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Ethical research landscapes in fragile and conflict-affected contexts: understanding the challenges

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Abstract

As the prevalence of conflict and fragility continue to rise around the world, research is increasingly heralded as a solution. However, current ethical guidelines for working in areas suffering from institutional and social fragility, insecurity or violent conflict have been heavily critiqued as highly abstract; focussed only on data collection; detached from the realities of academia in the Global South; and potentially extractive. This article seeks to respond to that assessment by spotlighting some of the most prevalent challenges researchers face in the pursuit of ethical working practices. It explores the material and epistemic injustices that often shape and underpin research structures and relationships in these contexts. The paper draws on the authors' experiences of research in conflict-affected and fragile contexts over the last fifteen years and on workshop discussions with researchers based in fragile and conflict-affected contexts conducted in Amman, Bogotá and Dhaka in 2019-2020. The paper works from the premise that achieving ethical research in fragile spaces is not dependent solely on activity at the site of research, but also on decisions made across the entire ecosystem of a research project. It therefore interrogates the full research landscape, from funding models, to research design (including research topics, partnerships, methods, participant selection, and researcher positionality),

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to dissemination plans and ethical gatekeeping. The paper critically reflects on inequities in the processes of knowledge production about conflict and fragility and the key ethical challenges that researchers encounter. It highlights the need for further guidance, support and accountability to ensure ethical research practices.

Reflections from a fragile research context: Mosul

In October 2016 the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces began a campaign to liberate the city of Mosul from the control of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The city's population had been subjected to the brutal rein of the extremist group for nearly three years. The liberation was complete by July 2017, but the east of the city stood in ruins.

As the country processed the cost of the victory, a complex array of actors subsequently descended on Mosul, desperate to collect information on the unfolding situation. Local and international humanitarian organisations conducted needs assessments and journalists and human rights investigators set about documenting the atrocities inflicted on the population. Very quickly these actors were also joined by a variety of international researchers working on both internationally commissioned projects and externally determined academic agendas.

The complexity and fragility of Mosul in the aftermath of the liberation created countless opportunities for unethical research practice. While many researchers upheld high ethical standards, seeking local academic partners, taking time to understand the context, and placing participant safety at the centre of research designs, many others did not. Researchers were frequently observed taking advantage of the insecurity to gain unregulated access to the population. The pressure of deadlines and fleeting research trips incentivised quick access to as many interviewees as possible in a short time.

Often based in the relative safety of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), researchers became reliant on local Kurdish 'fixers' to shape access to Sunni Arab and Yezidi populations. Research ethics training was rarely given and as such truly informed consent was often not attained. Newly escaped Yezidi women, who had been held under ISIL and forced into sexual slavery, were often interviewed by a stream of actors with no provision for psychological support and little safeguarding in place. Sunni families with perceived links to ISIL were sought out, inadvertently highlighting them to the security forces conducting counter-extremist intelligence gathering. Highly traumatised people were viewed as a commodity and many researchers risked causing direct harm through unethical research practices.

After the data was collected, researchers retreated back to the comfort of their offices to write up reports, articles and papers (usually in English), rarely returning to validate or share the findings with the participants. Even when Mosul University reopened, research was rarely translated into Arabic and distributed to local Iraqi academics. Iraqis were almost completely excluded from the construction of the narrative as international organisations defined the situation in Mosul and designed the response accordingly. The process of knowledge production in post-ISIL Mosul was extremely extractive and dominated by actors from the Global North.

This paper is motivated by my (Kelsey Shanks) reflections on the research practices witnessed in Iraq and in my wider professional work, and by Julia Paulson's engagements in international research collaborations. I have conducted research in Iraq since 2010, with frequent travel to the country every year. After the fall of Mosul to ISIL in 2014, I conducted extensive research within displacement camps and since the liberation of the city, I have worked on understanding the legacy of ISIL on education and the treatment of populations with perceived ISIL affiliation. I also held the role of Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) Challenge Leader for Education at UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) between 2018 and 2021, where I had the opportunity to observe, reflect upon and open discussions about the ethics around research agenda setting and research evaluation. My co-author, Julia Paulson, has conducted academic and consultancy work around education, peace and conflict since the mid-2000s and has led and participated in various international collaborative projects, including the GCRF funded Education, Justice and Memory Network (EdJAM), which itself commissions research. We are both white women, educated in the UK and Canada and employed at UK Universities, all factors which afford us privileges and position us, and researchers like us, to benefit professionally from the material and epistemic injustices in the research landscapes discussed here. The purpose of this investigation is to help highlight key issues for ethical reflection and action to funders, reviewers and academics trying to navigate research activity in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, including to signal the need for systemic or structural changes in the research landscape alongside the need for deeper ethical reflection, action and accountability on behalf of individuals and organisations.

Background

The number of forcibly displaced people exceeded 74 million in 2018, while the number of people living in proximity to conflict has nearly doubled since 2007 (Corral et al., 2020: 6). It is forecast that by 2030, 80% of the world's extremely poor people will live in regions defined by fragility[1] (Desai, 2020). Recent conflicts, displacement, and political, social, economic and environmental vulnerabilities are undermining wellbeing and opportunities to flourish in these contexts, now

exacerbated further by the Covid-19 pandemic (Lambert et al., 2020). The international community has pledged to address this, resulting in increased funding for fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Research forms an integral part of this response, essential to inform evidence-based policy, design practical solutions, and help to ensure that interventions do not result in unforeseen harmful impacts.

While there are clearly significant benefits of research to address fragility, this call to action for researchers requires a heightened focus on the complex ethical conditions within which academics are being incentivised to operate. Environments of extreme state weakness, excessive state control or ongoing conflict can create considerable opportunity for unethical research behaviour. Funding for research often comes from international and external actors and research agendas are therefore often set by agencies and academics in the Global North (Oddy, 2020). Local researchers are routinely disadvantaged by extensive inequality and side-lined in favour of external actors. The opportunity for what has been termed 'ethics dumping' – the application of double standards in research where researchers from the Global North undertake research in the Global South, which would be severely restricted or prohibited in their own country (Schroeder et al., 2019) – is magnified.

These issues create a research landscape prone to material and epistemic injustices. Academic research has established a strong theoretical and empirical critique of the effects of neoliberal capitalist expansion on the structures and practices of humanitarian aid (e.g. Christie, 2015), development (e.g. Duffield, 2014) and peacebuilding (e.g. Chandler, 2017) and their efforts to address conflict and fragility. Increasingly theorising around racial capitalism, which shows how racialised exploitation has historically been integral to capitalist expansion and continues to be so (e.g. Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021; Gerrard et al., 2021; Moreton-Robinson, 2015), is deepening these critiques (e.g. Pailey, 2020; Sriprakash et al., 2020). The same exploitative conditions shape the research environment and its practices, though less attention is paid to these dynamics (e.g. Novelli, 2019; Shuayb and Brun, 2021). As this article will present in more depth, opportunities to conduct research in conflict-affected and fragile contexts are unevenly distributed and are often allocated in ways that reproduce unequal power dynamics both between North and South and within national contexts. The daily practices of designing, conducting and sharing research can perpetuate epistemic injustice (e.g. Fricker, 2007; Santos, 2007) within research teams and towards research participants, raising profound ethical challenges.

Existing explorations of research ethics in fragile and conflict-affected contexts often focus primarily on the ethics of data collection (e.g. Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018; Gordon, 2021; Idris, 2019; Moss et al., 2019). While these issues are highly important, this paper is written on the premise that achieving ethical research is not dependent solely on researcher activity at the site of research, but also on decisions made across the entire ecosystem of a project (Mac Ginty et al., 2021; University

of Edinburgh, 2019; Wright, 2020). Therefore, the paper defines an 'ethical research landscape' as one which actively strives to prevent any unjust action, harm or suffering as a consequence of the research process, while seeking to maximise and create opportunities for fair practices.

Methodology

This paper draws on observations from Shanks' nine trips to Iraq between 2017 (after liberation of the city of Mosul) and 2019. During this period, she conducted research in the city of Mosul and the camps for displaced persons in the surrounding Ninewa governorate. The paper also includes comments collected from three workshops held between February 2019 and February 2020 in Amman, Bogotá and Dhaka. The events were organised by the GCRF in partnership with the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) and sought to unpack how educational research is conducted in fragile spaces, bringing together academics, practitioners and policymakers based in each region. The workshops included group discussions on the topics of (i) methodologies; (ii) research ethics; (iii) equitable partnerships; and (iv) dissemination strategies. The three workshops brought together 109 participants (40 in Amman, 30 in Bogotá, 39 in Dhaka), with participants from over 13 different fragile country contexts.[2] The workshops were held under Chatham House Rules and all participants were informed of and agreed to the intention to collate the workshop findings for publication, with the opportunity to indicate if they did not want comments to be shared. We report on common themes raised and comments from participants, using fully anonymised quotations in italics throughout. No formal ethical approval was required for these funder-organised consultations, often the case for funder-led activities and drawing further attention to imbalances in accountability highlighted throughout the paper.

The ethics of knowledge production

Ethical funding mechanisms?

To address the issue of ethical landscapes, we must first locate the discussion of ethical research within an examination of knowledge production; asking who determines research agendas. Workshop participants noted that funding for research in fragile contexts is often dominated by the commissioning of international researchers to conduct specific projects for humanitarian agencies. The thematic focus of research is therefore often predetermined and based on organisational mandates or the availability of funding streams that are linked to globally defined agendas. As such, the commissioning agency is understood to govern what is thought to be 'research-worthy' (Fox et al., 2020). The absence of local input in

the agenda setting process can be exacerbated by the fact that international humanitarian actors have experienced increasing restrictions of movement within areas that are deemed insecure or prone to violence (Autesserre, 2014; Collinson et al., 2013; Smirl, 2015). In situations of conflict the increased use of security actors for protection creates distance and can also fuel a 'bunkerized' mentality towards local populations (Bliesemann de Guevara and Kostić, 2017, 9). As a consequence, research topics are often dependent on international stakeholders' interpretations of a context.

The absence of local actors in the agenda setting process has spawned accusations that what is researched in fragile and conflict-affected contexts responds predominantly to the priorities and interests of the Global North, rather than those of the beneficiary country or communities being researched. This raises the question of whether such practices have enabled 'politically based evidence making' rather than evidence-based policymaking (Novelli, 2019). A workshop participant critiqued research funding from the Global North for being '*driven by the problem of migration into Europe rather than grounded in finding solutions to local realities*'. Such processes avoid critical reflection on the role of the West in the production and reproduction of the conflicts that research explores, resulting in policy narratives informed by 'a very particular and myopic understanding of problems and solutions' (Novelli, 2019: 3). In Mosul, many projects sought to understand the context in terms of 'violent extremism', reflecting a Northern security agenda that made funding readily available for this topic. The imposition of this framework to understand the city risked feeding existing sectarian narratives and security-driven human rights violations (Shanks, 2020).

An alternative to the commissioned research process can be found through academic funding models. For example, the UK government funds university-led research via research councils that award project grants through a competitive process. Such funding calls are generally less prescriptive regarding what research should be conducted and where it should take place; offering greater opportunity for investigation that is not bound by donor priorities or set lines of enquiry. Nonetheless, these calls often indicate particular 'challenges' to be explored or bundle together 'conflict and crisis-affected contexts' as though they all face similar and indistinct issues (Oddy, 2020). Especially when tied to Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), these calls are rarely truly open in terms of the issues that might be explored. In the UK critics argue that ODA funded research constitutes 'tied aid' and question whether the benefit to the UK is indeed 'a secondary consideration' as stated in fund objectives (ICAI, 2020).

In sum, research in fragile contexts has traditionally been facilitated by one of two funding streams: commissioned research that tends to have a narrow focus and represent the interests of contracting organisations or academic research, which can be more open, but dominated by Northern research councils and

academics' restricted interpretations of research needs. Consequently, the practice of excluding, or extracting from, local actors has been endemic in fragile environments. This domination of knowledge production has resulted in cycles of 'parachute' or 'hit and run' research in both commissioned and academic projects, as demonstrated in the Mosul example.

Ethical research partnerships?

Examination of the power dynamics present in North-South research collaborations is not new. It builds on a broad literature within research ethics that highlights the silencing of Southern voices in the processes of knowledge production (Ansoms et al., 2020; Asare et al., 2022; Kingori, 2013; Musamba and Vogel, 2020). Workshop participants suggested that researchers from the Global North frequently drop into fragile contexts and use local collaborators as merely data collectors without learning from them or acknowledging their work. Despite the promotion by research funders and the ethical and practical advantages, the establishment of genuinely equitable partnerships continues to be evasive. It was reported at the regional workshops that collaboration in fragile contexts often remains merely a '*tick box exercise*' with 'researchers in fragile contexts often expected to benefit simply from taking part in the research that is designed, managed and published by researchers in the Global North' (ReBUILD, 2017: 2). Workshop participants highlighted five obstacles that require specific attention: structural limitations; 'capacity building'; incentive structures; unequal burden; and partner positionality.

Structural limitations: Despite calls for equity by funders, workshop participants noted that research funding calls often continue to stipulate that the role of 'principal investigator' is restricted to the academic partner in the Global North (Grieve and Mitchell, 2020). Or, in commissioned projects 'international' rather than 'local' consultants are requested to lead projects. Furthermore, the privilege of leading research projects is often unevenly distributed in the Global North, intersecting with gender, racial, disability, career stage, disciplinary and institutional inequities in terms of who is likely to be awarded grants (e.g. Adelaine et al., 2020). This has implications for the allocation of roles and resources as well as a shared sense of ownership across the project, undermining potential leadership roles a more qualified partner in the country of research might seek.

Participants noted that in academic partnerships the subsequent administrative procedures between universities and research organisations contribute further to structural divisions of power.[3] They often fail to acknowledge different working environments and insist on procedures and mechanisms that prioritise the ways of working of Northern Universities. For example, the due diligence process undertaken by UK universities, through which partners are assessed to prevent fraud,

was raised by participants as a structural obstacle to equity. The due diligence process can often undermine trusting relationships between researchers by questioning the capacities and legitimacy of organisations in the Global South (Mkwananzi and Cin, 2021). The fact that funders and Northern Universities are not expected to conduct a reciprocal process creates a *'one-sided interpretation of risk'*. Furthermore, inappropriate funding models based on reimbursement remain prevalent and ensure economic control remains in the North. This not only creates and reenforces power dynamics between partners, but also generates an added financial burden that is not viable for many academics and organisations based in fragile contexts. The fact that money transfers to many contexts deemed 'fragile' are frequently and significantly delayed or obstructed within Global North Universities further compounds this burden. In one example an Iraqi researcher worked for 6 months before receiving his first salary due to payment delays and in another a UK University deleted an invoice from a partner organisation based in Pakistan on the assumption it was fraudulent, despite the organisation complying with and passing all due diligence checks.

Workshop participants in Amman and Bogotá noted that UK universities rarely allocate funding to translate partnership documents into appropriate languages, creating a lack of clarity around essential issues like reporting and payment schedules. This becomes increasingly problematic when considering that those contracts typically *'start from the premise that all intellectual property produced through the partnership will belong to the UK university. It is up to individual researchers to notice and push back against this and to argue for contracts that recognise the intellectual property of all researchers and partners'*.

'Capacity Building': Many of the funding mechanisms that support North-South research partnerships are explicitly framed as an opportunity for 'capacity building' for Southern researchers and research organisations and often require applicants to show how this will be achieved. This requirement bakes in neo-colonial and epistemically unjust assumptions about the nature and location of expertise, assuming that researchers based in the North bring with them skills and knowledge to be transferred to those in the South, whose capacity needs to be developed. These assumptions reinforce a North/South binary that is often inaccurate (e.g. Shuayb and Brun, 2021); they ignore the inequities in opportunity structures and inequitable research systems that may contribute towards limited research capacity in certain contexts and the fact that research capacity is extremely high in others. Even where there are specific limitations in local research capacities – which will often have historical explanations that can be connected back to unequal geopolitical systems – a genuine commitment to equitable partnership would start with expectations of mutual growth and development for all members of a research partnership, including those based in the North (Mitchell et al., 2020).

Northern Incentive Structures: For Northern academics, the professional system can serve to disincentivise or obstruct the pursuit of equitable partnerships with academic partners in fragile contexts. Academic careers are often driven by the need to cultivate the role of 'expert'. It was noted in workshops that this is often achieved by demonstrating 'ownership' of the knowledge in a chosen field. The prestige of leading on research grants, presenting at international conferences and publishing single author, peer reviewed academic publications in international journals all contribute to this goal. This was noted to be problematic for a number of reasons, but primarily because it undermines the need to acknowledge the contributions of local scholars and deters the investment of time and resources into inclusive partnerships (Carbonnier and Kontinen, 2015). This can lead to extractive and exploitative research practices that do not acknowledge the contributions of (or worse, directly appropriate from) researchers in the Global South and researchers earlier in their careers (Musamba and Vogel, 2020). Consequently, researchers attending the Amman workshop noted that the essential '*local knowledge and expertise that make many projects possible*' was frequently '*undervalued and lacked acknowledgement*', while Northern based researchers took leadership in global debates about contexts that are '*foreign to them*'. Southern-based scholars also noted the difficultly of obtaining international visas that would allow them to participate in the dissemination of knowledge on an international stage (e.g. APPG for Africa et al., 2019).

Unequal Burdens: It was acknowledged by participants that the very foundation of academic partnerships between those based in the Global North and those living in the everyday reality of conflict or fragility is based on a disproportionate allocation of burden, which is often not compensated for. Local scholars face increased risks that can be generated by a number of different factors. In fragile and conflict-affected contexts the subject matter is often of a sensitive nature and research can become more easily politicised. Research can result in local community retaliation or investigation by security forces for engaging with politically sensitive or potentially compromising information (Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018; Shanks, 2020; Shesterinina, 2019; Thomson, 2009). In addition to association with the topic, the physical act of data collection may put researchers under added strain to visit insecure areas to reach vulnerable populations (Kingori, 2013). Being the 'in-country' partner also creates an added risk of mental and emotional health burdens for researchers working on difficult topics. Researchers who have to document and retell potentially harrowing stories that are part of their everyday lived experience are at risk of secondary trauma (Van der Merwe and Hunt, 2019).

Incentive Structures driven by Fragility: The comparatively disempowered position of research partners based in fragile and conflict-affected contexts was noted to lead to acquiescence in decision making around a project. For researchers based in fragile contexts, the nature of fragility can influence them to be more

acceptant of exploitative power dynamics, both in terms of academic ownership and acceptance of increased burdens or risk. The degree to which NGOs and other external actors dominate local economies in fragile settings means that associating with foreign institutions can be a pathway towards above-subsistence living (Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018). High levels of unemployment and low wages in fragile contexts may result in local academics partnering with external researchers in the hope it can lead to a number of benefits such as further employment, access to research funding otherwise closed to them, or making their CV more attractive to foreign NGOs (Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018). These associated benefits were noted to serve as powerful motivators for local academics to acquiesce to relationships that did not fully acknowledge or even obscured their contributions.

Partnerships and Positionality: It was noted that when establishing equitable partnerships in fragile contexts the positionality of potential actors within the context where the research is taking place should also be considered. In other words, in fragile environments it is important to think about equitability not just in terms of the North-South partnership, but also equity of opportunity within the local research environment. In politically sensitive environments, researchers from the Global North may not have knowledge about local power dynamics that may privilege certain organisations and individuals over others. In regions that experience insecurity there are frequently areas of relative stability that become hubs for international researchers, as with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in the Mosul example. Travel outside of these hubs is either deemed not safe for external researchers or is prohibited by restrictive university insurance policies (Duffield, 2014; Fisher, 2017). This results in an abundance of partnerships forged within these specific locations and a profusion of research within that limited geographical location. This geographical restriction may also result in partnerships with an exclusive identity group and as such research partnerships may serve to privilege that group over others in the context. Research projects by their nature include resource transfer, such as money, infrastructure or skills, and therefore they also communicate implicit ethical messages, for example, partnering with members of a particular ethnic group or the choice of security infrastructure (Bentele, 2020). It is important to unpack how numerous funded partnerships with one identity group might interact with the wider conflict, possibility contributing to reproducing the same unequal power relationships that privilege some members of society and marginalise others.

Workshop participants noted that the issue of language use across the partnership can further exaggerate such risks, with Northern partners privileging partners with fluency in English and other dominant languages. As one participant noted '*there are many excellent academics who are rarely involved in internationally funded projects because they do not speak English*'. It must be considered that fluency in English and other dominant languages will often correlate with forms of privilege and therefore understanding how this relates to equity in a local sense is vital. Funders often seek to raise awareness about funding opportunities in the

Global South to broaden the pool of potential partners, including by seeking to broker partnerships at 'sandpits'. However, these events are primarily conducted in capital cities and through the medium of English, reducing their effectiveness and limiting their inclusivity, while risk analysis usually ensures that they are rarely conducted in fragile contexts at all.

Research design

Research topics

Workshop participants noted that in fragile and conflict-affected contexts the multitude of overlapping agendas and community positions can create ethical dilemmas over what is an acceptable research topic. In situations plagued by insecurity or violence, the polarisation of groups is often prevalent and widespread mistrust is common. This amplifies the potential for research topics to be easily politicised within the wider community and increases the potential for creating negative societal impacts or harm. Even research into what are deemed 'technical' subjects, such as service delivery, has the potential to feed into wider grievances if the social realities of different actors within the research site are not considered. Such sensitivities were illustrated by workshop participants who noted that research into refugees' access to schooling can alienate host communities if they also suffer from limited provision of education but are excluded from the study.

Examining how the implementation of a research project might interact with the research environment and potential conflict triggers in particular can be seen to complicate the scientific decision-making process (Elcheroth, 2017). That is because it requires the imposition of a limiting framework for scientific activity, whereby a research design may need to be adapted if it has the potential to exacerbate community tensions. This can result in the inclusion of additional groups in the research design to ensure inclusivity or a complete change of focus or methodology. It is therefore necessary to recognise a hierarchy of requirements at play for research in fragile environments. From an ethical perspective it is clear that in *all* research, regardless of context, human risk and epistemic gain cannot be given the same weighting in the research design process (Elcheroth, 2017). Participants noted that the dilemma of fragile contexts, however, is that the potential to do harm is often not immediately obvious, especially to an external researcher. As such, the thorough interrogation of how a project interacts with existing tensions in the research environment is essential, and not just during the project design stage, but continually throughout the project timeline.

Selection bias and positionality

The risk of selection bias can be intensified in fragile contexts due to security concerns and restricted mobility, with certain groups hidden or subject to limited access.

Not only does this bring the validity of research findings into question, but when policy or practice is evidenced by research that has selection bias, the resulting impact may benefit specific groups over others and create harm overall. That is to say, selection bias may result in the design of public services for some at the expense of others (Bell-Martin and Marson, 2021). This can then result in exacerbating existing conflict triggers that may be based on inequality or grievance.

Governments or controlling groups may exert control over researcher access through the use of permits (Moss et al., 2019), designated 'no-go areas', or straightforward threats. Different groups may have a vested interest in controlling international perceptions of local realities. The lack of access can serve to further 'marginalise the already marginalised' (Bell-Martin and Marson, 2021). In order to overcome the issue of limited access, many external researchers rely on local actors, including the use of local facilitators and 'fixers', who negotiate access, arrange meetings and support foreign researchers and journalists. Yet these relationships also need to be interrogated to understand their potential impact on selection bias. Just as Northern researchers need to interrogate their own positionality (Coffey, 1999; Rose, 1997; Srivastava, 2006), so too do local actors. Local partners are a product of the local social, economic and political context and as such are influenced by local power dynamics. For example, in multilingual countries selection bias may also occur because neither international nor local partners have the linguistic scope to reach beyond a certain community, or in areas of identity conflict the local actor may lack the relationships of trust that allow data collection across identity boundaries.

Workshop participants raised an additional concern with regards to reliance on facilitators and fixers: often they access the same groups of participants for every client. The research fatigue born out of fleeting visits by a procession of researchers can impact interview and survey responses. As workshop participants in all three locations noted, research fatigue and over exposure to surveys and interviews often leads participants into a trap of regurgitating pre-formulated narratives based on what they think the researcher wants to hear. It is necessary to critically reflect on whose voices are being amplified and whose are ignored or silenced and whether the project design serves to reinforce already dominant narratives that can further grievances between communities.

Research methods

The above sections have tended to discuss surveys and interviews. This is because these tend to be the most frequent methods employed in fragile contexts, often due to their convenience for short research trips. The 'gold standard' perception of knowledge generated via randomised control trials (RCTs) has been seductive in

the development and humanitarian sectors with consultancy, international agency, and academic researchers often seeking to implement a research design as close to RCTs as possible in fragile contexts. These studies can be done ethically and there are examples where great care has been taken (e.g. Burde and Linden, 2013). However, ethical reflection is necessary in contexts where control groups are employed when interventions are offering much needed services and support. Furthermore, there is a need for wider reflection on the politics of knowledge involved in privileging RCTs, experimental and quantitative evidence, including around the desire to transfer this evidence across contexts under the certainty of 'what works' or 'best practice'. Given the dynamics discussed in earlier sections, other methods, including creative methods, in-depth qualitative research or coproduced designs may be less extractive and more suited to building trusting relationships, avoiding retraumatisation and producing results that are of use to those participating in the study (Wilson et al., 2020).

Data collection

Data collection often centres on two key ethical challenges; duty of care and gaining informed consent. During discussions on methodological approaches workshop participants noted that any associated ethical risks will be highly contextual, dependent on the research undertaken. Participants argued that assessing these risks of potential harm should be viewed in terms of both potential negative physical and psychological impacts. Sensitive topics can leave research participants susceptible to physical harm in the form of retribution for association with the study. While, if the research requires the recounting of personally traumatic narratives, there is a further risk that interviews may retraumatise the participant. The question of whether it is really necessary to collect data from traumatised people is central and must be based on the possible benefit for the participant and not the researcher or epistemic gain. Contexts of extreme state weakness or ongoing conflict serve to enable exploitative practices as regulatory structures to protect such populations are often completely absent, with barriers to accessing extremely vulnerable populations removed. While there are scholars working in fragile contexts who have training that prepares them for these interactions, this is not the norm in global academia. In fact, there are current incentive systems at play that encourage untrained researcher engagement with the most vulnerable or oppressed groups. Researchers are often celebrated for presenting research with ex-combatants or other vulnerable populations, despite a lack of experience or training.[4]

Ensuring that interview participants give informed consent was also noted to create further challenges. For research to be ethical, participants must voluntarily consent to their participation in full understanding of what participation entails

and the potential risks and benefits (Belmont Report, 1979; Kelman, 1972; and now noted in the majority of profession ethical guidance). The research team must clearly understand and communicate any potential risks identified to the participants, manage any raised expectation of benefits and also ensure that participants feel under no obligation to participate. It was stated by workshop attendees that informed consent was often undermined by the context in which researcher positionality creates unavoidable power dynamics. When communicating risk to research participants, workshop attendees noted that researchers must understand how they are perceived culturally in the context of the research and unpack how this can influence potential interviewees' perceptions of their freedom to participate. It was frequently noted that in contexts affected by crises or food insecurity, there is a danger that participants can associate research with humanitarian assessments and have raised expectations regarding future service (Luc and Altare, 2018). By extension, vulnerable participants may fear reduced service delivery if they do not participate.

While duty of care and informed consent are two of the most commonly noted ethical challenges of data collection in fragile contexts, workshop participants also noted that they should be viewed as the most predicable issues. These are the ethical concerns that researchers can try to anticipate and mitigate against for example through an interview strategy of silent listening, rather than questioning, probing, or prying in order to ensure unequal power dynamics do not create an obligation to answer (Fujii, 2009; Thomson, 2009) or by restricting all interviews to the same length in time in order not to highlight one participant over another. The most pressing ethical challenges of data collection were observed to often arise from the unanticipated problems that occur in a fragile research context. For example, researchers at the Dhaka workshop noted becoming aware of situations of exploitation or abuse of participants by external actors, while in Amman the example used was when an interviewee turned out to be 14 not 18 as they had been led to believe. In this sense preformulated ethical procedures and ethical practice in the field become two starkly different concepts.

It is not possible to create a process or a guide for dealing with all the unexpected ethical challenges that might present in fragile contexts. Therefore, funders who incentivise projects in such environments need to create more dynamic sources of researcher support, such as peer-peer ethics networks, regular blog posts sharing real life experiences, structured ethical reflection within research teams (Stevens et al., 2016) or the practice of values-based and relational ethics (McMahon and Milligan, 2021). However, to achieve this will require a shift in organisational culture for funders and researchers alike. It necessitates the incentivisation of sharing accounts of when research goes wrong, something researchers and funders are not necessarily open about.

Dissemination; who benefits from the findings?

When reflecting on the unethical research practices witnessed in Mosul, the extractive nature of the process and non-Iraqi researchers' control of the narrative were significant issues. Therefore, the same level of ethical scrutiny should be applied to the dissemination of research findings as is given to the research process. Workshop participants in all three locations noted two ethical imperatives that should underpin this process; firstly, the need to continue safeguarding participants and local partners, and secondly, the need for outputs to be equitably created and accessed. What is shared, who creates it, and how it is disseminated can induce ethical questions around the potential to create harm in fragile contexts and the potential to reproduce epistemic injustice in research relationships.

What is disseminated: Where there is potential for stigmatisation of individuals or groups, extra care is needed. Although the researcher may have the respondents' permission to include their identity, it is the responsibility of the researcher to make decisions to take material out if it may risk harming the respondents (Wood, 2006). In rapidly changing contexts the inclusion of someone's identity may lead to a negative impact at a later point due to evolving conflict dynamics. A related ethical challenge that was noted calls for an assessment of whether the misuse or misrepresentations of research findings may occur and cause harm. Projects should examine the findings to ensure that they cannot be used to further particularly divisive agendas, justify structural inequalities, or disregard the needs of disadvantaged groups. An illustration of this can be drawn from an education study that collected enrolment data from ethnically segregated schools in a city that was heavily contested between numerous armed ethno-political groups. An examination of the findings in relation to the context concluded that the data may have been interpreted as a de-facto population census (a process that had been postponed due to the fragility of the security situation). As such the author removed all ethnically specific enrolment data so as not to feed into wider conflict narratives based on demographic territorial claims. However, that is not to say that findings that are politically unpopular should be suppressed, instead workshop participants noted the need for a collaborative dissemination plan that is designed by research actors and participants.

How research is disseminated: Without due recognition local researchers are often excluded from the intellectual ownership of research and consequently absent from the published outputs. The widespread erasure of local academics from published studies on conflict and fragility is a regular occurrence (Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018). Workshop participants across the three contexts noted four further key issues in relation to this. Firstly, participants highlighted that even where local scholarship does exist, Northern researchers often fail to cite it in their

work, with reviewers rarely penalising for the absence. This is particularly prevalent when scholarship is in a language other than English. Secondly, academic journals hide the knowledge generated by projects behind expensive paywalls rarely accessible to those living in fragile contexts. This limits the ability of academics from the Global South to engage with current scholarship, sometimes even work that they have helped to create. Thirdly, English dominates the language of publications, which can pose a barrier to the transfer of scientific knowledge in both directions, limiting the sharing of expertise from non-English speaking scholars and restricting access to Northern generated studies. Lastly, publishing in specialised academic outlets such as academic books or journals requires a particular type of language use which ensures a limited understanding outside of specialised circles due to specific disciplinary framings and terminology. Policy papers offer an alternative modality for publishing, yet this is not without ethical implications with an equal dominance of the use of English as a medium and scholars deploring the oversimplification of often complex situations.

The prevalence of these mediums of dissemination reflect the extractive nature of research in fragile contexts. It was noted during workshops that researchers rarely return to the site of data collection to share or validate findings with the communities at the centre of the study. This selective dissemination, aimed at policy impact or academic advancement, serves to demonstrate the intended audience of the research. As such it reveals that many research projects have a clear dichotomy between the participants of a study solely as beneficiaries of potential impact and the international community or governance actors as responsible for acting upon the findings to create said impact. This removes recognition of the agency that communities in fragile and conflict-affected contexts have to act for themselves (Hajir et al., 2022). Research results should also be disseminated back to the communities involved in ways that are meaningful or valuable to them, including opportunities for co-analysis and validation of findings. Workshop participants argued this is critical for broadening opportunities for impact and fostering public understanding, but also for enabling academic transparency that holds researchers accountable.

Ethical guidance and gatekeeping

Ensuring that research in fragile and conflict-affected contexts is conducted in an ethical manner is dependent upon and shaped by the procedures that guide and regulate research ethics in general. Typically,[5] for academically driven research this will be informed by three stages: Firstly, researchers draw on ethical guidelines and standards to shape the line of enquiry and subsequent methodology; secondly, project applications are reviewed for ethical standards at the funding proposal stage; and, lastly, all research must go before an Institutional Review

Board (IRB) or Research Ethics Committee (REC) to receive ethics approval before the project can start. How these different stages of 'ethical gatekeeping' acknowledge the complexity of working in fragile environments and reference the need for greater attention to the issues raised in this paper is critical. While most stages of the process will demand projects 'do no harm', whether they specifically acknowledge the complexities of potential harm in conflict-affected and fragile spaces is crucial to their effectiveness. The following section reflects on the effectiveness of each stage of the process in light of the ethical challenges fragile contexts present.

Guidelines: Traditionally ethical research guidelines and procedures have been drawn from the medical world and centre around the methodological and ethical principle of 'do no harm' during the data collection period (Fujii, 2012). Yet this focus is expanding with increasing reference in professional social science focussed guides to broader ethical debates, such as the language of publications and ethical dissemination (e.g. BERA Ethical Guidelines, 2018). Furthermore, the broader understanding of ethical research landscapes and the political economy of knowledge production has been championed by a number of organisations who have commissioned guidance on achieving fair and equitable research partnerships (e.g. UKRI (2021) and the European Commission (Nordling, 2018)). However, despite the advances in broadening ethical framing beyond just 'methods', there is still very little guidance that speaks specifically to the significant and unique ethical and security challenges that can arise from conducting research in fragile and conflict-affected contexts (Campbell, 2017; Mertus, 2009; Rivas and Browne, 2018; Roll and Swenson, 2019). As such, there remains a lack of reference to the specific challenges noted in this paper. For example, there are few guides available that provoke researchers to consider the conflict sensitivity of their projects or direct researchers on how to work with partners to unpack local conflict related bias. Equally methodological guidelines that specifically advise on working in conflict-affected contexts remain rare.

Application for funding: Proposals for research funding usually need to provide a full ethics statement, confirming that appropriate consideration has been given to any ethical issues that may be raised throughout the project's proposed lifetime. This typically includes risk and benefit to researchers, participants and others as a result of the research process itself and also the potential impact, dissemination activities and future re-use of the data (ESRC, 2021). The reviewers of the proposal will then be asked to consider the ethical statement during the peer review process.[6] The effectiveness of the 'application stage' to ethically vet proposals is therefore dependent on the amount of information provided by the applicant and the guidance given to reviewers to undertake this task. Yet, across funding bodies reviewers are seldom given explicit instructions on how to assess ethical landscapes in general, and even less frequently provided guidance on the

way in which ethical risks are amplified in fragile settings. This lack of assistance is further compounded by the fact that reviewers do not always have the relevant contextual country knowledge or conflict expertise required to understand or highlight missed ethical risks associated with conflict sensitivity, geographical limitations, and selection bias or partner positionality. Furthermore, many funding organisations continue to prioritise academics in the Global North to conduct review processes. This not only limits the contextual ethical review of applications but also serves to remove academics from the Global South from the process of determining what is ultimately 'research worthy'; once more feeding into the Northern domination of knowledge production.[7]

Research Ethics Committees: After funding has been awarded, researchers are usually required to submit a detailed overview of their project to an institutional Research Ethics Committee (REC). RECs generally have a broad ethical remit and 'give due regard to the consequences of the research for those directly involved in and affected by it, and to the interests of those who do not take part in the research but who might benefit or suffer from its outcomes in the future' (ESRC, 2021). They also consider the safety of researchers, especially where they are working in fragile contexts. REC approval is the most systematically institutionalised stage in the research ethics process and increasingly simultaneously sought from institutions in both the North and at the site of research where REC registered assessment exists. The latter approval can therefore provide a local level of oversight and raise more contextual ethical challenges that might have been overlooked before. Yet, the sequencing of the research process creates limitations to this. Should the local ethics review signal a need to adapt the project, applicants will have missed the opportunity to attach budget-lines to possible mitigation strategies during the proposal stage, something that is more often required when working in fragile contexts.[8]

An additional problem arises from the fact that attaining local approval at the site of the research is often challenging in fragile settings where such infrastructure may have been undermined. Therefore, Northern RECs often bear the primary responsibility for assessing the ethics of research projects in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. This is problematic as REC guidelines in Northern institutions are rarely adapted for the particular challenges faced by researchers in such environments and are often oriented towards reviewing research proposals that will operate in secure environments. As such, like the peer review process, they seldom have the tools and expertise needed for broader ethical guidance specific to conflict-affected environments (Campbell, 2017; Thomson, 2009). Scholars have therefore noted that the process has effectively become 'a risk management exercise at the behest of the host institution or funding body' (Chiumento et al., 2020; Tolich and Fitzgerald, 2006: 72). A genuine focus on respondents' safety and well-being has been overshadowed by the desire to protect research institutions from

legal repercussions that may be generated by research in their remit (Bhattacharya, 2014; Chiumento et al., 2017; Kohn and Shore, 2017). This was illustrated by workshop participants who provided examples of RECs stipulating the need for signed consent from participants even in areas where such practice would be deemed a distinct security risk.

When looking at these three areas of ethical gatekeeping it becomes increasingly clear that attention to guidance for the specific challenges of fragile contexts is missing. Furthermore, the broader ethical landscape of a project (beyond its procedures for data collection) appears to get less scrutiny by these gatekeeping processes. This furthers the distance between ethical procedures (often a tick box risk assessment) and ethical practice, which can remain largely unscrutinised and lacking accountability in fragile contexts (Bhattacharya, 2014; Parkinson and Wood, 2015).

Conclusions and ways forward

This paper sought to interrogate the whole research landscape – from funding models to dissemination plans – to critically reflect on how each aspect can acknowledge and respond to the complexity of conflict and fragility in an ethical manner. It raised a number of challenges at each stage, linked to epistemic and material injustices and geopolitical inequalities in the research ecosystem, and to the unique challenges posed by fragility, conflict and insecurity. We hope that this endeavour may contribute towards the development of future guidance and ethical support mechanisms that are responsive to the entire research landscape. We argue that guidance, support and accountability is needed across the research ecosystem and for all the different actors who operate within it.

Given the power dynamics that are often enabled and exacerbated by the material and epistemic injustices highlighted here, this guidance and accountability is especially urgent for actors based in the Global North, including research funders and commissioners, reviewers of research proposals, and Global North research institutions and Universities conducting research in conflict-affected and fragile contexts.

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Notes

1. The paper uses the World Bank definition of fragility found: http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/333071582771136385/Classification-of-Fragile-and-Conflict-Affected-Situations.pdf which focusses on countries with high levels of institutional and social fragility leading to insecurity and/or countries that are affected by violent conflict.
2. Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico, Honduras, Myanmar, Philippines, Nepal, Indonesia, Pakistan.
3. The restrictive nature of partnering with Northern Universities was raised at all three workshops.
4. Having presented on research with vulnerable populations for 10 years at academic conferences, the first author has never been questioned on the ethics of her access to such populations.
5. In universities and other research organisations, Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) and Research Ethics Committees (RECs), alongside national ethical review boards, are responsible for ensuring that research activity is conducted in a manner consistent with established ethical standards. However, some research, monitoring and evaluation and commissioned independent project work may fall outside of the remit of such bodies.
6. In the case of social science applications to academic funding councils in the UK the ethics section is often used to merely provide assurances that the proposed project will follow its own intuitional guidelines on ethical research behaviour. As such 'ethical compliance' tends to be downgraded within the overall selection criteria, deferring responsibility to the next stage in ethical gatekeeping, which is institutional ethical clearance.
7. The UKRI 'International Development Review Peer Review College' provides a promising example of challenging this model. The college brings together 300 members from Development Assistance Committee (DAC) list countries to ensure that developing country perspectives are a key part of the review of GCRF and ODA relevant proposals.
8. For example, local interrogation of the project after it has been awarded funding may reveal the need for a more inclusive sample set that reduces local grievance. Such conflict related adaptations require inclusion in the application stage due the possible budget implications they create.

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