of introspection, scholars have recently sparked a welcome discussion about best practices for ethical fieldwork.¹ The stakes are high. Scholars now routinely conduct fieldwork among vulnerable populations, often in fragile or violent settings, and do so with sometimes large-scale interventions that can impose significant harm if they go awry.² In addition, a new generation of scholars is now conducting this fieldwork with an eye toward influencing policy-makers, whether through direct collaboration or indirect channels.³ Fieldwork and policy engagement have, for many of us, now become intertwined.

Yet we have spent too little attention wrestling with the ethical dilemmas that arise at the intersection of research and policy. Scholars at this nexus are perhaps uniquely vulnerable to cross-cutting pressures from local populations and policy-makers that can lead to unexpected and unwelcome ethical compromises — what we might call “e-hacking”⁴ — to produce policy-relevant scholarship. These ethical issues are largely structural in nature: regardless of our preferred methodological stance or fieldwork setting, we all face a similar set of dilemmas arising from the challenges of lashing fieldwork to the mast of policy relevance.

We therefore need a structural approach for identifying and addressing possible ethical dilemmas before we conduct our fieldwork and policy engagement. Taking a page from the preregistration movement,⁵ I argue that we should preregister our ethical redlines. That is, we should each publicly designate the types of action (or inaction) that we deem to be ethically out-of-bounds when engaged in fieldwork among vulnerable individuals and communities. More specifically, a preregistration document captures our bedrock ethical

¹See, for example, American Political Science Association 2020; Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Campbell 2017; Fujii 2012; Wood 2006. The Advancing Conflict Research (ARC) bibliography provides an excellent overview of these materials (<https://advancingconflictresearch.com/resources-1>).

²I define a *vulnerable population* broadly as individuals or groups that live in violent, fragile, or non-democratic settings where (1) participants have experienced harm or credible threat of harm; (2) are at risk of further harm, whether mental, physical, or economic; and (3) where proposed fieldwork might increase risk of harm (e.g. via retaliation). Examples of populations include traditional categories such as children, pregnant women, and inmates (National Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research 1979) but also extends to refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and migrants. In some cases, the extent or threat of violence by governments, armies, or insurgents might be so high that the entire population of a fieldwork site would be defined as vulnerable. On ethical dilemmas in large-scale field experiments, see McDermott and Hatemi 2020.

³See, for example, the important Bridging the Gap initiative (<https://bridgingthegaproject.org/>) and the Carnegie-funded Responsible Engagement of Policymaker initiative at the University of Denver (<https://www.siethicalengagement.com/>).

⁴I define *e-hacking* as the piecemeal shifting — sometimes unnoticed, sometimes calculated — of a scholar’s prior ethical boundaries on the conduct of fieldwork and subsequent use of research findings.

⁵Nosek et al. 2018; Humphreys, Sanchez de la Sierra and van der Windt 2013.

principles, how we assess risk and potential harm to research participants, and how we propose to share our findings with policy-makers and the broader public.

Preregistration has notable benefits. It provides a mechanism for the transparent accounting of our risk assessment, for example, as well as steps for harm mitigation. When made publicly available, preregistration can help defuse e-hacking pressures by serving as a credible commitment to one's research ethics. In fact, preregistration acts as a signal of intent that can screen out research partners with questionable ethical practices, helping avoid ethical dilemmas from arising in the first place. Written before fieldwork, a preregistration document forces scholars to consider the end-use of research findings, how results will be conveyed to decision-makers, and possible misuse by other actors. Preregistration is also compatible with all methodologies, including participant observation, interviews and focus groups, surveys, and field experiments. And, with sufficient buy-in among scholars, we might create norms that are powerful enough to shape expectations of appropriate conduct in the absence of a discipline-wide ethical code.

This essay sketches how we preregister our ethical redlines for fieldwork and policy engagement. I begin with a discussion of common sources of ethical dilemmas in fieldwork, especially during collaborative projects, and detail the forms that e-hacking can take. I then outline the benefits of public preregistration before turning to a discussion of how we can formalize the writing of these documents across five different levels of analysis. In effect, preregistration forces us to consider the risks and potential harm of our research across five audiences: the researcher (you), team members, individual participants, host and adjacent communities, and policy-makers, including the broader public. I then conclude with eight concrete steps that we can take to protect our ethical redlines.⁶

⁶This discussion draws on my experiences conducting fieldwork in Russia and Afghanistan, where I have worked with government agencies (the US Air Force, USAID, the US Army), non-governmental organizations (Mercy Corps, IRI), survey firms (Orca, ACSOR), human rights activists (Memorial'), and ethics boards (US Special Forces Command, University of Denver's Responsible Policy Engagement initiative), among others.

1 The Issue: Combining Ethical Fieldwork with Responsible Policy Engagement

A growing number of academics now conduct their research with an eye toward influencing policy-making.⁷ Here I write with a specific audience in mind: those scholars who conduct field research among vulnerable populations in difficult settings and do so with the intention of improving policy design, implementation, and effects. While the idea of preregistration should apply to many situations, the ethical dilemmas posed by policy-relevant fieldwork are sharpest when working among vulnerable populations. Policy engagement can take several forms. Some scholars take up formal roles and embed themselves in partner organizations; others prefer to collaborate with fellow scholars, teams, and organizations to undertake research to analyze specific policy problems; and still others embrace a more indirect role, conducting fieldwork independently to generate findings that might frame policy debates about specific issues such as humanitarian aid, development, corruption, and counterinsurgency operations.⁸

What, then, is “responsible” policy engagement? Regardless of methodological approach, I view responsible engagement as having several qualities. Above all, the fieldwork that informs policy recommendations must minimize the prospect of current risk and future harm to participants, their communities, and adjacent populations. The empirical strategy used to generate these insights should be rigorous, meaning that key decisions about sampling, data collection, and analysis are transparent and appropriate for a given empirical setting. Both the instruments (interviews, focus groups, surveys, randomized interventions) and nature of analysis should be preregistered. Samples should be large enough to support claims; care should be taken not to extrapolate results to dissimilar contexts. Findings and their limitations, along with any weaknesses in design or analyses, should be discussed openly rather than buried in an appendix (or ignored completely). To guard against mistaken inferences, findings should be peer reviewed or audited by independent actors before being injected into the policy process. Alternative interpretations should be engaged fairly when advocating for a policy position, especially if that recommendation is at odds with prior scholarship. Mistakes will still occur, of course. But we

⁷Oliver and Cairney 2019.

⁸These categories are fluid; some scholars will move between on a case-by-case basis over the arc of their careers.

should at least commit to making a good faith case for our preferred policy, one grounded in both ethics and evidence.

The majority of ethical challenges to ethical fieldwork and policy engagement arise from two sources.⁹ First, we might misjudge the potential harms of proposed fieldwork, building research designs that are vulnerable to shocks and that magnify, rather than mitigate, risks to participants. Second, we might forge partnerships with other actors and organizations with differing time horizons, research expectations, and ethical standards that leads scholars to shift or breach their redlines to maintain the collaboration.

Let's take each point in turn. Many ethical dilemmas arise simply from a poor understanding of the baseline risks facing a given population. To date, we have yet to normalize the reporting of our pre-study risk assessments in our published work. As a consequence, we lack established frameworks for undertaking these assessments, short-circuiting possible learning from others' experiences conducting similar research. Sometimes local dynamics can create new, unanticipated, ethical dilemmas. These fast-moving situations are often compounded by researcher inexperience; while all researchers are vulnerable to mistaken risk assessments, scholars approaching a new field setting are likely to miss important local trends before they arrive. Unprepared, these scholars might find themselves entrapped into unanticipated situations that force ethical compromises that they would ordinarily denounce.

The desire to produce policy-relevant scholarship can also generate mixed incentives that lead, often inadvertently, to unwanted ethical compromises. In some cases, genuine affection for a cause or organization can create bias. The chance to play an outsized role in the policy process in an important struggle — say, for example, encouraging protests against an autocratic regime, or supporting humanitarian aid in war-torn countries — can be exhilarating but also distorting. Ethical norms can quickly be viewed as cumbersome obstacles that must be surmounted if timely policy recommendations are desired. Peer review, quality control, and sensitivity checks might all be sacrificed in the pursuit of relevance. Continued access to policy-makers might indeed hinge on speed of delivery, creating incentives to sidestep normal safeguards. Close affinity with an organization's mission can also warp your original questions; certain data analyses might be abandoned in favor of others deemed more relevant by policy-makers.¹⁰ Even worse, these pressure

⁹I set aside the possibility that researchers are acting out of deliberate malfeasance.

¹⁰Anthropologists use the somewhat unfortunate term “seduction” to capture the unconscious process

might overturn your independence as a scholar. Intellectual freedom might be sacrificed in pursuit of broader organizational goals, creating the twin dangers of sacrificed autonomy and bad policy advice.

Sometimes ethical lapses are driven by more coercive pressures. Careerism, for example, can lead scholars to short-circuit their own ethical judgements. Researchers might be reluctant to rock the boat in the face of unethical conduct if it means jeopardizing ongoing and future collaborations. Faced with a slow drip-feed of concessions to partners, researchers can find themselves reluctantly going along to protect their data access and stream of future publications. Similarly, reliance on partners for shelter, movement, and security can place researchers at a power disadvantage. Sensitive topics or field sites might be tabled for fear of disrupting the relationship, especially at its early stages. Scholars might also be compelled to shift their hypotheses and research designs to accommodate organizational sensitivities. These compromises not only restrict intellectual freedom but can also weaken safeguards meant to reduce risk and harm among vulnerable populations. Such troubling situations are likely to arise when collaboration hinges on favorable initial findings, skewing incentives even further.

This is not to suggest that all government agencies or non-governmental organizations are unscrupulous or seeking to take advantage of scholars. Far from it; many incredible collaborations have been forged between academics and actors like EGAP, Mercy Corps, J-PAL, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and others. And it's possible that scholars might use their own expertise (or reputation) to browbeat research partners into unethical practices, particularly if future donor funds are tied to program effectiveness. Most of the time, however, it is the researcher, not the organization, with the weaker hand. Even if no coercion is intended, there are enough power asymmetries, fast-changing conditions, and donor demands associated with fieldwork to create unwelcome pressures. If unchecked, a self-reinforcing dynamic can be unleashed, where each new ethical compromise undermines the intended research, creating new risks that only feed new ethical dilemmas.

by which a researcher comes to identify so closely with participants or organizations that objectivity is lost. See, for example, Devereaux 1967; Nordstrom and Robben 1996.

2 E-Hacking in the Wild

Career incentives, unequal collaborations, and a simple desire to “do good” can converge to create incentives to sidestep, shift, or simply ignore our ethical redlines. This “e-hacking” takes many forms in the wild.

Some of these compromises are subtle. Researchers might feel pressure to down-weight inconsistent or inconvenient results to produce a cleaner narrative. Nuance, too, might be stripped from analysis. Weaknesses in the research design, or implementation problems, might be hidden in appendices, if not buried completely. Initial reluctance to conduct “off-book” investigations that were not originally specified might give way if these become the price for continued access to data or subsequent collaboration. A desire to support the team can lead scholars to conduct these analyses outside the normal peer review channel. Such “off-book” analyses are especially problematic if they are done under time pressure and with an eye toward score-settling within partner organizations. As such, they can become quickly politicized and injected directly into the policy process without the normal safeguards that might induce caution. Researchers might also find themselves implicated in the use of unreliable data, sometimes gathered through ethically dubious means, to maintain a collaboration. In some cases, human subjects protections might be also be relaxed to facilitate a partner’s “mission critical” work among vulnerable populations.

As the screws turn, scholars might find themselves facing a cascade of new ethical concessions. Prior estimates of risk and potential harms might be revised downward to justify the continuation of problematic fieldwork. Scholars might become overly deferential to their partners, willing to mold their research around organizational sensitivities and priorities rather than theoretical or empirical debates. Skewed priorities represent something of a hidden opportunity cost: we might gain traction on a narrow question of program evaluation but forego the study of broader questions of pressing importance. E-hacking might also encourage the appearance of its close cousin, p-hacking, the use of repeated estimation strategies to “discover” statistically significant results that support desired research outcomes.¹¹ Collaboration itself can be compromised by e-hacking pressures. Critical voices on a research team can be discounted, or even silenced, if members are seen as too critical (“not a team player”) whose questioning might jeopardize the relationship with a partner organization.

¹¹Humphreys, Sanchez de la Sierra and van der Windt 2013.

Several factors increase the odds of e-hacking. Time pressures can lead to the shifting of ethical goalposts; the faster the required decision, and the greater its importance to fieldwork, the higher the pressure to cheat by crossing redlines. These constraints might also lower inhibitions on the use of dubious data. Better data might not exist, or be infeasible to be collected in the near term, forcing scholars to rely on a skewed evidentiary base to make decisions. Prior fieldwork experience is also important. New field researchers, or those new to engaging policy-makers, might be particularly susceptible to e-hacking, though all scholars remain vulnerable. Organizational environments where turnover is high among staff might also encourage ethical shortcuts. The need to demonstrate your worth to new, possibly skeptical, decision-makers quickly can create misaligned incentives between careful and rapid findings.

Resource imbalances can also lead to e-hacking. As a researcher's dependency on a partner organization for access and resources increases, so too does the potential for unwelcome pressure on ethical standards. Financial dependence can be especially tricky to navigate. If scholars are not bringing resources to the table, either in the form of financial backing or technical skills, then they may find themselves on the short end of a power imbalance that affects both research design and implementation. Without skin in the game, so to speak, ethical concerns might be dismissed. Scholars might find themselves forced to accede to second-best or problematic practices just to maintain their relationship. 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.

E-hacking can also arise from divisions within academic teams themselves. Partners without pre-specified boundaries might find internal fissures are exposed (or created) during fieldwork as new opportunities and problems arise. Homogenous teams are also more susceptible to e-hacking since they lack the diversity that can often serve as an internal check on ethical lapses. Indeed, the more diverse the team's collective perspectives and experiences, the more likely potential ethical lapses are detected early and the slide toward e-hacking arrested.¹² Finally, while all scholars are vulnerable to e-hacking, those using quantitative methods might find themselves under particular pressure to fiddle with models

¹²On advantages of diverse teams, see Page 2017.

and specifications to produce desired results if they have not filed a preregistration plan.

3 Combating E-Hacking Through Preregistration

Preregistration offers one means of arresting the slide into situational ethics. I define *preregistration* as the act of publicly documenting a researcher’s ethical code, her best assessment of the potential risk and net benefit of the proposed research to specific communities, and harm mitigation efforts that will guide the investigation and dissemination of findings *before* research is actually conducted. This document should be formal and extensive. That is, researchers should take the opportunity, in the quiet before the storm of fieldwork and policy engagement, to consider her ethical redlines.¹³

To maximize the advantages of preregistration, these documents should also be public, for three reasons. First, a public statement acts as a credible commitment device. Identifying your redlines and publicly pledging to conduct ethical fieldwork allows other researchers to assess your compliance with your own ethical principles. The prospect of being evaluated can generate external pressure to avoid e-hacking even in situations where the researcher faces no oversight, a common feature of fieldwork in violent or fragile settings. This external pressure can be helpful, acting as another line of defense against demands by research partners to engage in conduct that would compromise one’s values. For example, the document’s public nature, along with the need to provide detailed justification for deviations (or breaches) of these redlines, creates a shield that can deflect attempts to impose new requirements or force last-minute changes that might produce unethical research. In particular, unwelcome pressure to conduct side analyses could be short-circuited by a public preregistration document.

Second, preregistration signals your expectations to prospective partners about how the fieldwork will be conducted. By shaping expectations early, scholars might avoid inadvertently selecting themselves into collaborations where ethical compromises become necessary. Unscrupulous partners, or those with clashing ideas of ethical conduct, may simply steer clear of scholars who make their redlines explicit. If enough scholars commit to public preregistration, bad actors might find themselves deprived of research partners unless they adjust their own fieldwork practices.

¹³Some scholars have been writing their personal codes of conduct (see, for example, Chenoweth 2020). Just how common this practice is remains unknown.

Third, public preregistration represents something of a collective good. By making our statements available, interested researchers, especially those without substantial experience in difficult settings, can craft their own ethical standards in dialogue with others. New questions and possible answers are likely to arise when reviewing others' ethical standards. Such a review helps scholars anticipate possible problems with fieldwork and policy engagement, creating space for a careful consideration of possible solutions. It also provides a springboard for discussions of how to conduct a thorough risk assessment and harm mitigation by facilitating comparison with earlier efforts.¹⁴ In short, if these documents are made public, we can avoid reinventing the wheel each time we enter into collaborative fieldwork.

Statements of ethical conduct could easily be folded into existing preregistration templates provided by Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP) or the American Economic Association.¹⁵ The open-source software DeclareDesign could also be easily updated to include a section on risk assessment and harm mitigation.¹⁶ Scholars might also choose to append their statements to IRB submissions or post them as standalone documents on their own website. Whatever the format, it is preferable to have the ethics declaration and research design overview in the same document. This reinforces the dialogue between design and ethics, underscoring that many design issues are deeply imbued with ethical implications.

4 Locating Redlines: General Principles

Our ethical redlines stem from two sources: our own bedrock ethical principles about what constitutes appropriate fieldwork and policy engagement, and context-specific challenges that arise from fieldwork in fast-moving settings. No one can fully anticipate all possible challenges: personality clashes, competing organizational imperatives, new information, and sometimes sudden changes in local environments all frustrate a one-size-fits-all approach. Yet while trying to anticipate everything is a recipe for paralysis, our inability to

¹⁴Baron and Young 2021.

¹⁵EGAP now requires preregistration with the Open Science Foundation (<https://osf.io/prereg/>). The AEA registry can be found at: <https://www.socialscienceregistry.org/>. Neither currently require ethical statements as part of preregistration.

¹⁶The 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 could be extended to include ethical redlines (*E*). See Blair et al. 2019.

anticipate every contingency is not a reason to avoid preregistration.

We therefore need to locate our ethical redlines. A preregistration exercise offers one vehicle for identifying our core ethical principles and for articulating the possible risks and harms inherent in the proposed research. Painting with a broad brush, we must engage in an honest assessment of the nature and magnitude of risks to multiple audiences; outline possible short- and long-term harm among participants and communities, including the post-study dissemination of findings; and possible measures that might ameliorate these harms. Well before research designs are crafted, researchers should explicitly theorize the proposed intervention's direct and indirect effects on both the intended and adjacent populations.

Central to this task will be articulating *who* these populations are, possible spillover channels, and the potential benefits and harm that might result for (non-)participating communities. We need, in other words, to render explicit the implicit causal model that guides the proposed research. How might the proposed research affect these populations? What is the worst case scenario for harm among these vulnerable populations? What are the relevant counterfactuals for the proposed research, and do alternative questions or methods exist that might reduce anticipated risks? Some interventions will be intrusive;¹⁷ others, more subtle;¹⁸ and still others confined only to the researcher's own status as an outsider in the local context.¹⁹ All fieldwork, however, has the potential for ethical missteps, creating a demand for preregistration even when goals and methods appear modest.

I offer some general scaffolding for building a preregistration document below. I focus on five specific issues: (1) the researcher's own bedrock principles; (2) the role of collaborators, including local partners; (3) the treatment of research participants; (4) consideration of group rights, including both host communities where research will be conducted and adjacent ones that might be indirectly affected; and (5) responsible engagement with policymakers and the broader public.

¹⁷I have in mind interventions that seek to change existing political, economic, or societal arrangements. These might take the form of large-scale vocational training, cash transfers, or police reform programs.

¹⁸These might include survey experiments, encouragement designs to facilitate collective action (i.e. to encourage voter turnout), or informational primes about intergroup relations.

¹⁹See Cilliers, Dube and Siddiqi 2015 on how outsider status can affect research results. It may also raise ethical concerns if outsider status raises expectations of (continued) material assistance for participating in the research.

4.1 Your Bedrock Principles

Ethical redlines are reflections of deeply personal bedrock principles. No two scholars may agree on where to draw their boundaries. But each of us is guided by a sense of ethical behavior that shapes our fieldwork and policy engagement. This intuitive sense of appropriate conduct, of right and wrong, provides the foundation for our preregistration documents.

To begin, field researchers must take inventory of their own risk profiles before engaging in fieldwork. What types of physical and, equally as important, mental risks and challenges are you willing to assume by engaging in the proposed fieldwork? Everyone has their own tolerance for risk; these can change over time. Our sense of personal risk has downstream consequences for how we design and conduct fieldwork, so we must be explicit about what we consider necessary and unnecessary risks. How much risk is too much, for example, and how comfortable are you asking others — collaborators, colleagues, research participants, host communities — to assume those risks? Are risks to personal health shared equally, or are you asking others to run risks on your behalf that you will not?

We must also consider the possibility that the researcher's own presence can increase the risk of harm to others. Thinking through the nature of those negative consequences and their possible direction — does your presence upset existing power or social hierarchies, for example? — is a key component of risk assessment. In some cases, the researcher's initial intervention might have far-reaching but slow-developing consequences, forcing us to consider not just the immediate effects of our research but downstream risk. Part of this risk calculation should be the weighing of alternatives: is fieldwork really necessary, or are there alternative means of collecting evidence that lower the risk to others? In some cases, the consequences of an inadvertent breach of data confidentiality may be so severe for participants that ethical fieldwork is impossible. Here, the presence of a researcher and the sensitivity of collected data collide with emerging norms about transparency and replication in the social sciences.²⁰ Where the researcher stands on the tradeoffs between transparency and risk management will be important to pre-specify. Scholars should also consider whether certain populations are simply too vulnerable to conduct ethical fieldwork within.

Collaborative research and policy engagement also raise the risk of a loss of intellectual

²⁰See, for example, the discussions over DA-RT in American Political Science Association 2020.

freedom. Scholars should use their preregistration exercise as an opportunity to consider how research partners might chip away, sometimes unknowingly, at your ability to ask and answer your research questions. As noted above, resource imbalances, tight timelines, and a desire to maintain a relationship can all lead scholars to make concessions that might compromise intellectual freedom. Some scholars are comfortable working on a research project devised by an external organization; others will want to craft their own research questions and then find implementing partners. Some collaborations blend these two ideal types. In each case, it makes sense to locate the limits of one’s willingness to cede control over (parts of) the research process to outside actors and to craft possible safeguards for preserving intellectual freedom (see below).

Embedded research is especially fraught with implications for intellectual freedom. Joint by design, these collaborations can blur the responsibility for oversight of the research and its potential consequences. For example, I conducted a field experiment in Kandahar, Afghanistan, that involved a Western NGO, six Afghan ministries and agencies, two international organizations, a local telecommunications company, a survey firm, two colleagues at different universities, and three different donors.²¹ In these settings, it is crucial to identify the researcher’s specific responsibilities, including who is accountable if harm is inflicted, and who holds final authority for the design and conduct of fieldwork. In these settings, preregistration prompts researchers to consider their general comfort with the delegation of responsibility. It also offers a blueprint for ensuring that all parties have clear expectations about their responsibilities (and accountability) when working among vulnerable populations.

Finally, we must define the terms of responsible engagement with policymakers. Part of this process is simply identifying the organizations that one will, and will not, work with. This can be difficult in practice: researchers are often forced to collaborate with repressive or corrupt governments as the price of access to vulnerable populations. Similar questions surround research funding: are some donors ethically off-limits? Working with certain organizations, especially militaries and private companies, raise ethical questions around whether scholars are willing to use classified or proprietary data that cannot be shared with other researchers. Whether these data were acquired or collected ethically raises “second-hand” dilemmas even if a researcher is not involved in the actual data collection.²²

²¹Lyll, Zhou and Imai 2020.

²²Here I have in mind interviews and surveys among captured insurgents (or suspected insurgents) who

Much of this discussion will hinge on the researcher’s desired role in the policy process. Some will prefer an embedded role; others, a more distant collaboration; and still others will be most comfortable with an arms-length, more indirect, role in shaping policy debates. The same holds true for the scholar’s public profile. What does “success” mean in this space, for example, and what’s the best means of obtaining it? Some scholars will be comfortable with public-facing scholarship that paints in broad strokes and smoothes over (or ignores) the nuances in the findings. Others, however, might relish these nuances and caveats, seeking to couch findings in degrees of uncertainty even if it means reducing one’s audience. All researchers conducting public-facing research will need to wrestle with the question of their desired role in policy debates, including how to conduct ethical outreach on social media and other popular outlets long after the fieldwork is completed.

4.2 Research Partners

Standard IRB protocols exclude consideration of the safety of our research partners and, in particular, the individuals and teams that make fieldwork possible. This omission is unfortunate: reliance on “research brokers”²³ raises a host of questions that should be explicitly folded into our ethical frameworks. Perhaps most importantly, researchers should assess the risks that local fixers, translators, research assistants, enumerators, and other teams face as a result of their involvement in fieldwork.²⁴

What measures, for example, do you need to take to mitigate these risks? What types of harm — economic, reputational, physical — are most likely in these settings? In a pandemic world, can health risks be mitigated? And what of the mental strain of the fieldwork itself? Issues surrounding equitable pay (and what constitutes a fair wage) and credit-sharing, including co-authorship, should also be addressed in the preregistration document. Similarly, researchers need to think through what obligations they hold toward their team members if they are hurt (or worse) while conducting fieldwork.

Collaborative fieldwork also raises the issue of differing ethical standards among team members. How to reconcile competing visions will remain an ongoing challenge for teams if these differences remain unacknowledged and unaddressed before fieldwork begins. Your

likely suffered physical and mental abuse.

²³ Baaz and Utas 2019.

²⁴Desk research can also raise ethical concerns, particularly surrounding exposure to “second-hand trauma.” See, for example, Hoover Green and Cohen 2021.

ethical redlines, along with proposed solutions for mitigating ethical dilemmas, should be part of any group preregistration exercise. Many of the pressures that lead to ethical shortcuts come from within-group dynamics rather than external partners or the dynamics of conflict settings. This is true, too, of donors who view themselves as part of the research team and that have differing ethical standards. In a worst case scenario, varying ethical frameworks between yourself, team members, and external organizations might generate substantial pressure to engage in e-hacking just to maintain the collaboration. While the ethical codes of others are often blind items, we should be diligent about gauging their redlines (if any), including their understanding of the risks and harms associated with the proposed research.

Finally, the issue of deference often arises in fieldwork. Should local partners carry a decisive veto over risk assessments and how to respond to adverse events? How much weight should be given to local preferences over site location or interview subjects? What happens when there's disagreement within the team? And how much autonomy will team members have for making adjustments to adverse events, including changing field sites or interviewees, once in the field? While we tend to defer to local expertise, team members have their own identities and interests. These can sometimes work at cross-purposes to the proposed research and create new ethical dilemmas. In Afghanistan, for example, local views often carried enormous weight in planning and delivering aid projects. In some cases, however, this led to aid diversion, the rise of corruption, and sabotaged impact evaluations, leaving researchers unable to gauge aid's effects on local attitudes and violence. Team dynamics, and how to manage possible ethical dilemmas arising from them, should be addressed in our preregistration documents.

4.3 Individual Participants

Much has already been written about the ethical treatment of research participants drawn from vulnerable populations in (post-)conflict settings.²⁵ Here I would simply reiterate that we must move beyond the legalistic protections afforded by IRB protocols to consider broader notions of ethical research. In particular, the issue of informed consent looms large. Preregistration exercises are an ideal venue for defining what constitutes “informed

²⁵The ARC Bibliography offers an excellent entry point for this literature. See: <https://advancingconflictresearch.com/resources-1>.

consent” among these populations and how it will be obtained. How will you ensure, for example, that participants not only understand the initial decision to offer consent but that they retain the right to revoke it at any time? How much deception, if any, is ethical under these conditions? What happens if interviews and surveys, to take two examples, are public in nature? What does informed consent mean when access to a location is brokered with a rebel (or criminal) organization or repressive state agencies?

Scholars also need to be proactive about considering the risks of retaliation against participants. Given ever-increasing powers of state (and non-state) surveillance, researchers need to document the nature of precautions they will take to preserve participant anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses or behavioral data. Studies that encourage high-risk activism — say, participation in mass protest in autocracies — or that solicit views on sensitive topics such as support for criminal or insurgent organizations (or, indeed, the government) need to be especially careful to build robust data protection measures. Direct questions, for example, might be abandoned in favor of indirect questioning techniques that obscure the respondent’s identity. In some cases, the risk of retaliation might prove too high to conduct ethical research.

Preregistration can also be helpful in detailing how participants might be harmed by their involvement. Harm can take many forms. Re-traumatization, for example, is a possible danger for individuals who have been victimized in these settings. Given this possibility, certain aspects of an individual’s personal history might be off-limits or require an indirect approach. Similarly, partnership with aid agencies or non-government organizations might stoke hope among individuals of future material rewards for participation. These expectations might have distorting effects on the research; they may also create backlash by angry individuals who believe that they have been misled or exploited. There may also be invisible harms, including loss of wages, disrupted studies, reputational loss, or other opportunity costs born by participants.

One additional issue deserves mention. Every study makes an implicit tradeoff between the potential costs and benefits for the proposed research. There is a danger, however, in fieldwork that draws on too few individuals to make a meaningful contribution about local populations, let alone more generalizable claims. We need to think hard about how to right size our samples to avoid both needless harm by scaling up too much but also running risks that our research is too underpowered to make credible claims. Studies that are too small to make credible claims but that still heighten risks among vulnerable populations represent

the worst of both worlds. We must be mindful of the possible risks facing participants while avoiding the trap of too-small samples that might lead to mistaken inferences.²⁶

4.4 Host and Adjacent Communities

Preregistration also creates the opportunity to consider one’s ethical obligations toward host and neighboring (“adjacent”) communities. We often treat spillover between individuals (or villages) as a methodological problem to be mitigated, if not eliminated completely. But our research can also create ethical spillover if its consequences are felt within host communities or even ripple beyond them.

Our calculations of risk and potential harm should be extended to the communities that host our research rather than focusing narrowly on participants only. Informed consent, for example, may involve seeking formal permission from local power-brokers to conduct the desired research. Our interventions and, indeed, our mere presence, can often upset existing power or social hierarchies in host communities. Economic interventions, for example, may create a new set of winners and losers within host communities that can have long-term effects, including decreasing trust, stoking jealousies, and creating incentives to engage in violence.²⁷ In short, what are your short- and long-term obligations to the host communities that make the fieldwork possible?

One of the most important — and neglected to date — areas of ethical concern is that of group rights and demographically identifiable information (DII). Following Raymond (2017), DII is “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.” Nearly all ethical discussions focus on the researcher’s own data collection (a “single stream” approach). We must be aware, however, of how our data can be merged with other, usually independent, fieldwork to create a new picture of host communities that might increase their risk of harm. How

²⁶For example, there is a growing trend in conflict studies of using small-n samples to survey attitudes among vulnerable populations. While these might be motivated by a desire to minimize potential risks, they may be too underpowered to generate credible causal inferences. Risk is therefore imposed on these populations without producing useful knowledge.

²⁷This is true even of household-level interventions, where family and gender hierarchies may be scrambled by participation in vocational training or cash transfer programs.

our data collection fits into a mosaic comprised of many sources, some of which might not be collected yet, thus poses an unusually thorny ethical problem.

Imagine, for example, fielding a survey that records the respondent's ethnic or religious identity. With standard random samples, a site's ethnic composition could be extracted with reasonable precision simply from the respondents' demographic information. Standard data practices, including redacting respondents' names, would not guard against the construction of these site-level indicators. In turn, these demographic data, including questions about education and wealth, could be married with data gleaned from other methods (e.g., remote sensing) to assemble a rich mosaic of site-specific attributes without ever compromising informed consent or respondent anonymity. Repressive governments could use these mosaics to target rival ethnic groups or pro-insurgent populations. Humanitarian organizations might use these data portraits to direct their aid efforts. A researcher might find herself inadvertently helping choose winners and losers, or fueling conflict dynamics, if their DII data are combined with other efforts.

The need to consider future data uses is only likely to grow. 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 possible harm. We are fast 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 convergence of these data streams raises a morass of tricky issues for prevailing notions of informed consent. Merging data collected under informed consent with other data where consent was neither asked nor given (e.g., via remote imagery) may invalidate the original consent. Individuals might also give consent while unaware that their data will be merged with other sources. Our preregistration documents should therefore consider explicitly the consequences for groups affected by the proposed research. This amounts to a major revision of how current IRB practices are structured and how we view ethical fieldwork.

Central to this radical reimagining will be extending our ethical conversations to adjacent communities. Certain interventions (e.g., hot-spot policing) can displace crime from

targeted communities to neighboring ones. Aid, too, can draw new populations to the disbursement site or, alternatively, create jealousy among neighboring villages that do not receive aid. Paying locals to play experimental behavioral games might similarly create anger or resentment among excluded neighbors. Even focus groups and interviews could be misinterpreted as a prelude to future aid (or government presence), shifting expectations and behavior in unvisited adjacent communities.²⁸ How far the effects of our research might ripple is a matter of the nature of the intervention and the local context. But the notion that such spillover is possible, indeed, likely, should inform our preregistration exercise.

4.5 Policy-Makers and the Policy Process

There is little formal guidance to date on what constitutes “responsible” engagement of policy-makers or, indeed, the broader public. Yet the nature of our involvement in the policy process and the end-uses of our research have far-reaching implications for vulnerable populations and home audiences alike. While each of us will define our role differently, we must all consider our desired position in the policy process before fieldwork begins. We cannot be stewards of ethical policy advice if our own research is ethically flawed at the outset. But we must work to maintain our ethical redlines as we become enmeshed in the policy process.

Researchers seeking to embed themselves within (non-)governmental organizations will need to introduce these partners to their ethical redlines very early in any collaboration. Sharing your preregistration document can ensure that ethical concerns are reflected in the choice of research design, nature of the proposed intervention and fieldwork, and post-fieldwork public outreach. Key questions to consider include: What is the level of agreement about ethical redlines and proposed risk and harm mitigation strategies between yourself and partners? Does your dependence on your research partner create vulnerabilities that might lead to e-hacking? Will you consent to pre-publication review and accept limitations on data-sharing? Or will you require your research to be peer-reviewed before offering actionable policy advice? Is there agreement on public outreach? Are you comfortable conducting side analyses that will be used for internal organizational purposes but not published? Are you comfortable with your (initial) findings being injected directly into

²⁸Spillover also raises the question of how we might compensate adjacent individuals and communities for harmful effects when they are not formally part of our fieldwork.

the policy process?

Even indirect routes to influencing the policy process can raise ethical issues. We can now reach broad audiences through high-quality e-magazines and blogs (e.g., *Washington Post's Monkey Cage*, *Political Violence at a Glance*, *Foreign Affairs*, and *War on the Rocks*, podcasts, op-eds, and social media like Twitter, LinkedIn, and Meta. Doing so, however, can sometimes force a tradeoff between nuance and flashiness; weighed down by caveats, our arguments may fail to find traction among harried policy-makers looking for streamlined solutions. Whether we should junk nuance for simpler narratives, and how we convey uncertainty about our findings, will remain challenges for policy-facing scholars. We will also wrestle with the moral hazard problem of supporting certain policies or interventions where we are insulated from direct consequences of failure.²⁹ Public efforts to shape policy might also meet unwelcome resistance if the policy issue has become politicized.³⁰ Ultimately, we cannot control how policy-makers or the public engage our work. But we can preregister our commitment to how we describe our findings; what types of outlets and audiences we will engage; and our level of engagement in fact-checking and challenging mistaken narratives.

5 Protecting Redlines: Specific Actions

Staking out ethical redlines is only half the battle, however. Ethics must be translated into action if we are to conduct fieldwork and policy engagement responsibly. I therefore offer eight suggestions that, when taken together, provide a blueprint for actionable items that could be included in a preregistration document.

Formalize your risk assessment. All preregistration documents should provide a transparent accounting of the possible risks associated with the proposed fieldwork. While context-specific, risk assessments should include a detailed discussion of the baseline risk to the vulnerable population as well as specific research partners, communities, and adjacent populations. Some research may require a statement of how the proposed intervention will affect both recipient and adjacent communities and locations. Risk assessment should

²⁹Chenoweth 2020.

³⁰Online harassment and abuse is especially severe for women and people of color. While one-in-five adults report being harassed online for their political views, women and POC are more likely to experience severe harassment and to be targeted for their gender or ethnicity. See Vogels 2021, 8-11.

explicitly acknowledge the possibility that risk may spillover to neighboring populations. Once a baseline is established, researchers should also outline what types of actions represent increased risk to research participants and facilitators. The threat of increased harm might arise from the research itself or changing circumstances in the fieldwork setting. In either case, researchers should detail how much increased risk is acceptable before the net balance between the costs and benefits of research swings too sharply toward anticipated harm.³¹

Define informed consent. Scholars should detail how informed consent will be obtained from both research participants and host communities. While consent is contextually specific, researchers must nonetheless describe how participants will be informed about potential risks of participation, including the level of uncertainty about those risks.³² Scholars should pay attention to both the quality of informed consent and the types of information that would enable participants to make credible assessments about the costs and benefits of participation. How permission will be obtained, and from which consenting parties, must also be described. In many settings, informed consent is a combination of individual decisions and those of relevant political authorities, including village elders, regional administrators, and neighborhood organizations. Consent is also an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. Researchers could pose follow-up questions during the research process to ensure that participants still wish to participate. These questions could also probe for issues or practices that are causing unease. In one recent field experiment in Mexico, for example, researchers pre-specified a stopping rule: if five percent or more respondents felt unhappy about their participation, the study would pause so that additional information could be given to assuage participants' concerns.³³

Sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with relevant partners. MOUs can be a powerful vehicle for safeguarding ethical redlines. Researchers should craft and sign these documents with relevant partners well before conducting fieldwork or disseminating findings. MOUs should determine who controls the data that results from the partnership; whether partner organizations have the right to pre-publication review; whether

³¹Examples of specific questions to pose when assessing risk can be found in Asiedu et al. 2021.

³²See Wood 2006.

³³Baron et al. 2022.

the researcher will be expected to conduct “off-book” analyses intended for internal consumption only; and the nature of post-research media outreach efforts, including the extent of the researcher’s participation in these activities. Detailing responsibilities clearly, as well as timelines for deliverables, can also alleviate time constraints that often weaken ethical safeguards. While legalistic, these MOUs can be invaluable for protecting a researcher’s intellectual freedom and for shaping how findings are portrayed to policy audiences and the broader public.

Commit to robust piloting. We often operate without knowing fully how the proposed research will affect local populations. This is especially true of large-scale field experiments and surveys on sensitive issues in (post-)conflict settings. Even focus groups and interviews have the potential for creating unexpected harm if they upset local dynamics. Researchers should therefore plan (and budget) for piloting their interventions, surveys, or interview questions on a relevant subset of the population before scaling up their efforts. Desk reviews of prior research are of course useful. But little can replace the lessons learned from piloting in the same conditions where the proposed research will be conducted. Such efforts might reveal that certain questions are too sensitive, that unexpected dynamics arise in focus groups, or that substantial spillover effects are present, forcing adjustments to either the intervention or the measurement strategy. Pilots should be large enough to detect potential problems; multiple rounds might be necessary to fine-tune risk assessments and to avoid inflicting harm inadvertently.

Build a “kill-switch”. Based on their risk assessment, researchers should build an explicit mechanism — a “kill-switch” — for rapidly suspending fieldwork. All researchers, regardless of their methodological leanings, should be able to identify a set of indicators for determining whether their research is inadvertently elevating risk or causing actual physical or mental harm. Surges in crime or violence relative to pre-fieldwork baselines offer one possible warning sign. Adverse behavioral changes among participants are also important clues. Perhaps, for example, a police training program makes officers more abusive toward civilians; perhaps cash transfers stoke increased domestic violence by upending traditional gender norms. Within-subject observations, especially through interviews and surveys, will be especially useful in detecting increased risk or harm. Timing is key: investigators should engage in persistent monitoring over the project’s life, often at repeated intervals,

rather than a one-time evaluation at the project’s end. Multiple attitudinal and behavior indicators could be blended into an index for assessing when to pause fieldwork. Of course, not every adverse incident will require pausing fieldwork. Instead, researchers will need to draw conclusions about whether the observed harm stems from the researcher’s fieldwork or from changing ground conditions unrelated to the researcher’s presence. Criteria for restarting fieldwork should also be discussed in the preregistration document.

Consider debriefing and post-research harm mitigation. Scholars should consider whether participants and relevant communities should be debriefed once fieldwork ends. Interviews and focus groups could be conducted with participants and key local stakeholders to explain the fieldwork’s purpose and to gauge downstream harm.³⁴ Participants could also be asked if they believed the research was ethical and appropriate, particularly if deception is used.³⁵ Public meetings to describe the the research and its findings would also represent a good-faith effort to give back to host communities while also investigating the possibility of post-research harm. These meetings are especially valuable after fieldwork that involves attitudinal or behavioral interventions that seek to alter attitudes toward out-groups or coping strategies among vulnerable populations. They also represent a relatively low-cost measure of collecting additional data on the spatial reach and temporal persistence of our interventions.

Scholars should pair debriefing with preregistered plans for mitigating possible second-order consequences that might arise for host or adjacent communities. To avoid “informational harm,”³⁶ scholars should redact community-identifying information, including latitude and longitude coordinates, from public datasets.³⁷ Researchers, along with their partners, can also establish data collection plans to monitor relevant communities for post-research harm. While we typically view research as concluded once we leave the field, the reality is that the effects of of our interventions (and even just our presence) can take time to unfold. In some cases, the negative consequences of these interventions may manifest only after prying (foreign) eyes have left. Above all, scholars should use the preregistration exercise to consider what obligations they owe to participants and host communities and

³⁴See, for example, Lyall, Zhou and Imai 2020.

³⁵Desposato 2018.

³⁶Raymond 2019.

³⁷These could be made available to other scholars for replication or publication purposes so long as community-level data remained anonymized.

how long these debts last.

Identify possible misuse of research by policymakers. One downside of policy engagement is the potential that our findings and, in some cases, even our methodological tools, might be applied for purposes we may disagree with on ethical grounds.³⁸ At worst, our findings might be miscast to defend odious policies or inflict actual harm on vulnerable populations. To be clear, scholars are not responsible for every misuse of their data or findings. Nor can we let policymakers exercise a kind of soft veto over the types of research that we conduct. Instead, we should consider foreseeable misuses of our findings and take action to mitigate these concerns. For example, concealing village locations that receive “hearts and minds” economic assistance would prevent governments from punishing communities that continued to support criminal or insurgent organizations. How findings are disseminated is also important. Social media and outlets like the Washington Post’s *Monkey Cage* are powerful channels for influencing policy. But outreach can sometimes come at the expense of nuance and exaggerated findings. Scholars should consider how they might effectively communicate both the strength of the findings and possible caveats, including levels of uncertainty, before a media blitz is launched.

It is also possible to build in safeguards to protect one’s ethical redlines. 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.³⁹ 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?

³⁸Consider, for example, the possibility that the creation of statistical packages or the automation of text analysis provides actors with new technical capabilities for using (or extending) your original analysis.

³⁹Lyll 2019; Papadogeorgou et al. 2020.

I declined: I wanted to understand the violence, not engage in its actual production. I therefore imposed a six month delay in receiving new data updates, a form of planned obsolescence that prevented my findings from being used to guide daily targeting decisions.

Know when to exit. While optimism is a prerequisite of fieldwork in fragile settings, researchers must also consider worst case scenarios. Above all, scholars should be prepared to answer the question of when (and how) to shutter a project completely if ethical redlines are breached. Some situations may simply prove irredeemable from an ethical standpoint. Committing to an exit strategy in advance can prevent situations where researchers find themselves rationalizing ethical violations once they are enmeshed in the hurly-burly of fieldwork. It is also important to recognize that participants, brokers, and host communities do not have the same exit options. They will bear the brunt of ethical transgressions and the consequences of hasty exits. Before opening the door to fieldwork, it makes sense to locate the exits and anticipate the circumstances that might drive you to them.⁴⁰

6 Better Social Science and Policy Through Preregistration

There's little use hiding the fact that preregistration, if done correctly, is burdensome. It represents a substantial time commitment and a costly, if self-imposed, constraint on a researcher's discretion during fieldwork. Yet the advantages for both social science and policy are considerable. At a minimum, preregistration is a boon to transparency: often-hidden decisions about risk assessment, harm mitigation, and methodological choices are now revealed in far greater detail than current norms dictate.⁴¹ Posting these documents, whether as part of a formal preregistration exercise or a more personal statement, will also help build a repository of best practices about how to approach ethical fieldwork and policy engagement. Indeed, in the absence of a universal code of conduct for political scientists,⁴²

⁴⁰This logic also applies to collaboration with policymakers in which one's findings or methods are distorted for political purposes. An exit — perhaps as a public correction (or disavowal) of the research, or a private severing of ties — may be necessary under certain conditions.

⁴¹The situation is slowly changing, however. Scholars have started calling for ethical discussions in appendices (Asiedu et al., 2021) while leading journals (notably, *American Political Science Review*) have mandated ethics statements.

⁴²For one such effort in economics, see DeMartino 2011.

these statements may collectively represent both an emergent norm and a learning tool for scholars, especially those approaching fieldwork for the first time.

Reputational benefits and, yes, costs, might further cement this norm into place. As more researchers preregister their redlines, organizational partners might choose to work only with scholars who have publicly signaled their commitment to ethical research. By contrast, unscrupulous organizations might steer clear of researchers who have signaled their ethical commitment, reducing the odds that scholars will confront ethical dilemmas once in the field. And, on the methodological front, the need to assess risk and monitor possible harms cries out for a mixed-methods approach, with qualitative and quantitative approaches joined in a common framework. Interviews and focus groups, for example, can be conducted alongside a field experiment to determine why a particular result was observed and whether harm was inflicted on research participants. The result is more rigorous, and perhaps more nuanced, findings that can improve the design and implementation of policy interventions in these settings.

Yet the demands of preregistration should not become so onerous that they crowd out fieldwork entirely. Preregistration is a framework, not a straitjacket. Scholars should also take care to revisit their preregistration documents after major rounds of fieldwork or before a new project is undertaken. Past ethical concerns, for example, may be irrelevant in a new context. Precautions about collecting certain types of data or asking particular questions might be relaxed if individuals prove far more forthcoming, and the risks of harm much lower, than anticipated. The opposite might also hold true: with experience, researchers might shift their ethical redlines forward as they come to better realize the sources of risk and harm in a given setting. Preregistration documents are, in the final analysis, living documents that should reflect our hard-won lessons from engaging policymakers and conducting fieldwork.

7 Conclusion

This essay has sketched a modest proposal: researchers should publicly preregister their ethical redlines when conducting policy-relevant fieldwork among vulnerable populations. While a simple practice, preregistration has numerous benefits. These include increased transparency of risk assessments, stronger safeguards against unexpected harm to research

participants and communities, and improved communication of study limitations to policy-makers. These benefits accrue regardless of a scholar's methodology: interviews, focus groups, participant observation, surveys, and randomized control trials could all be housed within a preregistration framework. To be clear, my intent here is not to impose a single ethical standard. Many issues that arise during fieldwork are context-specific and morally challenging; individuals acting in good faith will reach different conclusions about how to address ethical dilemmas. But all scholars will benefit from investing time and effort identifying their ethical redlines, assessing baseline risks, and proposing possible solutions *before* fieldwork. The stakes, already high when dealing with vulnerable populations, only become more so when we step into the policy arena, regardless of our good intentions. Public pledges of our redlines can help ensure that we remain within the guardrails of ethical fieldwork and policy engagement while avoiding the pitfalls of our ambitions.

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