Title: Forum: Rethinking Ethics Review for International Relations Research

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Abstract: In this forum, scholars contribute to a critical re-evaluation of ethics review processes arguing that the existing frameworks are inadequate for the dynamic and politically charged environments in which International Relations as a discipline operates. We observe the institutionalized nature of ethics reviews and their inadequacy to address the methodological and epistemological approaches typical of IR. Drawing on experiences from diverse contexts and bringing together expertise from diverse institutions, the forum's object is to raise awareness of the limitations of the one-size-fits-all approach of current ethics review protocols. Such approaches overlook the power dynamics and the contextual sensitivities in which IR scholarship operates and instead of addressing these, they risk amplifying their negative consequences. Although there is no easy fix for this, we hope to inspire readers and stimulate critical engagement by reporting on alternative practices that prioritize reflexivity, inclusion, context-specific adjustments, and continuous ethical dialogue among all stakeholders involved.
We call for an ethics that is not only procedurally compliant but is also substantively consistent with the nuances of IR research landscapes.

Keywords: research ethics, International Relations, fieldwork, IRB, ethics review

Rethinking Ethics Review for International Relations Research

Introduction: Research Ethics in IR

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Over the past several decades, institutional ethics review has become a requirement for research with and on people in many countries; research estimates that today, these regulations extend to the social sciences in nearly 25% of countries worldwide (Tapscott and Machón 2024). This expectation is increasingly reinforced from various directions, as academic publishers, journal editors, and funding bodies have also begun adopting requirements for researchers to demonstrate compliance with this regulatory system (Dingwall 2007). Ethics review almost universally includes some form of scrutiny by committee and is guided by open-ended principles of beneficence and non-malfeasance, respect for persons, and justice (Israel 2015). Both the form of review by committee and the core principles can be traced to practices adopted for biomedical and clinical research in post-World War II United States (Stark 2012).

Social scientists have long voiced criticism of ethics review, highlighting that its assumptions about research rely on biomedical norms and practices that often do not translate to social science methodologies or epistemologies (Lederman 2007). Common criticisms amongst social scientists note the system's preference for signed informed consent even when it may increase risks for respondents (Wynn and Israel 2018), failure to account for power

imbalances (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Siddiqui and Turnbull), and a focus on individual researchers and participants to the extent that the larger societal costs and benefits of conducting research are not adequately weighed (Johnson 2018). Less widely discussed but equally important are the differential effects of an institutionalised system of ethics review that falls heavily on postgraduate researchers and others with constrained timelines and budgets. Incentives for publishing more and faster can also work to the detriment of an adequate ethical process, while complex and time-consuming review procedures add to the workload of researchers and their administrators, often without proper acknowledged by their employers.

Like cognate disciplines, International Relations (IR) scholars, especially in conflict studies, have pointed to the need for an ethics review process based on greater reflexivity and with attention paid to researcher positionality and power asymmetries between all research stakeholders (Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay 2016; Shesterinina 2019; Krause 2021). Lee Ann Fujii (2012) brought these concerns to the fore in her reflections researching genocidaires in Rwanda, showing how a procedural notion of ethics review failed to address the real-world ethical challenges that she encountered. Ethics review processes have also been critiqued for copy-pasting western views of sensitive topics onto foreign contexts (Segalo and Molobela 2019) or being overly risk-averse to protect institutional interests over those of the researcher and research participants (Peter and Strazzari 2017). There is also an important question of how IR scholars can conduct ethical research remotely, whether relying on research teams or virtual methods to collect data (Konken and Howlett 2023).

Beyond these general reflections, the unique characteristics of IR prompt particular questions about research ethics. These stem from the discipline's methodological and epistemological pluralism (Jackson 2011); attention to interactions across and beyond borders; focus on

power, specifically as it manifests in the international realm and traverses both the international and local (Barnett and Duvall 2005; Guzzini 2013; Enloe 2014); and interest in international and transnational actors including elites. Taken individually, these aspects are not the exclusive prerogative of IR, but their combination define a disciplinary context with a degree of specificity that generates unique questions of research ethics deserving of recognition.

Firstly, IR embraces diverse methodologies and theories, ranging from causal to interpretivist perspectives. These methodological and epistemological approaches rely on fundamentally different assumptions about human agency and autonomy on one hand, and social explanation on the other – concepts that are central to research ethics. While a purely causal approach allows researchers to see themselves as autonomous from their research endeavours, an interpretivist one embeds researchers and their positionalities into their research designs and ethical considerations from the get-go (Frazer 2020). This diversity, arguably, requires IR to adopt a more flexible and open-ended approach to ethics regulation than other disciplines.

Secondly, beyond its methodological and epistemological variance, IR research is organised around questions that cross political borders. While other disciplines such as political science, sociology, and anthropology also conduct research internationally, the politics of cross–border relations are the very object of IR research, as is demonstrated by its concentration on inter-state interactions, international organizations' behaviour, international orders, and international and transnational actors and phenomena. As Tapscott and Rincón Machón (2024) highlight, these features of IR intersect with the reality that ethics requirements are currently determined at a national level. Thus, while scholars increasingly call for studies outside of their institution's country to seek so-called 'local' ethical review (which is

typically overseen by national guidelines and requirements), we must grapple with the reality that states may have incompatible agendas for what type of knowledge is produced on domestic and international politics (Glasius 2018). This raises unique and complex ethical queries about academic freedom, and hierarchies in collaboration and knowledge co-production, which often sit at odds with the incentives of advancement in the academy.

Thirdly, our research often studies power, especially as a transborder phenomenon, meaning that it often manifests in a way that transcends the institutional order of the state. IR scholars consequently deal frequently with conflict zones, emergency situations, and so-called peripheral areas, or seek to uncover the inner workings of global elites and political regimes – spaces where power may be governed through informal institutions, highly fragmented and contested, and unpredictable or illegible to outsiders (Acharya 2016; Glawion 2020; Tapscott 2021). While related disciplines also engage with questions of power, and we can certainly learn from their insights, they do so from situated positions. For example, sociology typically studies domestic processes, and thus does not have to grapple with inter-national interests in the way IR does. Whilst variation does exist, anthropology largely draws on inductive and interpretivist methods; this methodological coherence within the discipline perhaps has been an important catalyst for more directly opposing the strictures of institutional ethical review designed for deductive and positivist methods.

Fourthly, and relatedly, as a significant proportion of IR scholarship studies elites, the power dynamics typically assumed in processes of institutional ethics review are reversed in our research. While we wish to protect all of our respondents from unnecessary harm, elites often do not share our interests in holding the powerful to account (Siddiqui and Turnbull 2024). For these reasons, IR scholars face unique challenges and, arguably, limitations in effectively navigating their research within the confines of institutional ethics review processes. Single

submission point ethics review systems that see researchers as more powerful than their research participants are limited in their ability to grapple with the relevant ethical questions in IR research and can even be counterproductive to scholarly interests and objectives.

When combined with the methodological diversity and international focus of our discipline, a complex set of questions hence emerges around how to negotiate the formal, nationally-embedded regulatory ethics review requirements for our research in a way that stays true to the topics, places, and people we study. Crucially, we recognise that these issues are not exclusive to IR. We should and surely can build on insights from related fields including anthropology, sociology, and political science. At the same time, the aforementioned concerns are at the core of what we do as IR scholars, and thus, they should be of special concern to us. There therefore remains a serious need for the discipline of IR to consider the role of institutional ethics review in our research.

This Forum

This forum stems from such questions and a general dissatisfaction of IR scholars about the present status of institutional research ethics review. Originating from a roundtable at the ISA Annual Convention of 2023, the forum seeks to prompt a robust discussion about research ethics that gives voice to the needs of IR research – both around procedural ethics and ethics in practice. To offer some preliminary considerations about the idiosyncrasies and demands of IR research, we convened a diverse range of scholars at institutions in, for want of better terms, both the "Global South" and "Global North." Drawing on their diverse backgrounds and perspectives, all contributors to this forum share critical perspectives on ethics review. In detailing their experiences conducting research in dynamic socio-political contexts, and collaborating with others across borders and institutions, they identify various issues with ethics review processes – although neither exhaustive nor exclusive – with the aim of

bringing this discussion more centrally into IR. They also offer examples of practices they adopted to maintain high deontological standards in challenging research contexts. We hope that their learnings may be useful for readers to reflect on their own experiences of ethical regulatory requirements. Perhaps more ambitiously, we also hope this symposium might be a starting point to orient IR readers to think about if and how the discipline can collectively carve out space to build its own robust, grounded, and tailored practice of research ethics in response to, at times, problematic institutional requirements.

Unsurprisingly, the picture painted by this forum's contributors is complex, just like the world within which our work is conducted. Still, the following core contentions are clear: first, as a discipline, we lack a strong foundation to assess the specificity of the ethics of IR research; and, second, without this, we risk applying ethical review processes that are unmoored from the nature of the research we seek to conduct and its attendant power hierarchies, exclusions, and silences. A common theme that emerges across the forum that is likely to resonate with the experience of readers is therefore that, as it stands, much about the current ethics review process for IR research is inadequate to address our actual ethical challenges, and, it sometimes raises new ethical challenges of its own. Most critically, as the forum's contributors both individually and collectively illustrate, a one-size-fits-all approach to ethical review frequently amplifies pre-existing power imbalances between research institutions, researchers, and researched populations; risks perpetuating Western-centric biases; and, most problematically, fails to adequately address the needs and expectations of the wide-ranging stakeholders in IR research.

By detailing how they conceptualised and addressed ethical quandaries when carrying out their diverse research projects, or observing those conducted by others, the authors in this forum specifically underscore that the canonical forms of ethics assessment do not fit the

ever-changing and fast-moving contexts which IR scholars often focus on. In her piece, Natalia Otrishchenko, for example, identifies how alternative approaches to ethics review – particularly, a deliberative group to continuously reflect on ethics within the quickly evolving and highly sensitive context created by war – allowed her team to collect data from the beginning of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. In contrast, as she explains, the cumbersome and lengthy ethics review processes in Western European countries not only prevented her partner institutions from conducting research in the initial weeks and even months after the invasion, but hindered them from documenting and gathering critical information about the conflict – a reality which could, arguably, even be considered *unethical* for knowledge production about the war, and certainly indicative of the embedded costs of ethical review processes that are too often overlooked. By outlining her team's commitment to continually assessing local dynamics and updating their work in response to the evolving situation, Otrishchenko's contribution underscores the importance of bringing context-specific knowledge into discussions of ethics, especially in dynamic and conflict settings.

In an entirely different context, Grace Akello similarly argues for the need to consider local specificities when Global North scholars conduct research in the Global South – a topic that should be of great relevance to many scholars of IR. Reporting on her experiences as a researcher in Uganda collaborating with institutions from the Global North, the author highlights how she has regularly observed research ethics procedures fail to engage with local ethical standards, thus widening the gap and exacerbating power imbalances between researchers, researched populations, and institutions, and reflecting a prevailing and pernicious view that those based and trained in elite Global North institutions are legitimate producers of knowledge and authoritative voices on ethics, while those in the Global South merely supply context, data, and evidence. In illuminating the shortcomings of the dominant Western biomedical model of ethical review for IR research, especially when used to vet

research in non-Western contexts, Akello's work critically emphasises the importance of deferring to contextually grounded knowledge and collaborating with scholars from the areas we study on an equal basis to uphold high ethical research standards.

Mousumi Mukherjee also illustrates the challenges involved in translating the ethics codes of conduct for research widely used by scholars in the Global North to a Global South context. By drawing on her own experience engaging with ethics review processes in India's Higher Education system, the author details how common practices mandated by ethics review boards in the Global North, such as informed consent documentation, can be harmful and even make some participants more vulnerable, especially in environments with entrenched colonial legacies. The contention underlined by Mukherjee is that institutional ethics review processes are embedded in broader colonial dynamics and, therefore, can and often do reproduce these hierarchies, even when attempting to do the opposite. Elaborating on some of the core issues concerning ethical review that she and her home institution seek to tackle, Mukherjee hence reiterates the need to account for context-specific nuances in both procedure and practice.

Speaking directly to the challenges highlighted by the other contributors, Anastasia Shesterinina discusses her own ethical research practice throughout the research process by prioritising contextual and ethnographic sensibilities. By acknowledging her positionality as a scholar from the Global North who has conducted team-based, fieldwork-intensive conflict research all over the world, the author stresses the importance of flexible research designs, ongoing reflexivity, and updating projects before, during, and after data collection. In doing so, she pushes scholars of IR to reconcile the tension between contextual sensitivities and comparability across cases, especially when volatile settings and vulnerable populations are involved, including those described by the other contributors. As an important illustration of

innovative and ethical IR research, her piece accordingly pushes scholars to re-think how we approach research ethics within our discipline.

Rethinking Research Ethics in IR

This forum evidently raises several critical considerations for IR scholarship. Firstly, drawing on real-world accounts of what a research ethics of IR looks like (or not) in practice, it becomes evident that we – as scholars and as a discipline – would do well to dedicate more resources and attribute greater value to it. This includes acknowledging the workload that ethics assessment entails for researchers and their departments but, especially, realising how unreflective ethics procedures and standards can, and do, perpetuate epistemic hierarchies and inequalities between the Global North and Global South, both within academia and vis-a-vis the societies under study. Instead of addressing and rebalancing such dynamics, the contributions in this collection show that research ethics review practices can very much contribute to their consolidation by setting standards of 'good' research practices without including the perspectives of those researched, those more locally connected to our research fields, or those who may be most impacted by our research. Taken together, the forum also reflects an ambivalence about whether so-called 'local' review processes can help mitigate these problems, as they often implement similar requirements and can introduce other layers of potentially politicised gatekeeping (Glasius 2018). As IR scholars, and as social scientists more generally, we must be attuned to these power differentials and consider the ways our research, and the ethics review processes we need to conduct for it, may perpetuate them.

In some ways, this critique may appear paradoxical. Western institutions tend to have more formalised and consolidated structures for ethics review than research institutions in other parts of the world. Intuitively, then, the expectation would be that the diffusion of research ethics norms should not become yet another postcolonial practice, but a process throughout

which the research field can be evened out to create the conditions for fair research to be conducted. Our contributors, however, suggest this is not a straightforward process – and we concur with them. Although, in principle, ethics reviews are expected to be in the interest not only of the researchers but also the researched, and should equalize hierarchical imbalances, in practice, the review process, the consent procedures, and the dynamics between funders and funded, or between lead researchers and partners, perpetuate such imbalances. The consequence is that research practices often remain extractive, widen the gap between institutions and scholars in the Global South and Global North, and reduce 'ethics' to a performative 'box-ticking' exercise that is a form of virtue signalling at best. As is evidenced by this forum: we believe that scholars of IR should have a different standard that goes beyond and challenges the status quo.

Secondly, the contributions in this forum identify a great need for the discipline of IR to better account for real-time and emergency research in complex settings and with vulnerable populations. The approaches taken by Otrishchenko and Akello emphasise that large funded projects, typically from Western institutions, usually find ways to carry out their studies regardless of ethics review requirements. While we may be widely critical of the ability of ethics review processes to meaningfully protect vulnerable populations or improve ethics in practice, it is nonetheless concerning that resources are often able to override these checks, consequently creating greater inequality in processes of knowledge production.

Still, the forum's authors note that it is possible to hold research to high ethical standards even in these dynamic and complex sites, by privileging context and politics and, at times, working with experts outside the formal ethics review process (see Otrishchenko in this forum). They also show that it is pertinent IR research does not overlook context-specific nuances because, as Mukherjee stresses, doing so risks reproducing colonial practices and

Western-dominated epistemological orderings in knowledge production. The thoughtful steps outlined by Shesterinina are therefore a useful starting point for IR scholars to think about how to practically hold research to high ethical standards when working across multiple cases, as well as in diverse research environments. Several of the contributors in this forum also identify that fostering stronger collaborations between local and foreign scholars can likewise contribute to more innovative and ethical research projects. At its core, the forum thus highlights the importance of international 'learning,' or the notion that institutional ethics requirements, especially those assumed by Western institutions, may be insufficient, or even detrimental, to ethical research practices in non-Western contexts.

Crucially, we recognise that IR departments are situated within larger university bureaucratic structures that govern their ethics review processes, which are also often in accordance with government policies. With this in mind, we do not advocate for new ethics research structures in this forum. We realise that developing viable alternatives to the existing institutional ethics review processes would prove a highly complex endeavour requiring conversations between, and the onboarding of, wide-ranging stakeholders, which is not achievable in this short forum or format. We instead use this symposium to raise awareness about the diverse ethical needs, questions, limitations, and challenges of the current ethics review processes for IR research. The discussion that follows is hence crucial for IR scholars narrowly and the discipline more generally to actively (re)think about what ethical research looks like, and could look like, in procedure and practice. It is equally relevant for the departments and institutions within which we are situated to become more aware of, and to reflect on, how ethics compliance procedures may produce unanticipated outcomes when applied to IR studies.

War-time ethical review committee: Reflections from Ukraine

Natalia Otrishchenko

Center for Urban History of East Central Europe, Ukraine

Following Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, one of the first reactions of Ukrainian historians and social scientists was to start collecting and archiving data. This included writing personal diaries, collecting memes, conducting interviews, and gathering evidence of war crimes. These initiatives were mainly driven by individual researchers and relied on their pre-existing communities and ideas of urgency and appropriateness. Yet, Ukrainian scholars' rapid reactions – personal and professional – went against well-planned temporalities and norms of academic research. War collapses ordinary life, as well as poses challenges for established procedures. Given the unfolding violence and unpredictability of Russia's war in Ukraine, there was (and remains) an evident need for risk assessments to conduct rigorous and ethical research.

Nevertheless, before 2022, there were no ethical review committees in Ukraine. Scholars instead more or less followed formal guidelines and codes developed by different professional associations (such as the *Sociologists' Code of Professional Ethics*, approved by the Fifth Congress of the Sociological Association of Ukraine on May 20, 2004). After Russia's full-scale invasion, considerable debates quickly emerged about researching the war, where some scholars advocated for absolute freedom to do anything in the name of science, while others took a more paternalistic position and rejected data collection due to the conditions of uncertainty. One of these extreme positions, hence, lies in the shadow of Milgram's experiment, while the other resembles censorship.[1] As academics living amidst the

1 Milgram's experiment was a series of experiments conducted by social psychologist Stanley Milgram investigating obedience to authority, which remains highly controversial and widely criticized for breaking

evolving war and seeing a critical need for data collection, we therefore had to search for a way to navigate between these extremes. In this collection, I therefore outline the steps we took to ensure ethical research, and the lessons learned for IR scholarship.

"4/02/22, 5 am: Testimonies from the War" Project

At the end of February 2022, the Center for Urban History – a privately funded academic NGO Lviv, Ukraine – secured its digital collections and then immediately converted its premises into a bomb shelter for anyone seeking a safe place to live. In early March 2022, the team was thus surrounded by numerous people who wanted to share their experiences of the war. Together with colleagues from the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, the Polish Academy of Sciences, the Polish Oral History Association, the University of Saint Andrews, and the Center of Contemporary and Digital History at the University of Luxembourg, we started online discussions about the possibility of documenting these stories ethically and in line with the highest academic standards. This led to the emergence of the "24/02/22, 5 am: Testimonies from the War" project.

At the Center for Urban History centre, we developed common ethical and methodological framings very quickly – in just three weeks – which now sounds impossible, considering the challenge of a full-scale invasion, constant stress, exhaustion, and the impossibility of planning one's life for more than a day due to heightened security risks. Nevertheless, this project became possible, as oral historian Mary Marshall Clark has written about 9/11 documentation, because of the "sense of urgency that can fuel an amazing level of activity and build a sense of community among interviewers, transcribers, narrators, and funders" (2014, 258). Although ethics reviews were not common, nor required, in Ukraine, we

numerous ethical guidelines around deception, protection from harm, and right to withdraw. Milgram's study is a useful example for scholars across disciplines, including IR, of the core principles of ethical research when working with human participants. (Milgram 1977)

reflected deeply on the practice of ethical research, especially about how to do no harm to our participants.

Yet, it was not possible to create any formal ethics committee for the Ukrainian part of the project during the escalation of the war, especially when academic institutions were struggling to survive, and people's lives were endangered. Relying solely on the decision of a foreign ethics committee seemed problematic to us, as it felt like a colonial practice where one institution (often the one with more resources) exerts moral authority over another. While the ethical protocols in Western institutions indeed carry many advantages in terms of protecting participants and researchers, our research about the war was not pre-planned and therefore a procedure was not in place at the time of the invasion. Scholars in other countries have also detailed other concerns about formalized and external ethics review (see for example Calabria, Harding, and Meiklejohn 2023; Fisher 2021; Krystalli 2021), while Surmiak (2019) directly links institutionalized ethical committees to audit culture. The existing scholarship shows a growing gap between the over-bureaucratized process of gaining ethical approval from institutions and the practical concerns of researchers in the field. We experienced this firsthand as our European partner institutions had to secure ethical review approvals to interview and document the experiences of Ukrainian refugees in host communities, which proved to be a lengthy and bureaucratic process; it took more than two months in Poland and five weeks in Luxembourg to receive the necessary ethics review board approvals (Łukianow and Wylegała 2023, 15). This led us to the first conclusion that if ethics reviews are required by institutions, in the situation of emergency, boards should be obliged to offer faster processing. This is particularly important for scholars collaborating across or studying populations and phenomena in other countries, as is true for much IR research.

The experience of the Ukrainian team of the '24/02/22, 5 am: Testimonies from the War' documentation initiative moreover revealed the importance of thinking about ethics and ethical sensitivities in new ways. We were able to put ethical and methodological frameworks in place quicker than our international colleagues because, rather than submitting an ethics review application to an institutional body concerned with safeguarding and compliance, we established a consulting group prioritising the ethical and sensitive collection of data about the war. In the format of open conversations, we tested our feelings and questions, trying to understand whether our decisions were informed and considered various challenges at different stages of the project – from interviewing to disclosure and the long-term effects of our research. The consulting group recognised that the situation during war is always evolving, requiring projects to adjust and adapt in response. Rather than a one-time permission approving scholars to do their work, the group was used for continuous engagement and dialogue to ensure that researchers collected data in the most informed and ethically sensitive ways. It also helped us to routinely check the adequacy of our decisions on various levels and during all stages of the project (and even beyond).

For this project, we accordingly practiced ethical reflexivity (von Unger 2021) and developed consulting procedures with people from the groups we planned to engage with (Gubrium and Harper 2016). We set the group up before the project's launch after consulting with internally displaced scholars and talking to people with different war experiences. Their comments helped us attune our questionnaire and recruitment procedures. Since people experience war in different ways, it was important to consider such variability and adapt to new information from the project's planning stage. We then reviewed the trauma-informed ethnography literature (Elliott et al. 2005; Isobel 2021; Jessee 2017) and consulted a psychologist to prepare ourselves for conducting interviews. One of the key rules from the very beginning of our work was that interviews could only be undertaken when the researcher had the resources

to emotionally deal with the experiences that might arise during the conversations. Among ourselves, we called this ‘the rule of the oxygen mask’ – first, we put it on ourselves, then we can help others.

We equally built on our earlier experiences of rapid response methods and researching dynamic situations ‘from within’ after interviewing participants during the Euromaidan protests in 2013–14 and documenting the COVID-19 pandemic. We also consulted scholars who had already interviewed people involved in and affected by the first phase of Russia’s aggression in Ukraine between 2014–22. These experiences proved beneficial both for our fieldwork and for us to think about the long-lasting outcomes of emergency projects. We additionally established academic and advisory boards operating on a voluntary basis to provide external review of our work every six months, and who could be consulted further in the case of urgent need. This group includes academics with various backgrounds – historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists – from Ukraine and beyond with regional expertise and working in different war contexts. Our colleagues from Saint Andrews University also developed a series of international seminars where invited researchers who work on the topics of trauma and violence globally could discuss the ethical sensitivities of research.[2] By helping us to reflect on our research practices, these events and the consulting group enhanced our ethical awareness and improved our ethical standards. They also show the ways that IR research can draw insight from other related disciplines working on related topics.

The team also served as a space to practice reflexivity. Through our regular meetings, we were able to examine interconnections between our evolving positions, choices, and outcomes. We additionally discussed the variations in the effects of our interventions on

2 See the program here https://www.lvivcenter.org/en/conferences/violence-trauma-seminars/ (accessed 6 March 2025).

people and their communities. For instance, we considered the different challenges involved in collecting, archiving, and disclosing testimonies, and tried to minimise or overcome any negative consequences of our work. We collectively agreed on an approach that can be summed up by the phrase 'inform and give choice,' as we saw our task as researchers to provide people with the maximum information available about the risks associated with their participation in the project and create as much space as possible for them to decide what, when, how, and under what conditions they participate and their information is made available. As we believe that interviews could and should be a space of empowerment, we decided that we must ensure participants hold maximum control – from the decision to join the project to options around archiving, with the possibility to withdraw at any time. We recognised the impossibility of predicting all consequences of our decisions and, simultaneously, the need to inform potential project participants as much as possible about this uncertainty. It was therefore critical that we conceptualised the project for our participants and ourselves beyond the time of emergency and the 'here and now,' viewing it instead through multiple time horizons. This was as much an ethical exercise as it was one of imagination and empathy.

Lessons Learned

As social scientists working with human participants, we live under multiple pressures for research, particularly balancing that no harm is done to our interlocutors and producing valid results. While researching an unfolding war, we have been forced to deeply reflect on the conduct of scientific work in extraordinary circumstances. Our experiences as scholars working with an NGO outside traditional academic institutions and in a situation of constant emergency due to a full-scale war highlights the potential of a process of consultation longitudinal to the research, which we believe can be applicable for other scholars, especially those studying IR-related topics and including those working within the ethical protocols of

institutions with certain and clear liabilities. We particularly realised the value of collective groups that are not necessarily affiliated with an institution, which are able to create a more flexible process that both maintains ethical standards and expedites ethics review processes. Still, these groups must be centred on consultation instead of monitoring, open communication instead of filling formal check-boxes, and the inclusion of different experts during various project stages instead of an exclusive group of professionals who evaluate an entire project before it can begin. Our experience can therefore be summarized in three main directions: diversification of the sources of advice, constant conversation about ethics sewn into the project, and a participatory approach throughout the entire research process.

As we learned, developing bespoke ethical processes for projects like ours can create space for important discussions about ethics. When the members of such boards have relevant experiences, communication with them (even if sometimes frustrating) can help researchers be more prepared to conduct research and help avoid potential pitfalls, ill-preparation, and overly ambitious projects (Jessee 2017; Fisher 2021). Indeed, our design of ethics review would be challenging for institutions that handle dozens of projects simultaneously, as it is both more time and resource consuming. However, our practice shows that such an approach can be productive – it helps researchers realise their biases and become more aware of possible risks. This is especially important when scholars are researching settings and phenomena that they are not also themselves living. It also contributes to subtle ethics reflections instead of simply performing ethical procedures. At minimum, institutions could encourage new processes of engagement that push researchers to reflect deeply and carefully about the meanings of informed consent, the implications of positionality, and the co-creation of narratives (Calabria, Harding, and Meiklejohn 2023). While difficult to codify, especially during times of war, such engagement could also include greater emphasis on ‘practical

ethics,' so that scholars more robustly consider how to treat people during and following their interactions.

Still, the responsibility of conducting ethically sensitive research fundamentally rests with scholars and their institutions. Our decisions inform our projects' ethical frameworks. Our experiences as scholars working and living in full-scale war conditions can therefore greatly add to existing literature on research ethics in IR research, especially around political violence and conflict. However, our experiences diverge from those of scholars whose voices dominate this literature and whose fields are not also their homes – often those situated in "Western" academic institutions. We accordingly stress the importance of context specificities and recognising ethics around and within each unique situation under study. If we agree that the documentation of individuals' stories is an act of empowerment, then we also must translate this into concrete steps: from recruitment to data collection and then to the archiving and disclosure of data.

Conclusion

In our experience, researching the Russia-Ukraine war is possible thanks to the prioritisation of trust, solidarity, and flexibility in our research designs. Trust is essential – faith in your colleagues working on the same project but also the larger professional milieus, to which you can turn with questions or for advice. This also means solidarity with those who are directly affected by the phenomena of interest and who want to share their experiences. In this way, ethics is implemented horizontally in relationships, not vertically in dos and don'ts, and exists in the practices of interaction, not in formal prescriptions. Flexibility is accordingly necessary on the level of procedures, but not the general ethical frame.

Finally, the war situation reveals the responsibility of scholars, which takes on radical forms – our work also social scientists can and does directly affect lives. To constantly see real

people behind discussions about data management or abstract academic findings is thus a return to the humanistic ideal that originally brought many of us into the profession. The main piece of practical advice I can draw from my experience of finding ethical ground during an unfolding war is thus: first, to create as vast a consulting network as possible to reach out to, and second, to talk to those whose lives you will document and ensure their interests are at the core of your work. These takeaways are critical for ensuring more ethical research in IR as well as the social sciences more largely.

Pre-approved studies during complex emergencies in Uganda: A new research ethics challenge to reckon with in the Global South

Grace Akello

Gulu University, Uganda

In the early 2000s, the concept of seeking ethics approval prior to conducting social science research was quite new in Uganda. The national ethics committee categorised studies into 'natural' and 'social science' research. Teams scrutinised natural science studies because of their potentially deleterious effects. In contrast, social science studies were not reviewed—to the extent that, in 2004, when I was obliged by a Dutch University to seek ethics clearance before assessing wartime young peoples' experience in northern Uganda, I appeared to impose a foreign process, a new process, to the then-National Ethics Board in Kampala. When their Research Secretary asked me why I wanted a social science research project to be reviewed, I answered that it was Leiden University's requirement, but also, as an institution, they needed to pay attention to what researchers do with respondents in the natural or the social sciences. I then submitted a package which included a letter of admission to Leiden University as a doctoral student, a research proposal, and a request for ethics clearance. The next day, I was called to pick a researchers' identity card to which I was obliged to pay 50.000UGX (approx. 18 Euros in 2004).

By further drawing on my experiences as researcher in Uganda navigating ethics review processes, this short contribution provides critical insight into how local ethics committees deal with increasing researcher-related challenges in social science research, especially with vulnerable populations and in emergency settings. The main aim of this piece is to shed light on ethics systems in different and non-'Western' contexts, and to highlight what this means

for IR scholars doing research in those contexts. This is important as much IR research uses countries in the "Global South" as case studies for their investigations. In this way, this contribution underscores both the role of ethics review processes and ways to conduct more ethical research in Uganda, as well as in other African countries and the "Global South" more generally.

Shortcomings of Ethics Requirements Understood in Light of Ethical Reflexivity

A decade after my experience detailed above, I was a co-investigator in a study funded by an international organization about how former Allied Democratic Force (ADF) fighters who were amnestied as a strategy to stop armed rebellion and were reintegrated among people they exposed to war-violence. By then, Uganda's National Ethics Committee appeared well-established to assess all types of studies, with various forms to fill, and several local and university ethics committees to monitor studies conducted in Uganda. Members of the local ethics committees were based within hospitals, state universities, and research institutions such as the Uganda Virus Research Institute. In this way, all regions in Uganda had one or two ethics committees to scrutinise researchers' protocols. These committees were meant to give 'local' perspectives, although they were generally heavily oriented toward biomedical research and implemented international standards, often with only a token social scientist to provide perspective on local issues. They also often took, and continue to take, significant time to complete reviews.

Out of a need for expedience in this study, my team and I requested another government body outside of Uganda, the Amnesty Commission (which had granted amnesty to all former armed fighters from both the ADF and other groups), to authorise our researchers to study amnestied ex-combatants. The Amnesty Commission wrote letters of introduction to present the research to various districts and facilitate the research. To ensure that the study was

conducted in an ethical manner, researchers on the project funded by this international organization were trained in asking sensitive questions about amnestied rebels' experiences and how to handle community demands related to the research. Participation in our study was voluntary and respondents were free to opt out or not answer any question they felt was sensitive. We also compensated respondents' time, reimbursed them for their transport (approximately 10 USD), and provided meals during the interviews. Contrary to common arguments suggesting that incentives and compensation risk biasing study outcomes, and that advocating for researchers to disentangle themselves from the complex social, economic, and political dynamics involved in their studies (i.e. 'de-politicise' research), we offered material packages at the end of our interactions with interlocutors. This was significant for our respondents, many of whom lived in abject poverty, were stigmatised, and were intermittently exposed to revenge attacks by ADF survivors nationwide for their decision to abandon the rebel fight and reintegrate into civilian life. Many of our respondents expressed gratitude when they received material packages from our team. To some extent, this was essential for establishing rapport and improving trust with stigmatised interlocuters.

While ensuring the fair treatment of our participants, our approach also neglected other procedures that are often recommended by Ugandan ethical review processes. For instance, we did not include in our study an obligation for researchers to provide distressed or traumatised ex-combatants and survivors with professional counselling. While offering counselling to populations that have suffered extensive violence and marginalisation is a solution that draws on Western and medical science assumptions about harm and its mitigation, we found that, in some contexts, this requirement may not be particularly useful or even ethical. In fact, during our prior field experience, our respondents did not desire or prioritise access to counselling. No respondents asked for counselling, even when we suggested it as a way of managing the effects of violence on their psychological and

emotional well-being (Akello 2019; Akello et al. 2010). Other scholars have also highlighted various efficacious approaches of coping with attendant war-related psychological distress beyond counselling (for example, Akello, Reis, and Richters 2010; Summerfield 1999). Although ethical review puts in place certain requirements and safeguards to ensure ethical research, we found that this pre-set demand by Ugandan ethical review processes for researchers to provide interlocutors with access to counselling reflects a gap or misalignment of imposing foreign guidelines which do not resonate with local needs and practical experiences of many Ugandans. Our experience hence raises questions standardised approaches set by ethics committees and their appropriateness in different settings.

The above example also highlights the importance of what Von Unger (2021) calls ethical reflexivity, which underscores the need for the diversification of sources of advice, ongoing conversations about ethics, and continuous reflection about the literature we use, including even alternative propositions. Furthermore, ethical reflexivity entails paying attention to researchers' embodied knowledge, which is enriched by both their own experiences and global debates about the topic and phenomena under study. Calabria et al. (2023) also highlight the notion of practical ethics, which focuses on treating people well both during and after research interactions to ensure research does not merely extract information from them. Treating people well also includes desisting from recommending interventions or advice premised on evidence generated elsewhere. Schatz (2009) likewise urges researchers to opt for ethnographic sensibility rather than pre-determined parameters by paying attention to interlocutors' local perspectives when doing research. For example, if interlocuters prioritise material, social, and other psychological approaches of coping with their experiences, both local and international researchers must attend to these needs or, at least, respect their different views. Pre-determined ethics parameters like offering counselling to interlocuters, not offering compensation to 'avoid bias', and avoiding empathic enmeshment (see Akello

2007) can be particularly challenging to researchers who have shared experiences with interlocuters. In such cases, flexible research designs and amendments to standard ethical protocols should thus be considered.

Improving Ethics Review in Light of Pre-Approved Studies

In the contemporary social scientific discourse, which includes IR research, the glorification of real-time evidence can additionally pose challenges for the conduct of ethical research. This is particularly demonstrated by the increasing use of pre-approved studies in countries in the "Global South" like Uganda. Pre-approved studies involve powerful research outfits seeking approvals from outside the national research ethics approval structures of the country they will conduct research in, often because they can be lengthy, obstructive, and require unhelpful changes to the study design. Pre-approved studies are often recommended for complex emergencies, whereby research goes ahead without the presentation of ethics protocols for clearance by local ethics committees. The demand for pre-approved studies is especially evident during crises, times of devastation and disaster, and when there are shortages of technical, economic, and structural resources to handle complex and multifaceted socio-political problems. These types of studies are conducted by both natural and social scientists, typically from the "Global North," sometimes supported by scientists in the "Global South."

In Uganda, pre-approved studies are typically developed and funded by foreign researchers with the aim of generating real-time evidence about particular phenomena. The over-arching characteristics for pre-approved real-time studies include the depoliticization of evidence and the generation of value-free, implementable, standardised context-free interventions. Local research teams who frequently scrutinise pre-approved studies and oblige researchers to minimise their extractive process are therefore seen as a barrier that slows down data

collection. A tension accordingly exists between the need for both additional safeguards and an ethics review structure premised on a biomedical model of research.

Whereas conducting pre-approved studies during complex emergencies has been proposed by international researchers as a way of generating real-time scientific evidence, many scholars in Uganda are disturbed by this precedent. While international researchers aim to overcome tedious and lengthy ethics review processes, pre-approved studies can be extractive and violate social, moral, and political boundaries. Since timing is key, as assessments must be conducted during certain events and under real-world conditions, like disease epidemics, it is particularly at these moments that I have observed Uganda become a tourist spot for foreign researchers. For example, in 2007, 2008, 2014, 2015, and 2018, the Ebola epidemic in the southwestern district of Bundibugyo bordering the DRC and West Africa attracted many scientific researchers who conducted investigational pharmaceutical and vaccine trials. I even witnessed foreign scientists fight amongst themselves to get access to people living in such complex emergency settings in order to collect evidence. The notion of ‘scientific tourism’ is thus commonly evoked in Uganda to describe foreign researchers who come to the country and want to study various phenomena, test hypotheses, or find a ‘study population’ or respondents to provide them with evidence.

Moreover, the aims and benefits of research have not been balanced with the potential harms to the study population. In Uganda, after permitting foreign researchers to conduct pre-approved studies, we have seen medical studies which are not socially and culturally adapted to local settings. Some pre-approved studies conducted during complex emergencies have greatly violated local social, cultural, and moral boundaries. For instance, in a 2023 complex emergency in DRC caused by Ebola, one infamous study collected semen samples from

survivors of the virus to ascertain whether it can be found in such body fluids.[3] There are significant methodological, social, and moral issues associated with this study. In other instances, pre-approved studies have added little to existing knowledge or merely replicated existing understandings of certain phenomena, or even had outputs that did not necessarily benefit the at-risk populations involved in the research, such as pharmaceuticals and vaccines. In such situations, the costs of the research are not proportionate to its benefits, particularly for local communities who may be exposed to various research-related adverse effects. If local ethics committees had scrutinised these studies, it is possible that they would have raised these concerns and requested modifications in the research design.

Indeed, emergency research can be very effective. During the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, for example, local clinicians and social scientists discovered that rehydrated patients were likely to survive the virulence of Ebola. Although in this case, several positive outcomes and patient recovery rates improved due to subsequent revision of patient management protocols, only some evidence generated through all pre-approved studies will have such a direct impact and benefit both the future preparedness and mitigation of complex emergencies. This is because both international and local health researchers tend to depoliticise local experiences and context-specific evidence during pre-approved studies in an attempt to produce value-free, de-contextualised, standardised, and easy to roll-out solutions. Parker and Allen (2014) highlight this by showing the depoliticization of evidence in the adoption of mass-drug administration to eradicate schistosomiasis in Uganda. They have also argued that large-scale, top-down, context-free interventions are not as successful as bottom-up studies (Parker and Allen 2014). Similarly, Berman (1982) argues that biomedical interventions often set up

3 During that same period, Ugandan local media highlighted a behavioural health study in which a vaginal microbicide was distributed to sex workers in Kampala to assess its 'properties to prevent HIV/AIDS.' Yet, after four years, the study conducted jointly by Makerere Faculty of Social Science and Case Western University had instead exposed many people to HIV/AIDS since the microbicide was not efficacious in preventing HIV/AIDS infection. For more, see (McGrath et al. 2006).

unsustainable approaches that not only undermine national health care systems but do little to address the fundamental underlying causes of ill-health. Real-time evidence generation notwithstanding, these studies demonstrate the need for a greater consideration of the potential impacts of pre-approved studies in emergency settings.

Reflections on Uganda's Ethics Review Processes

The emphasis on pre-approved studies in countries like Uganda thus highlights the limitations of existing ethics review systems in many "Global South" countries. As the topics that social scientists study, such as disease epidemics, are deeply embedded in local geopolitical, social, cultural, and economic inequalities, especially in countries in the "Global South" like Uganda, IRBs need to draw researchers' attention to these complexities. If the overarching aim of ethics review and approval processes is to protect researchers' study populations, both international and local researchers must also be encouraged to seriously consider how the knowledge they generate tangibly do so, such as helping to mitigate emergencies, environmental disasters, and disease epidemics. National-level ethics review processes could therefore be used to ensure that pre-approved studies include a clear objective of mitigating disaster in-country. Local ethics systems and research committees also evidently need to be much more adaptive by weaving expedience and helpfulness into their procedures, as well as by offering clear guidelines and principles during ethics reviews. One option would be to foreground the need for expedited ethics reviews; if researchers are pressed for time, then a mechanism to minimise risk and community exploitation through extractive and deleterious research must be institutionalised.

Another potential way to mitigate some of the unintended consequences of international researchers' activities in "Global South" countries is to oblige international researchers to collaborate with local researchers or the inclusion of national social scientists in foreign

studies, where appropriate. In this way, social scientists can centre matters pertinent to geopolitical and social-economic inequalities, especially in contexts where these dynamics are complex and often historically rooted, particularly the “Global South.” But although local researchers have, to some extent, improved foreign researchers’ protocols through collaboration by making them culturally appropriate, attendant power dynamics might be difficult to surmount and therefore risks can, and are, easily perpetuated. For example, due to unequal power relations between researchers in the “Global North” and “Global South,” researchers in the “Global South” may be, and often are, exposed to situations of “structural violence,” where their intellectual input is erased and their perspectives minimized or even reified as “local” (Bouka 2018). Elsewhere, scholars have also discussed extensively how scientific collaborations between scholars in the “Global North” and “South” can be a tool for re-asserting imperialism and reinforcing unequal power dynamics (Guma, Akello, and Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2024). The above examples of pre-approved studies thus highlight the need for new considerations around research ethics beyond more than international collaborations.

Following from here, I accordingly suggest that local ethics committees only offer ethics clearance to studies which will potentially contribute to the better management or mitigation of certain risks for both local and international researchers. Studies which show no indication of improving conditions for local populations should only be granted foreign clearance towards the end of the emergency, or only permitted to do research that has significant benefits for the at-risk communities or involves local partners as study leads. Still, any research conducted in settings involving vulnerable people like those in emergency settings must fundamentally ask: who is generating data for whom and for what purpose? And, how will at-risk populations benefit from such research? In other words, it must be understood the extent to which the data are localised and meet the over-arching local needs of the societies under study.

Conclusion

In light of the need for real-time evidence for certain socio-political phenomena, this article has directed its gaze at ethics review processes in times of emergency and with vulnerable populations. While questioning the importance of some types of research, like pre-approved studies, this paper highlighted the need to recognise context-specific nuances in research designs. Whereas scholars in the "Global North" may be under pressures to attend to grantors' needs for translatable, replicable, and effective solutions for the complex social-political and cultural matters they investigate, their efforts to attend to these needs may, and does, result in the production of de-contextualised knowledge that may not be meaningful to the populations and societies most affected. Therefore, there is a need to re-think how we do social science research in disciplines like IR in settings facing emergencies, conflicts, or other dynamic events.

As local and experiential knowledge has often been minimised in IR studies, I therefore argue that IRBs need to do a better job educating both international and local researchers about the relevance of, and the need to prioritise, local knowledge and local needs. In this view, IRBs could be effectively used to educate and foster a more ethical international community of IR scholars. While expedited ethics reviews could aid in facilitating both local and international researchers' in conducting such research, mechanisms must fundamentally be put in place to mitigate risks associated with conducting decontextualised, exploitative, extractive, and unethical research. In Uganda, like other countries in the "Global South," local ethics committee capacity must also be built to ensure the needs and interests of the studied communities are prioritised.

Research and publication ethics in a postcolonial Indian context

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The Higher Education system of India has experienced many reforms since the country gained its independence from British colonial rule in 1947. The most important of these reforms is the establishment of research-oriented universities. Whereas the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) established in India during the colonial period were teaching and testing-oriented, mere "retailers of knowledge", as critiqued by Jayaram (2007), new research-oriented HEIs have been established post-independence. However, most universities remain modelled after the University College London and are teaching-focused. They were designed for the professional training of native Indians as British colonial civil servants, with students expected to regurgitate "rote-memorised" textbook knowledge during examinations for placement in various government jobs. Within a system like this, very few students received research training. Knowledge about research ethics is, therefore, still not very prevalent within the modern Indian context. There is neither great knowledge about research ethics review processes, nor the need to promote good quality research.

In response to this problematic research environment, some Indian HEIs established Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) to promote the ethical conduct of research and scholarly communication. Like in other countries, IRBs are responsible for overseeing research and scholarly knowledge dissemination practices by reviewing applications, asking critical questions about research design, examining ethical codes of conduct in research processes, and assessing researchers' plans for knowledge dissemination. IRB approval is contingent on satisfying ethical codes of conduct in knowledge creation and dissemination. Nevertheless,

there remains significant deliberation within Indian HEIs about the need to develop context-sensitive and decolonial ethics protocols for social science research and the ways to do so.

In this contribution, I therefore outline how legacies of colonialism continue to shape the standards and, more importantly, scholars' understandings of and awareness around the importance of research ethics in today's India. By drawing on my own experiences as an Indian scholar working with an Indian HEI, I detail the difficulties in, and inadequacies of, applying the codes of conduct that guide ethical research in the "Global North" to postcolonial contexts like India. I specifically highlight how common practices used in the "Global North" to ensure ethics in research, such as written informed consent, can prove harmful in countries in the "Global South" as they risk making participants more vulnerable. While similar issues are indeed present in other social science disciplines, this discussion is especially relevant for IR scholarship because of its emphasis on transborder phenomenon and manifestations of power within the global order, especially between the "Global North" and "Global South," and because IR research often involves Western scholars conducting fieldwork in postcolonial contexts like India. My central claim is accordingly that IR research must not overlook 'local' understandings and standards of ethics in both procedure and practice as doing so risks reproducing colonial practices and Western-dominated epistemic hierarchies in the production of knowledge.

The Challenges of Research Ethics in India

IRBs in India

The evolution of research ethics can be traced to the Nuremberg Code (1947), the Declaration of Helsinki (1964) by the World Medical Association, and the Belmont report (1978). Several international agencies such as the International Science Council (ISC), the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), All European Academies (ALLEA), and various countries have

also formulated guidelines for research integrity and ethics. In India, the Indian Council of Medical Research set out their own guidelines in 1980, which are continually revised based on the changes in the field of research. In contrast, the ethics frameworks that any given HEI adopts, as well as how they are implemented, are shaped by the funding, nature of research work, partner organizations, and recommendations of institutional committees. This variation is not unique to India; as scholars have noted, even in Europe, there is significant variation in how ethics review is implemented (Piccio 2016).

But although there is a recognised need to conduct research and publish research findings ethically, few Indian HEIs actually have institutionalised structures and processes for ethics review in the social sciences. As the UGC (2021) report on *Academic Integrity and Research Ethics* notes:

> Surprisingly, the codification of ethics in social sciences has not received much traction in India. Not many universities have ethical guidelines for social science research. The Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) does not have such guidelines either. The University Grants Commission's Research Development and Innovation Programs Implementation Guidelines (UGC, 2017), deals with a long list of areas, but with little elaboration. Under the section on research ethics it simply states: The higher education institutions receiving the UGC research funding are required to have a Responsible Conduct of Research Guideline and an instruction program to instruct the researchers about the guideline. (UGC 2021, 24)

The lack of attention around ethics requirements in social science research and publication in India has hence limited the establishment and work of IRBs at HEIs in India, as well as the ethical conduct of research more generally.

Research ethics in the context of Indian universities is also challenged by the fact that India's University Grants Commission (UGC)—the central regulatory authority of Indian HE—introduced new Academic Performance Indicators (API) in 2010, making research and publication compulsory for the career advancements of teachers across all kinds of HEIs, including teaching-focused colleges. However, many Indian HEIs have infrastructural

deficits (i.e., lack of access to good quality research lab facilities and libraries) and many young and even senior academics have little or no knowledge and skills about research ethics and integrity. The hyper-pressurised academic environment paired with low regulatory requirements and a nascent culture of research ethics has accordingly created an environment in which ethics is given low priority. As with peer review, ethics application reviews often get delayed because of academics, who are already burdened with huge amounts of administrative and bureaucratic work over and above teaching and research. These delays often lead to scholars' disenchantment about the ethics review process. In many instances, I have witnessed young faculty requesting expedited/post-dated ethics approvals since it is a requirement for publishing in specific professional journals. Sometimes, young faculty see the process merely through the bureaucratic lens and think the ethics committee is unnecessarily delaying the process as a gatekeeper of knowledge creation. There is also a dismissal of the ethics committees' work among sections of academics mostly trained in teaching oriented Indian HEIs with little or no knowledge of research methodologies and ethics.

Challenges to the conduct of ethical research can also be seen in other ways. As it is widely accepted that researchers have an ethical responsibility to protect the data they collect, varying legal and political regimes, paired with an evolving information and communication technologies landscape, have had far-reaching implications. For instance, like all kinds of publication activities, scholarly publishing has also turned online. Therefore, there is an increasing push from both academics concerned about equity and university administrations in India to embrace online open-access publishing because it provides global access to scholarly work and can also enhance citation metrics to aid scholarly and university rankings. However, there is little literacy and education in India about data protection and the ethics of using online and digital tools for research purposes, which risks unethical research practices.

The policy of measuring academic performance by research outputs has also pushed many faculty to pursue fast publication opportunities, in turn, leading to the proliferation of fake and predatory journals, along with other kinds of research and publication-related malpractices (Basu 2023). India consequently has the highest number of fake journal publications worldwide, with mostly junior academics falling pretty to publication scams or using unethical means to increase research outputs (Priyadarshini 2017). Without the widespread adoption of IRBs and institutionalised ethics review processes in Indian HEIs, these practices have persisted and perpetuated poor practices around research ethics.

Ethics in Postcolonial Contexts

Beyond the aforementioned challenges to ensuring ethical research, the application of codes of conduct for research ethics designed in the "Global North" to contexts in the "Global South" also raises complex ethical questions for IR research in postcolonial contexts like India. While not always realized, ethics review processes assumed by Western institutions are embedded in broader colonial dynamics and therefore can be insufficient, and even detrimental, to ethical research practices in non-Western contexts. Teixeira da Silva (2022) has described this as "Ethics Dumping (ED)." They explain that pressure to be productive in research and publishing can raise the risk of ED, which can exacerbate "power differentials, patronizing conduct, such as a false belief of superiority by the high-income country (HIC), inequitable and unfair distribution of burdens and benefits, cultural insensitivity, double ethical standards, or the lack of due diligence and transparency" (internal citations omitted, also see Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018).

The problems of uncritically applying Western norms around ethics to postcolonial contexts can be seen in many ways. For example, the process of seeking written informed consent that is commonly mandated by ethics review boards in the "Global North" is often misconstrued

in the Indian context. While many have argued that the process of signing an informed consent document assures research participants about their rights, particularly to reiterate the research process and guarantee of anonymity, in India, my colleagues and I have observed that research participants often feel more vulnerable when they are required to put their signature on paperwork. I also directly experienced this during fieldwork in India when following ethical protocols aligning with Western institutions, as trust and confidence between participants and researchers is generated more through social interactions within particular contexts than through paperwork, especially that which appears legally binding. For many in India, *zabaan dena*, or word of mouth, carries more weight than paperwork. Even for participants who do not see signed informed consent as a breach of trust, they may feel it lacks meaning as its not familiar in their context. This is greatly due to colonial legacies in countries like India, where "law is understood more as a punitive measure used by the powerful to punish, rather than a tool for individual self-protection in case of breach of trust" (Mukherjee 2015). The ineffective and even problematic adoption of the Western requirement of signed informed consent in the postcolonial Indian setting accordingly underscores how the moral principles of research ethics constructed in one context are not always useful in others (Riessman 2005).

But despite this disjuncture in moral principles of research ethics, signed informed consent has been widely adopted by IRBs in India. My home institution's IRB, for example, requires that signed informed consent at least occurs in a respondents' local language. However, is this approach sufficient to both ensure ethical and decolonial research? While doing so aligns with the principles of ethical research recognised by HEIs in the "Global North," it does not necessarily ensure a higher level of ethics in research. In fact, like in many Western countries, informed consent in India is widely understood by scholars as important for protecting researcher(s) and their institutions against any legal liability, rather than solely for protecting

participants. As this shows, not giving enough attention to context-specific nuances when designing ethics protocols can create significant barriers and even problems in ensuring ethics in data collection and publication, as well as risks perpetuating colonial discourses and ideas about the populations under study.

In addition to informed consent, the increasing use of digital and online tools for research has also prompted new issues around the conduct of ethical research in India. While much IR research involves scholars traveling to other countries and contexts for fieldwork, in recent years, we have seen a growing use of online repositories for research data and online data sharing practices by scholars in the "Global North." Foreign researchers are also increasingly conducting online surveys in India. Yet, online platforms and tools can be vulnerable to hacking and surveillance by authoritarian and non-democratic regimes. This can put research participants in countries like India at risk, including in ways that may not be acknowledged or even realised by foreign researchers. This has accordingly perpetuated hierarchies of knowledge co-production and led to the normalization of data colonialism in some fields of study (Kohnke and Foung 2024).

To keep up with changing global practices of data collection and management, India recently passed the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 (DPDPA) for the processing of digital personal data within the territory of India collected online or collected offline and later digitized. It is also applicable to processing digital personal data outside the territory of India, if it involves providing goods or services to the data principals within the territory of India. Hence, IRBs within the Indian context and those from outside India seeking to do primary data collection in India will now need to strictly comply with the DPDPA with regards to primary data collection and storage for research. This is one important step in ensuring protections for Indian citizens, but significant challenges nevertheless remain to developing

more context-sensitive and decolonial ethics protocols for IR research. There is accordingly a need for scholars in and studying India to more robustly consider what IR research ethics could, and should, look like within postcostcolonial contexts.

Addressing Ethical Concerns in the Global South

Indeed, it is far from straightforward to address these concerns to conducting and publishing ethical research in India. HEIs are faced with the pressures of designing and implementing new systems of ethics review modelled off of those used in the "Global North" and tailoring them to the country's "Global South" environment. To overcome some of the aforementioned concerns, at my home institution O.P. Jindal Global University, we have adopted a rigorous approach to ethics in IR research that goes beyond setting standards to build the ethical capacity of our researchers. Given that a large incentive for adopting an IRB is to meet both national and international requirements (both formal and informal) to be part of the global system of knowledge production, we had good reason to ensure that our ethics process is recognisable to publishers, funders, and foreign researchers. We therefore formulated ethics guidelines after referring to various international guidelines and making adaptations that, while perhaps not necessarily in line with the codes of conduct found at universities in Western countries, allow us to better acknowledge local contextual and specific project needs.

Firstly, being mindful of our institutional context in the "Global South," we consciously refer to "research participants" rather than "research subjects" in our ethics guideline documents. This is purposely done to ensure equal and respectful relationships with those who participate in research as there is a great deal of fear and scepticism in the minds of people within the postcolonial Indian context about research because it was *done* on them as "Colonial Subjects." While this approach may be similar to those taken by other disciplines, it is critical

within IR because institutional ethics review processes are embedded in larger colonial dynamics, which already risk Western-dominated epistemological orderings in knowledge production. Doing so also works to help dismantle the entrenched legacies of epistemic colonialism.

Secondly, as noted above, one of the greatest challenges that researchers face within the postcolonial Indian context is gaining informed consent from research participants in an appropriate way. Hence, we have made it standard practice to allow researchers at our institution to secure informed consent orally when respondents are illiterate/semi-literate or belong to vulnerable population. If researchers wish to collect oral rather than signed consent, they must submit a plain language one-page statement of research in the local language as part of ethics review applications. We have received feedback from our researchers that the process of verbally communicating the research objectives in local languages has helped in gaining the trust of the research participants and their informed consent. The submission of a plain language statement of research along with the ethics application also makes the ethics review process more sensitive to local contexts. In the research ethics application form, we also ask specific and detailed questions about the research problem, literature review, methodology, and post-study publication plans to ensure that there is organic connection between the researcher's ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology. In this way, the ethics committee seeks to ensure that the application process does not become merely a bureaucratic process to delay data collection, but instead ensures ethical practices in research and knowledge dissemination.

Thirdly, we work hard to ensure local settings and nuances are thoroughly considered in ethics review assessments. Once the ethics application is submitted to the committee, it goes through a round of screening by the committee chair and secretary to assess if the application

falls under exempt Category I, Expedited Category II, or Full Review Category III. Reviewers are assigned for each application based on their expertise in the domain of research and the research methodology. The reviewers are mostly chosen from among the Research Ethics and Review Board (RERB) committee members, but sometimes external reviewers are invited if the required expertise to assess the application is not found among committee members. Generally, the members of the board come from diverse fields of research within the social sciences and humanities; each school/department in the University assigns at least two faculty members as ethics committee representatives. This process helps to satisfy the needs and expectations of the wide range of research stakeholders.

Finally, alongside reviewing research ethics applications, the primary work we do as part of the RERB is educational. In 2019, India's University Grants Commission made it mandatory for Indian universities to offer a course on Research and Publication Ethics to all its PhD students. This is a welcomed initiative. Yet, at our university, we have been offering this course to our PhD students from Spring 2020 onwards, which I personally designed, and even prior to that, a module on research ethics was being taught as part of compulsory research methods courses.[4] We also host regular workshops to educate faculty and student researchers about research ethics, including running workshops through the ethics committee and the Research Dean's office. We discuss at length the various research and publication related malpractices that should be consciously avoided, as well as the importance of gaining informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality with regards to human participants in research. We equally speak about the need to minimise risk and increase benefits while designing projects, and provide opportunities for researchers to reflect on the larger public good of their research.

4 Such courses are also being offered on the SWAYAM portal of the Indian Government (see: https://onlinecourses.swayam2.ac.in/nou24_ge73/preview).

In one such research workshop, a faculty member from the School of Architecture reflected on her own field experiences.[5] As she explained, architects and artists enter communities of people to draw sketches or take pictures of built environments, but do not usually seek permission from the people who inhabit these places, especially when these places are inhabited by low-income/low-status communities like slums, refugee colonies, or semi-urban/ rural communities. After attending the ethics workshop, she better understood why an elderly Haryana village man sitting on his cot outside of his house and smoking hookah got angry when she entered the village community and began sketching without seeking any permission. This anecdote fundamentally illustrates the need for more education and training around research ethics in Indian HEIs, as well as opportunities for scholars to reflect on their own fieldwork experiences and share stories with ethical insights. Still, based on the feedback we have received, scholars who have attended our training now recognise the importance of more robustly considering ethics in research. These initiatives are helping to change the awareness around ethics in India.

Conclusion

Evidently, the situation is slowly evolving in India as research ethics becomes more recognised. While much work is still needed, I am hopeful that we are in the process of nurturing a community of ethical Indian researchers – in IR and across the social sciences – who will be committed to ensuring ethical practices and maintaining high quality standards in research-based knowledge creation into the future.

My position is that we should urge Indian institutions to adopt ethical research processes and stress the need to regularly update ethical guidelines to reflect the particularities of research

5 I have permission from the researcher to share this story for educational purposes. The researcher (workshop participant) also shared this story in the workshop to raise consciousness about research ethics among arts and architecture students, who work on built environment inhabited by humans.

in our context, as well as the changing regulatory environment. Any initiatives must also consider the entrenched legacies of colonialism, particularly the ways they shape standards and scholars' awareness around the importance of research ethics. They must neither simply replicate the codes of conduct used in the "Global North," but recognize context-specific nuances in both procedure and practice. This is also true for foreign scholars conducting research in "Global South" contexts. Doing so will aid against Western-centric biases and epistemological orderings in knowledge production.

Research Ethics in Team-Based, Fieldwork-Intensive Projects[6]

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Team-based, fieldwork-intensive research projects funded by nationally and internationally competitive grants have become widespread in the social sciences. The rise of project funding has generated debates on the effects of such funding on the competitive culture and career uncertainty in academia, particularly for early-career researchers employed on short-term contracts, as well as dynamics within research teams (Franssen and De Rijke 2019). The challenges of obtaining external funding have made grant writing a part of "the hidden curriculum, where grant-writing skills often are taught informally," with efforts to systematize support for scholars in writing and obtaining grants underway across disciplines (Windsor and Kronsted 2022, 313).

Despite increasing attention to the effects and challenges of competitive research funding, little guidance exists on research ethics in externally funded projects where the goal of comparability across team members' field research can come into tension with the differences across research sites. Specifically, the variable contextual sensitivities that need to be recognised for ethical decision-making before, during, and after fieldwork. This tension between comparability and context sensitivity is particularly pronounced in settings involving political violence and war, where conditions can change rapidly, presenting "unforeseen contingencies" for researchers and their ability to conduct research ethically (Parkinson and

6 This contribution benefited from ongoing discussions with and feedback from the Civil War Paths project team—Eduardo Álvarez-Vanegas, Sayra van den Berg, Hanna Ketola, and Toni Rouhana. I am grateful to Michael Livesey for support with research design at its early stages. The discussion at the roundtable on Ethics and Risk Assessment in IR Research organized by Filippo Dionigi at the 2023 Annual Convention of the International Studies Association sparked my interest in writing this contribution. Funding is acknowledged from the UK Research and Innovation Future Leaders Fellowship "Understanding Civil War from Pre- to Post-War Stages: A Comparative Approach" (Grant Reference: MR/T040653/1; start date 1 January 2021).

Wood 2015, 23). Conditions vary dramatically in these contexts, not least because of differences in state capacity and approaches to research, which results in distinct ethical challenges for researchers of political violence and war across contexts (Noakes 2023). Prioritizing adherence to research designs specified in grant applications in order to satisfy the promise of comparability over context sensitivity can thus be detrimental to ethical conduct across research sites under such conditions.

Collaborative Projects in Ethics Debates

The literature on ethics of large research projects in this area has focused on North-South collaborations, where the core group of researchers, including those who design and lead projects, is based in the so-called "Global North" with the rest of the research team located in the "Global South" (Vlassenroot 2020). Local research collaborators in such projects have often been variously characterized as "brokers" (Eriksson Baaz and Utas 2019) and "facilitators" (Abedi Dunia et al. 2023) who shape knowledge as gatekeepers, risk managers, data collectors, and interpreters of their context, but are rarely acknowledged or protected in the ways their Global North counterparts are (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018). This leads to a situation of "structural violence" where intellectual input of scholars from the Global South is erased and their perspectives are reified as "local" (Bouka 2018). The ethical repercussions can be severe when unique risks for local collaborators are not fully understood or considered in institutional reviews and practices of research, spanning from physical, psychological, and reputational harm to the further entrenchment of power disparities in knowledge production.

Ways forward in such collaborations have been proposed in terms of distributing power (Bleck, Dendere, and Sangaré 2018) and trust building, especially where research is conducted "by proxy," that is, "local research associates hold a central, relatively autonomous role at the research design and data generation stages" (Bliesemann de Guevara, Furnari, and

Julian 2020, 428). Joint research experiences between local and foreign scholars have also pointed to shared training in the Global North as one basis of equal partnership where the comparative advantages of team members drive the initial division of labour, but researchers participate in different areas of the project (Sınmazdemir 2019). These efforts have been contrasted with "collective fieldwork" (Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay 2021, 97) and "joint ethnographic practice" (Vogel and Musamba 2022, 6) in the same research site where questions of mutual positionalities come to the fore in reflections on ethics. While offering promising avenues for navigating ethical challenges in collaborative research, this literature says little on research ethics in externally funded, fieldwork-intensive projects that are based not on North-South collaborations or joint efforts by researchers in the same site, but research teams located in the Global North. This contribution accordingly starts filling the gap in our understanding of ethical considerations specific to such projects.

Civil War Paths Project

Drawing on the experience of the multi-year, multi-country Civil War Paths project funded by the UK Research and Innovation Future Leaders Fellowship, I propose three practices particularly relevant for research ethics in such projects. These practices include flexibility in research design, ongoing reflexivity, and project updating before, during, and after fieldwork. They are rooted in the understanding that research methods and ethics are intricately related, and decisions made on the former inform and shape the latter. Through this discussion, I highlight a trade-off between the goals of prioritizing the well-being of all involved in the research and comparability expected in large projects, and point to a way in which comparative analysis can be undertaken while being true to interlocutors' meanings, especially in relation to ethical decision-making.

The Civil War Paths project conceptualizes civil war as a social process and compares civil war trajectories in contexts where major armed groups mobilized and organized in different ways (Shesterinina 2022). As part of the project, a team of ethnographers conducted intensive coordinated fieldwork to collect life history interviews with ex-combatants and semi-structured interviews with other stakeholders on questions of pre-war, wartime, and post-war[7] evolution of conflicts, extending methods developed in earlier sociohistorical studies of civil war (Shesterinina 2021). The result is a richly nuanced account of individual conflicts from the perspective of those who lived through them and a comparative research agenda where lived experiences across contexts are brought in conversation to illuminate conflict dynamics over time. But the reality of research reveals careful decision-making from the stage of research design to the adaptation of plans during fieldwork to broader project adjustments based on fieldwork outcomes part and parcel for the ethical treatment of interlocutors and materials generated through fieldwork. This complex reality deserves attention as future projects of this kind are likely to face similar challenges.

Research Design

Built-in flexibility, or openness to changes in response to changing circumstances in the selected research sites, researchers' fieldwork experiences, and theoretical development, was a defining feature of the research design in this project. This could be considered a risky decision in the context of transparency debates in political science, particularly calls rooted in the positivist tradition for the preregistration of research designs in qualitative research (Jacobs et al. 2021). As is often the case with qualitative projects, who would evaluate the proposal could not be known in advance and this meant that ontological and epistemological positions could have shaped the way the proposal was evaluated, such as by seeing flexibility

7 While this term is contested and does not apply in many contexts of armed conflict where violence is ongoing, it also reflects a methodological decision to conduct fieldwork only in post-war settings where the security situation allows it.

as its weakness rather than strength. However, in line with interpretive approaches, a flexible research design was essential for not only exposing where the original assumptions and conceptualizations of the project fell short, but also ensuring the safety of all researchers and interlocutors (Fujii 2018, 48-49). In other words, *flexibility was an ethical practice* that enabled necessary changes to the project in response to emergent shared understandings in the research team. For example, when conflict developments jeopardized researchers' safety in the selected research sites or researchers perceived interlocutors' unease with certain interview questions, these sites and questions were reconsidered, modified, and, in some cases, withdrawn from the study. In a fixed research design, such changes would not be readily available, and new insights about potential harm to researchers or interlocutors could be overlooked.

Hence, the "cases"[8] in this project were not predetermined. Instead, they were selected through an iterative process of deepened conceptualization of armed group origins in conversation with the existing literature, mapping contemporary civil wars according to different origins, and safety concerns (Shesterinina and Livesey 2024). This effort guided the recruitment of doctoral and postdoctoral researchers for the project. While applications were invited from candidates with regional expertise in Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe, a broad range of cases could be accommodated in the flexible research design since armed groups with different origins were present in multiple civil wars within and across these regions. The core recruitment criteria of experience of qualitative data collection and analysis and relevant language skills for research on civil wars in one or more of these regions highlighted those candidates who had conducted extensive fieldwork on civil wars in these regions in any relevant discipline. Scholars who had lived, studied, and/or worked in the countries where

8 See Simmons and Rush Smith (2021) for a discussion of cases in comparative research.

these wars took place often showed particularly in-depth engagement with and nuanced understanding of these wars, as well as the greatest awareness of fieldwork conditions in these countries and were selected among other successful candidates. In these ways, the flexible research design enabled recruitment of team members from diverse disciplinary and institutional backgrounds instead of imposing undue limitations on this process and the pool of candidates who could be considered for the project.

International, interdisciplinary researchers with varied regional expertise thus joined the project for the core funded period of three years as members of the research team with equal standing. The three-year employment period helped address the challenges of pervasive competition, individualization of research, and career uncertainty associated with short-term contracts that the existing literature on externally funded projects cautions against (Franssen and De Rijke 2019). The doctoral and postdoctoral researchers discussed and decided the distribution of individual roles on the project, which were renegotiated at specified points for the team members to develop different skills during their time on the project. The values of recognition and mutual support underlying the research culture within the group helped the team members navigate difficult fieldwork on civil war, collective leadership of parts of the project, and career development. From this starting point, the team members were able to draw on their extensive knowledge to question and advance the original conceptualization of armed group origins in their areas of expertise and engage in open and informed conversation about fieldwork conditions in potential case study contexts, and the project's framework was continuously adapted, including through external expert feedback. This was the foundation of the collaborative research design in the project that enabled ownership by the researchers.

Based on this collaborative research design, preparation for institutional ethics review relied on the researchers' "ethnographic sensibility" rather than predetermined parameters (Schatz 2009). Instead of streamlining multiple case studies into one ethics application, the team

members submitted separate applications focusing on the ethical implications of working on questions of conflict in their field settings. This approach exposed differences across research sites between the current contexts of conflict, which would pose distinct ethical dilemmas during fieldwork (see below), and specific considerations regarding potential interlocutors; for example, interviewing recently demobilized ex-combatants, as in Colombia, as opposed to those engaged in activism on the back of earlier wars, as in Lebanon or Nepal. While we adopted life history interviewing to capture the pre-war, wartime, and post-war evolution of conflicts from the perspective of interlocutors' lived experiences, the researchers also adapted the interview plan to the specificities of the field setting and used it to guide rather than direct the conversation (Shesterinina 2021, 31). Where the discussion of wartime was deemed too sensitive, as in South Sudan, the researcher focused on artistic practices around the conflict as entry points to understand interlocutors' experiences (van den Berg 2022). Such decisions before fieldwork were crucial for prioritizing the well-being of those involved during fieldwork. What emerged were coordinated yet contextually sensitive fieldwork protocols, with checks built in according to field site-specific ethical considerations.

Coordinated Fieldwork

This sensibility "that pays attention to the perspectives of the people being studied," including about questions of risk, also guided the fieldwork process (Schatz 2009, 6). Equipped with detailed fieldwork protocols, the researchers conducted preliminary and core field trips, adapting research plans based on their awareness of changing circumstances in the field sites. For example, interviews planned during elections were rescheduled following interlocutors' requests due to worries of potential renewed hostilities (Rouhana 2022). Where interviews could feel extractive, the researcher relied on observation and engaged in interviewing only when negotiated as appropriate in situ. Sometimes, these negotiations involved research collaborators from the field settings who became coauthors on the project,

having shaped the fieldwork process and insights that emerged from it (Ketola 2022). “Ethnographic surprises,” or unexpected yet consistent observations that emerged during fieldwork, also changed the course of research (Shesterinina 2021, 38). Such observations prompted changes in field sites and questioned assumptions that could have misrepresented interlocutors’ lived experiences had we not paid attention to them (Álvarez-Vanegas 2023).

Overall, conducting coordinated fieldwork based on the shared analytical framework and fieldwork protocols that the research team developed collaboratively while being guided by ethnographic sensibility – that is, being sensitive to how interlocutors make sense of their context and especially risks associated with research in this context – generated intersecting questions in the research team as individual researchers reflected on their field experiences during and after fieldwork in field notes, conversations with collaborators and interlocutors, debriefs with team members, and short pieces of writing exploring particular challenges. For example, all researchers faced intense emotional dynamics in their interviews (Shesterinina 2019). While the team members undertook vicarious trauma training tailored to the study of political violence and war in preparation for project fieldwork in addition to their previous experience of addressing emotional dilemmas in field research, some of these dilemmas were surprising and necessitated a situational and reflexive response in practice. In Nepal, for example, what to the researchers appeared to be simple questions about friendship and family often provoked profound sadness and tears, something that did not happen in earlier fieldwork (Ketola 2022). Although general guidance in such situations is to stop the interview and refer the interlocutor to necessary support, in this context, the researchers were not in the position to decide on behalf of the interlocutors and had to accept that the interlocutors may want not to stop but finish their recollections.

These questions of power differentials rooted in positionality of researchers who are from, returning after prolonged periods, or new to the selected field sites fed *the practice of* “*active*

reflexivity" in the project, which involves ongoing consideration of the researcher's social location and assumptions about others (Soedirgo and Glas 2020). In line with this practice, the researchers recorded changes in assumptions around both their interlocutors' experiences and own positionality (Álvarez-Vanegas 2023). They systematized reflexivity, routinely reflecting on the context-specific nature of positionality and what it means for their ability to be true to the interlocutors' own aspirations for justice (van den Berg 2022). They brought others – from research collaborators and interlocutors to other team members – into the process, reflecting openly, among other issues, on the role of emotions in the production of knowledge, as exemplified above. They also reflected on how changing circumstances in the field sites after fieldwork affect anonymization practices and choices about what can and cannot be included in the analysis and writing. This reflection on all those involved in fieldwork – what Thomson et al. (2013) call "stories behind the findings" – and decisions on conduct we made in response ensured that research ethics was not an institutional check-box exercise but "an ongoing responsibility" throughout the course of the project (Fujii 2018, 9).

Project Comparability

The field research that the individual researchers engaged in was thus necessarily distinct, guided by shared yet evolving analytical concerns, ethos of ethnographic sensibility, and ongoing reflexivity. This diversity of fieldwork experiences in this project reflects our careful attention to interlocutors' own understandings, which served as our basis for ethical decision-making. Still, it comes in tension with the goal of comparability, which is often prized in large projects, such as this one. That our interviewing approach resonated with most research participants was nevertheless crucial for our ability to prioritize interlocutors' well-being. Interlocutors were willing to share their conflict experiences across field settings because the researchers showed they were interested in learning from their life histories rather than responses on preset themes, as in more structured alternatives. The latter approach can be

effective for some types of data collection, but in this project, it may have overlooked what was meaningful to interlocutors and heightened power differentials between researchers and interlocutors. The resulting diversity of fieldwork outcomes, however, required adjustment of the overall goals of the project.

Yet, the *practice of updating the project* enabled us to stay true to our ethos in general and what our interlocutors shared with us in particular. At the most basic level, the research team selected a smaller number of comparable interviews than they originally proposed, which would meaningfully inform comparative analyses. As a result of restrictions on travel to field sites affected by renewed conflict, case comparison was also updated to include primary cases where preliminary and core field trips were possible and secondary cases where they were not. More substantively, fieldwork insights from all trips reshaped the conceptualization of armed group origins and added themes, such as impunity, that the project had not originally incorporated, but that emerged systematically during fieldwork. This practice underpins abductive analysis in the project where analytical priors are in iterative dialogue with field insights (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006, 27).

Most importantly, had the project been based on a fixed research design and paid little attention to the changing conditions of fieldwork, not only the production and advancement of knowledge but also research ethics could have been compromised. Cases could have been preselected with the research team recruited to fit rather than advance the analytical framework. The different ways that team members' awareness of field settings and relationships developed during fieldwork could have been disregarded, opening possibilities for unethical conduct in terms of acknowledgment and protection of all those involved in search of predetermined project outcomes. Ethnographic surprises and reflections on fieldwork could have also been bypassed in favour of preset questions, maintaining rather

than challenging, assumptions and conceptualizations, despite research collaborators and interlocutors' insights. These issues reflect some identified in previous literature, and show how the practices of flexible research design, ongoing reflexivity, and project updating before, during, and after fieldwork helped to avoid them in this project. Future team-based, fieldwork-intensive projects should thus be open to these practices as the foundation for ethical, innovative research. These practices can accordingly help to achieve comparability with contextual sensitivity across field sites, while being open about the research process and changes along the way.

Conclusions: A Call to Rethink Approaches to Ethics Requirements and Regulation in International Relations Research

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This forum originated from a conversation among IR scholars in different subfields, revealing widespread and deep dissatisfaction with the present status of research ethics review processes, mainly in the US and the UK. Recognising the limitations of our regional representation, we used the forum format to invite colleagues in other countries – Ukraine India, and Uganda – to share their perspectives about how IR research is practiced and to showcase what ethics review looks like in other places in the world. By bringing their views together, this collection raises awareness about the shortcomings of institutional ethics review for IR research, while also illustrating how researchers have sought to work around, within, and through these systems to ensure ethical practices in their own projects. Such critical reflection is particularly important now as institutional research ethics reviews march on in "Northern" academia, steadily affirming their role in calls for funding, publication processes, and career progressions, among other things, even though little attention has been devoted to systematically and rigorously unpacking their limitations and inadequacies in IR research.

Indeed, criticism towards existing institutional ethics review procedures is much broader than what could be accounted for in this short collection. Still, the forum draws attention to some of the key aspects of ethics review procedures in IR research that, we argue, merit serious deliberation. While the shortcomings of ethics review in IR closely resemble those in other

disciplines also involving human participants, such as political science, anthropology, and sociology, there are certain characteristics of our field that pose unique challenges for research ethics. These include our embrace of wide-ranging methodologies and epistemologies, which make it especially hard to establish shared practices across the discipline; our focus on cross-border phenomena, even in light of ethical nationalism; our study of power as it occurs in the international context; and our focus on elites, frequently inverting power dynamics assumed by processes of ethical review.

Given the diverse topics explored by scholars of IR, and because questions of research ethics are intrinsically linked to methodology and epistemology, it is not possible, nor necessarily practical for the field to merely adopt the position, procedures, or ethical guidelines of other disciplines. We need to instead develop discipline-specific ethical practices that acknowledge IR's idiosyncrasies, and, in doing so, inform a research ethics that we think responds to specific principles. Among these, we stress the importance of *inclusiveness*, *adaptability*, *reflectiveness*, and *discursive practice*. As IR has many affinities with other related fields and disciplines, as the contributions in this forum highlight, it is thus also our hope that this forum may encourage greater allyship and cross-discipline pollination on issues related to ethics, which, in turn, will prompt the broader and more inclusive conversations necessary for re-thinking what ethics reviews could, and should, look like in IR research.

This forum accordingly makes three contributions. Firstly, existing scholarship on ethics in IR has remained largely "Northern" in its contributors and perspectives. Our collection therefore pushes forward these conversations by bringing into conversation scholars from and working in institutions in Ukraine, India, and Uganda, in addition to the UK. These perspectives together illustrate how structures of ethics review have many common features, are largely drawn from western models, and advocate for so-called 'universal ethical

principles' that impose and reinforce hierarchies, exclusions, and silences both in their national implementation and across borders. We think this forum is hence an essential step towards broadening the discussion on institutional ethics review practices, recognising its limitations, and providing a motivation to either work more proactively to reform the system or perhaps to seek alternatives where possible.

Secondly, existing scholarship in IR has predominantly focused on ethics in practice, using real-world observations to highlight the limitations of institutional review. We complement this strand of thinking by starting from the perspective of regulatory requirements, which foregrounds how ethical review functions in different national contexts. While recognising that ethics review processes are, for the most part, governed by universities' rules and regulations, the contributions in this forum show the critical roles of both institutions and individual scholars for ensuring a high level of ethics throughout the entire research process.

Thirdly, our contributors come from diverse methodological backgrounds and regional expertise, thus showcasing a wide range of perspectives. We use this diversity to better understand how the methodological and epistemological pluralism that is so inherent to IR, in turn, shapes prospects for institutional ethics review. Together, the contributions show that, even in the fast-changing contexts wherein much IR scholarship operates, there are ways to foster much needed discussion and debate, and to set high standards for ethics in practice, regardless of whether that stems from regulatory requirements or professional standards.

Importantly, the contributions in this forum are not limited to critique. While ethics review remains a fundamentally contested and contestable practice in our field, investing in a robust and disciplinarily grounded discussion of both research ethics in practice and procedural ethics is important intrinsically and instrumentally. Intrinsically, the contributions in this forum underline the significance of having a base upon which to assert a positive vision of

‘ethical’ research in our subfield. Indeed, there are no easy answers about what practically makes research and scholarship ‘ethical’ in the study of contestation, marginalisation, and domination across spatial and temporal landscapes of power; however, this means that ‘ethics’ cannot effectively be captured through static, top-down, box-ticking exercises. In fact, as the pieces in this forum show: ethics as a solely procedural exercise often falls short in supporting more ethical research practices and, sometimes, even acts as an obstacle to doing so. This is because it fails to recognise that ethics is a dynamic and evolving concept and practice.

From a practical standpoint, then, and given that compliance with research ethics regulations is increasingly the norm and becoming progressively more demanding in recent years, we must be more critical of the broader university structures and bureaucratic processes that determine what is ‘ethical’ research. The contributions in this forum particularly underline the need to reimagine research ethics in IR in a way that realises the historical contingencies and legacies of our discipline, and the sites and people most directly affected by them, to avoid perpetuating and reproducing dynamics of domination, power imbalances, and inequalities. This implies a two-fold response: one that considers the possible risks and harms associated with IR research, and another that extends these considerations from risks for research participants to risks for everyone engaged in our research, including us as researchers (Reno 2013; Wood 2006) and our teams (Eriksson Baaz and Utas 2019). While fundamental to the work we do as IR scholars, we must also remain attuned to the stakes of formulating these dynamics as risk. Doing so can inadvertently legitimate political narratives and foster the bunkerization of researchers from the field (Peter and Strazzari 2017). Risk and fear also have methodological implications that we are only now starting to interrogate (Shesterinina 2019; Krause 2021). Being able to justify our ethical stances in reflective,

critical, and empirically grounded ways is critical for supporting a positive practice of ethics and helping IR scholars hold ground in this changing landscape.

As an immediate overhaul of these bureaucratic procedures may ultimately be unfeasible at this time, we instead advocate for incremental change, taking a two-pronged approach: first, continuing to re-think of the role of these regulations for our subfield to offer concrete and feasible steps to improve the process. Second, in recognition that formal processes of ethical review fall far short of what the discipline needs, we also propose creating spaces dedicated to ongoing discussions of ethics in practice. Such spaces should be discrete from procedural ethics, so that researchers can explore complex ethical questions even when they do not map neatly onto the demands of university bureaucracy and compliance regimes. In pursuing these two prongs, we propose the principles of inclusiveness, adaptability, reflectiveness, and discursive practice emerging from this forum. By inclusiveness, we mean the practice of thoroughly incorporating in the process of ethics assessment the contextual specificities and people involved in our research so that ethical practices can be responsive to and inclusive of their realities, rather than simply imposing preferences and requirements from researchers' home institutions (see, for example, the inclusion of local organizations in the case of Ukraine or the need to revise consent practices in India).

By adaptability, we refer to the need for research ethics procedures to revise the single submission point model of ethics reviews and, instead, create processes in which researchers can update and revise their decisions to conform to the changing circumstances that IR researchers constantly face. Importantly, this should only be done if it can be implemented in a way that does not create additional bureaucratic hurdles. To support researchers in this endeavour, we turn to reflexivity and discursive practice. Rather than understanding research ethics assessments as the deployment of rules and guidelines, this forum has highlighted that

researchers face ethical questions not (only) in preparation of research but as part of it, hence calling for greater reflection and engagement. In this sense, it would be helpful to develop spaces for reflection and open dialogue to make more informed ethical decisions. To prevent the bureaucratization of these processes, it may also be prudent to make them discrete from procedural institutional requirements.

As is evident from this forum, finally, a more reflective and discursive approach to research ethics in IR is possible and needed. Still, the onus is on us as scholars and members of academic institutions to ensure that our understanding of research ethics in IR is fit for the ever-changing research environments we investigate. This may mean learning from and with other related disciplines to develop trainings and resources to help scholars work around and within ethics review to ensure that institutional regulatory processes do not suffocate critical and complex studies of global power and its circulation. Concretely, this could be achieved in numerous ways; for example, ensuring that IR scholars are represented on university ethics review boards; providing venues and departmental support for staff and students to feedback to ethics reviewers on what works and what needs changing; and above all, not equating ethics review and approval with the ethical quality (or lack thereof) of our colleagues' research. While seemingly a minor reframing, this type of approach is important to separate our obligations as employees adhering to the requirements of our employer from those to research participants, as the priorities of university administration may be, and often are, structurally distinct from those of researchers and our respondents. We are thus not advocating for IR departments to adopt a totally different or unique approach to ethics review. Rather, we call on departments and scholars to invest resources in ethics review processes and practices that allow for proactive interpretation and the application of ethics requirements in ways that centre high quality and ethically responsible IR research.

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