

Harm, change and unpredictability: the ethics of interviews in conflict research

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Abstract

Conceiving of interviews as relationships of knowledge creation involving a researcher and a research participant, we engage with the ethical implications of the unpredictabilities of this relationship when conducting research in conflict and post-conflict contexts. Through a conservative application of the precautionary principle that prohibits change of all involved in the research process, presuming change (always) implies harm, scholars to date have overlooked the ethical challenges that stem from the unpredictability of the interview method. In turn, this perspective has limited our ability to capture and mitigate possible forms of harm, undermining the legitimacy and appropriateness of existing ethical guidelines. We argue for a deliberative and iterative approach to understandings of harm and harm thresholds in interview research. This argument draws on recent debates on the precautionary principle in natural sciences, which address the unpredictabilities of research, allowing us to think about change in ways that is ethical.

Keywords

Research ethics, interviews, conflict studies, identity politics, precautionary principle

Introduction

A researcher is interviewing a member of civil society in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and asks this research participant to reflect on his position on the issue of justice for war crimes that he had articulated publicly. At that moment, the interviewee cannot recollect his point and responds ‘I don’t know, you ask me as if you were my neighbour – the lady from the 18th floor [of my apartment block]’ (11 December 2015). The researcher is taken

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aback; she had come prepared for the interview. But, in that moment, her preparedness and her credentials become challenged in unforeseen, explicitly gendered and disempowering ways. This example demonstrates the unpredictability of research interviews. In this case, the very process of the interview becomes contested and likened to an 'interrogation' by a nosy neighbour. This unexpected turn is reflected in evident unease experienced both by the interviewer and interviewee. They are both changed by the experience of the research process, and this change needs to be navigated ethically.

As researchers, while we can prepare, we know to expect interviews to be unpredictable: we cannot foresee how the relationship will develop and how this will impact the knowledge we generate (Swauger, 2011: 498). While the latter is an issue of substance, in this article, we engage with ethical considerations that emerge from the unpredictability of research interviews, as relationships between researchers and research participants. As Tannert et al. (2007: 892) put it, 'where the lives of others are at stake, decision-making and the handling of uncertainties have important ethical dimensions'. Vast scholarship on research interviews across social sciences has not engaged with unpredictability to date, although unpredictability is innate to this research method.

Addressing unpredictability, explicitly from an ethical perspective, challenges us to consider how interviews change participants and the researcher, as the example above demonstrates. As scholars familiar with conflict-affected and conflict-prone contexts, we situate our discussion of unpredictability in these research environments where the unpredictability of interviews is amplified because we can neither know, control nor predict many aspects of the field. These insights can also provoke a useful discussion for scholars using interviews in more benign settings where unpredictability might seem more subtle, but where researchers still enter 'into the lives of others' (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007: 330).

Researchers of conflict, in particular, need to rethink the ethics of change that result from the unpredictable dynamics between a researcher and a research participant. Existing literature, such as Woliver (2002: 677), has suggested change to be unethical and to be avoided because it is conceived as analogous to harm, which is why researchers 'must leave them (participants) in the same position in which you found them. You must do no harm to them'. Instead, we question the elision between change and harm, and embrace the notion of ethical forms of change. Change is an unavoidable consequence of research interviews. As such, we need practical tools to deal with change ethically.

This instinct to refuse (any) change stems from a conservative application of the precautionary principle that underpins a consequentialist approach to ethics in response to unpredictability. A consequentialist approach seeks to mitigate potential harms and prevent action that might cause harm because of research. However, a conservative application of the precautionary principle in social sciences might also adversely impact interviewees' experience of an interview. While the application of the precautionary principle in social sciences derives originally from biomedical sciences, considerations of ethics in social sciences have not kept up to date with recent ethical debates in natural sciences. These debates rethink the consequentialist logic and practice so that it is more finely attuned to the uncertainties of research practices. They can thus inform our understanding of unpredictability and change in conflict research, and beyond.

In this article, we consider interviews as a collaborative relationship between participant and researcher (Fujii, 2017; Tanggaard, 2009). Regardless of the researcher's epistemological underpinning or whether the research is hypothesis-generating or testing, interviews should be conceived as collaborations rather than interactions of knowledge extraction. But, these relationships of knowledge creation are replete with moments of unpredictability, which raise ethical questions foremost in relation to change. Though collaborative, interviews are also distinct from community-based and participatory methods of data collection. Change and unpredictability are a consequence of interview research, which is our focus here from an ethical perspective, rather than a research aim as in participatory methods.

First, we review literature on the consequentialist approach to ethics and the rethinking of the precautionary principle. Second, we shift to an empirical discussion centring on forms of unpredictability in interviews, relating to sharing of knowledge and research relationships drawing on our collective field research on identity, ethnicity and violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia (2014–2018), and Crimea (2012–2013). These field sites capture the unknowns of conflict-affected and conflict-prone research contexts. Finally, drawing on recent debates in natural sciences, we offer some deliberative solutions for foregrounding unpredictability and potential for ethical forms of change. These solutions entail including participants in calibrating the acceptable nature and thresholds of harm and adopting an iterative approach to ethical procedures within institutions.

Beyond harm: the emerging ethics of knowledge creation

The responsibility of researchers to 'do no harm' has long been a tenet of ethical research. Researchers of conflict processes, in particular, have articulated concern regarding risks to participants (Wood, 2006), as well as fixers, gatekeepers and researchers themselves who can all be harmed by research (Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018; Loyle and Simoni, 2017; McCosker et al., 2001). Moreover, as we mention above, change to participants is conceived as a form of harm that ought to be mitigated (Woliver, 2002).

Focusing on harm stems from a consequentialist approach to ethics that is underpinned by a conservative application of the precautionary principle in social sciences.¹ While the precautionary principle provides ways to deal with the uncertainty of the research process, it does so by 'making conservative assumptions or building conclusions around "worst-case scenarios"' in terms of how researchers conceive of, and attempt to, mitigate the potential harms that stem from the consequences of their research (Rona-Tas et al., 2019: 616). A conservative application of the precautionary principle might, for example, preclude the possibility of change on the grounds it *might* be harmful without considering *if* it will be harmful or whether there might be ethical forms of change that mitigate the potential harm. On the one hand, the long-standing debate in biomedical and environmental sciences has centred on the usefulness of the precautionary principle in providing adequate guidance for the ethical dilemmas in the daily conduct of research, as well as the instances when the precautionary principle should be invoked to deal with uncertainty when 'potential negative outcomes are deemed serious and irreversible' (Arcuri, 2007; Burnett, 2009). On the other hand, the discussion of the principle has also advanced the ways forward in terms of iterative, practical and

deliberative practices in such a way that ethical guidance does not paralyse research (Arcuri, 2007). Discussions in biomedical and environmental sciences have suggested less conservative as well as more appropriate and ethically sensitive applications of the precautionary principle (Burnett, 2009; Steel, 2013). For example, from a precautionary standpoint, the uncertain risks of implementing a regulatory policy vis-à-vis the environment need to be weighed against the risks of not implementing the policy (Goklany, 2002). This debate on the precautionary principle offers useful pointers for rethinking how social scientists can engage with the unpredictability of the research process – a genuine question of research in practice. Social scientists, and especially researchers of conflict and post-conflict processes, have considered the question of harm but, we argue, have not related it to unpredictability. Thus, we have so far missed the opportunity to reformulate the precautionary principle and design ethically sensitive ways to deal with uncertainty and change.

There are many social science researchers who resist biomedical advances on ethical procedures, including the ‘mission creep’ of ethical regulation (Gunsalus et al., 2006) and the misalignment of ethical challenges for biomedical and social science research (Humphreys, 2015; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2016), for example, because forms of harm and benefit differ (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). We respect the differences, methodological, often ontological and analytical, between social and biomedical science. However, given that the complexities and contingencies of human interaction are the basis of social science research and interviews as a method in particular (Kuhlau et al., 2011: 2), ethics debates in social science can benefit from engaging with recent nuances of discussions in natural sciences. These discussions are concerned with developing a plural understanding and application of the precautionary principle as it pertains to different disciplines and objects of concern (Hartzell-Nichols, 2013).

The unpredictable nature of interviews represents a type of problem to which a better-informed version of the precautionary principle is not only applicable but needed for the conduct of ethical research, as opposed to a more conservative application that proscribes change. The case is even stronger for research interviews about sensitive topics in volatile conflict and post-conflict environments. Researchers, therefore, need to foreground unpredictability and the potential for ethical change.

Unpredictability in research interviews: the questions of ethics

The unpredictability of research and its effects is enhanced in conflict-affected and conflict-prone contexts. In conflict research, participants may be victims and perpetrators of violence and human rights violations (Clark and Sharf, 2007). The researcher may intrude into private and deeply personal experiences, such as war-time rape or death of a family member or ask participants for information that may be stigmatising or incriminating, and infringe on the vested interests of the powerful (Lee, 1993). An encounter with a research participant and their ‘story’ may stir profound emotional reactions in a researcher; it may be deep empathy, even tears with, a victim (Clark, 2012), or revulsion at the perpetrator (Shesterinina, 2019).

Researchers are unable to predict the conduct and content of the interview. All depends on how the relationship with a participant develops, but also on how participants are embedded in their political, social and cultural environment. In turn, it is hard to assess (and thus minimise) the forms of harm that might result from research (Brooks, 2013; Clark and Sharf, 2007; Swauger, 2011). We can certainly prepare ourselves by gaining knowledge about the field site we enter, about the participants and existing factions (Grant, 2016). However, we cannot predict what forms of knowledge and interaction will emerge within the interview. For example, research will always face risks of ‘tapping into unknown (or unknowable) sensitivities’ (Hollway and Jefferson, 2012: 28), with implications to the research participant and researcher. Also, we cannot predict how our preparedness, which has long been a ‘cardinal rule’ of interview research, will pay off (Burnham et al., 2008: 211).

Finally, the research site can pose real kinds of security risks because loci of ‘real’ power are often murky or unknown. Both experienced researchers and novices are left with what is – at best – limited reliable information, on which to base their considerations of ethical risks. These considerations include considering what information is even taken from participants (e.g. names), and what is published about a field and how much time to allow to elapse before the material is published (Sabar and Ben-Yehoshua, 2017; Sriram et al., 2009; Wood, 2006).

Returning to participatory methods, they are a qualitative method grounded in unpredictability. Such methods seek change to participants, broader social change, and to ‘do good’ (Shaw, 2016: 424), rather than just to ‘do no harm’. For example, participatory methods seek to co-produce data by supporting participants to construct, reflect and shift their ‘own understandings of their situation’ (Shaw, 2016: 419), and by fostering agency, ‘self-empowerment’ and ‘self-development’ (Bussu et al., 2020; Grant and Dicks, 2014). Ethical discussions for participatory methods recognise the novelty of the method and the need for data collection, and thus ethical considerations and review protocols, to be emergent, cyclical, situated and iterative (Bussu et al., 2020; Khanlou and Peter, 2005; Shaw, 2016). At the same time, the most common ethical discussions remain those of ethics of consent, anonymity, and power (Bussu et al., 2020; Khanlou and Peter, 2005), without foregrounding the ethical implications of seeking change and unpredictability. The ethical challenges of change and unpredictability are distinct for interviews, where change and unpredictability are not an aim but a consequence that ought to be accounted for. Our goal is to provide some practical assistance to interview methods as well as other qualitative methods more generally, including participatory methods.

In the following sections, the innovation we bring to these discussions of ethics stems from an explicit discussion of the ethical dimensions of unpredictability: first, of sharing knowledge, which is the main purpose of an interview; and, second, of the interaction between the researcher and interviewee, which is a key feature of an interview. We do so by recognising the need to move debates about the ethics of research interviews beyond existing considerations of dignity and respect, on the one hand, and positionality, power and reflexivity, on the other hand, to embrace the notion of ethical change.

Scholars have emphasised participants’ rights to dignity and respect (Fujii, 2017), regardless of who they are (e.g. whether they are victims or perpetrators of violence). Dignity and respect also relate to the process and meaning of gaining consent, and the

need to re-conceive of consent as a negotiated process rather than a one-off transaction (Bhattacharya, 2014). Relatedly, discussions point to how researchers need to reflect on dynamics of power within interviews, including their positionality, as part of ethical practice (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Tripp, 2018). Regardless of how an interview is designed – as structured, semi-structured, or ‘dressed up like a conversation between friends’ (Miller and Dingwall, 1997: 59) – interviews are never ‘a dominance free zone’ (Brooks, 2013; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008: 33). They are a ‘deliberately created opportunity to talk about something that the interviewer is interested in’ (Miller and Dingwall, 1997: 59). If power is inherent in human interaction, the ethical onus has been on researchers to reflect on the role of power and researcher bias within interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008: 34). When we design, write up and present research derived from interviews, the focus has been on improving the human experience of research – for example, by focusing on the humanity of interactions and tensions between researchers and participants – to increase the internal validity of data collected (MacLean, 2013; Mboti, 2012).

In these advances of ethics of interview research, consideration of unpredictability and the ethics of change has been scant, even though scholars have encouraged us to develop ethical sensibilities to engage with the dynamism of the field (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). For example, researchers have questioned the expected notions and ethical implications of an empowered researcher and a disempowered participant; thus, Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay (2016) reference their feeling of powerlessness in interviews with Afghan warlords. But, such discussions of the unpredictabilities and contingencies of interview research have at best been implicit, but certainly not written about by scholars conducting interviews.

Turning to our collective experience of conducting research interviews, we show how our current understandings of research ethics equip a researcher with only limited guidance on how to handle unpredictability inherent in the different and dynamic stages of the interview research process. While understandings and experiences of unpredictability might be subjective – what is unpredictable to one researcher might not be unpredictable to another – they are also contextual. Despite the contextual and subjective nature of unpredictability, it is useful for researchers to discuss how interviews might become unpredictable and how to respond ethically.

The unpredictability of creating and sharing knowledge in interviews

From the perspective of knowledge creation, interviews are steeped in unpredictability. When a researcher enters an interview setting, they are unaware of what participants will share, how happy participants will be willing to share this information and how the interview will progress and impact both of them. As we explore below, the entire exchange is fraught with ethical challenges that emerge from the unpredictability of sharing knowledge, reacting to the knowledge that is shared and the post-interview effects of sharing knowledge for participants and researchers.

Sharing

Pre-interview considerations of research ethics are focused on minimising harm, with a concern for preventing the traumatisation of a research participant or a researcher. However, when researchers enter the interview, we have a limited understanding of how the interview, and our interaction with the participant, will progress and impact the researcher and participant.

First is the challenge of what the participant wants to share – such as instances where they perpetrated violence – against what the researcher wants to know (Clark and Sharf, 2007; Woliver, 2002). This ‘guilty knowledge’ may expose both participant and researcher, as well as assistants handling the data, to harm by the trauma that might arise from exposure to this knowledge. It is also the responsibility and challenge of ascertaining what is considered sensitive where norms (e.g. gender, race/ethnicity, sexual practices) vary across contexts (McCosker et al., 2001). Discussing sensitive material can lead to expected (or unexpected) degrees of re-traumatisation for participants or catharsis, in ways that are hard to foresee (Aroussi, 2020; Corbin and Morse, 2003). These challenges of unpredictability intersect with different types of interviews and how harm might arise. For example, less structured interviews can be informative, by offering an equal space between researcher and participant to converse (Berry, 2002). At the same time, less structured interviews can open the door to more unpredictability, in terms of the stories and intimate, sensitive or secret material that participants might share (Corbin and Morse, 2003).

Relatedly, real ethical dilemmas arise where a researcher is aware that an interview or a segment of an interview is distressing to a research participant (and to the researcher). Yet, the anticipation that an interview might be a distressing or difficult experience does not deter a participant from being involved in research, or from proceeding with an interview. Throughout the Balkans, survivors of war crimes whose family members have perished in violence responded to invitations, because that is ‘something they want to do, in debt for the loved ones who are no longer there’ (Kostovicova, 2016). This motivation requires us to redefine the scope of permissible questions to be asked and tolerable distress, which has implications for how we consider ethical challenges of these uncertain interactions. It is driven by the imperative research participants feel that they must contribute to knowledge about the situation that resulted in their suffering. All this sheds light on the incongruity between perspectives of research boards and those of research participants. Buckle et al. (2010) specify that ethical review boards assume that the bereaved are necessarily distressed when they are interviewed about their experience of bereavement. In contrast, interviews can be beneficial environments for participants to share these experiences.

Second is the concern surrounding sensitive issues that are a likely subject in conflict-affected contexts. Researchers are acutely aware of not causing distress by probing into issues that may cause suffering to participants. Ethical training, for example, may encourage researchers to terminate the interview when a degree of distress, such as an emotional response, has become evident. Interview novices, in particular, might heed such advice to comply with the ethical principles of beneficence and doing no harm (King and Horrocks, 2010). But, as King and Horrocks (2010: 115) remark, ‘invoking a distressed

participant's right to withdraw from the process is often not the outcome that the participant wants or needs'; that very act can cause greater distress.

A researcher might encounter a similar dilemma during the very course of an interview when a participant consciously starts sharing sensitive information. For example, in an interview about justice for war crimes with a human rights activist in Belgrade, the participant became aware of the increasing risk to themselves and the researcher. Nonetheless, he continued to share information, ever more frequently asking the researcher to consider it to be 'off the record' (25 September 2014). These segments of an interview are useful as they enhance the understanding of the topic. Yet, from the perspective of a research participant, 'off the record remarks' signal distress, as the interview seemed to make the participant reveal more information than he planned before the interview.

After the sharing

Research ethics are primarily concerned with the process of sharing information in the interview process. Only rarely do we consider the impact of this experience on the research participant after the interview has occurred. Concern for the post-interview period has been focused on the secure storage and safeguarding of data, including research participants' identity. Scholars have also raised concerns about the ethical questions, and forms of harm, that can arise from data sharing and moves towards transparency, in particular in sites of conflict and authoritarianism (Parkinson and Wood, 2015).

At the same time, researchers (at least those trained outside of an exclusively positivist perspective) are guided and trained to be reflexive, and to interrogate the research process from their perspective (Tripp, 2018) or even from the participants' perspective (Perera, 2020). The act of reflection allows researchers to be attuned to 'the grounding, direction and motivations pervading the research' (King and Horrocks, 2010: 128–129) and how it impacts on the creation of knowledge on a given issue. However, we are never asked to engage ethically with the process of self-reflection by participants themselves on their participation in the research process. Several unpredictable dynamics can pose ethical quandaries for the researchers, especially when research participants start to reflect on their contribution towards the researcher's aims.

Scholars have written about an interview being a 'stressful' experience, not only because a researcher is under pressure to gather primary data (Lodge, 2013), but also because an interview itself is a performance of sorts. From the perspective of knowledge creation, a research participant's stress has to be recognised too and is part of these unpredictable dynamics. Acknowledging participants' superior knowledge, for example, in elite interviews, this literature has focused on the pressure on the interviewer who approaches the research participant from an inferior position, epistemologically. However, research participants too often perceive themselves as subordinate in an encounter with the researcher. Even if research participants are not professionals or well-educated, from the perspective of knowledge creation, they are the ones with a superior understanding of the subject of the interview, for example, based on their personal experiences, such as victims of war-time violence. Epistemic insecurity that a research participant feels in interacting with researchers may be amplified by other perceived

intersectional inequalities including West/non-West, race and ethnicity, class, or gender, resulting in anxieties about the validity of the knowledge that participants can and want to share.

To illustrate, a Kosovo Serb victim of violence of the Kosovo war in the late 1990s completed the thought saying: 'I swear to you this is how it was' (Belgrade, 16 November 2014). Another interviewee in Bosnia and Herzegovina ended a particularly insightful interview by remarking modestly: 'I don't know. That is, in a way, my view of this subject matter' (Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 10 December 2015). Similarly, in Crimea, one participant commented they would have wanted more time to read up on the subject they were being asked about (access to Russian education by Crimean residents), even though it was participants' intuitions and perceptions that were relevant. While scholarship on research ethics has focused on the need to avoid participants' emotional distress (King and Horrocks, 2010: 115), what has not been sufficiently recognised is the kind of emotional discomfort that derives from participating in knowledge creation. Namely, participants impose pressure on themselves to deliver on the knowledge that they have been asked (and consented) to share.

Reaction to sharing

Finally, we address questions that emerge beyond the research relationship of researcher and participant and speak to the unpredictable nature of sharing knowledge. One particular dilemma concerns how we represent participants' perspectives to audiences (Hammersley, 2014), some of whom have their stakes in interpretation, whether professional, political or personal. For example, in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea, it has been challenging to deal with a newly politicised attitude to the idea of what it means to be Russian in Crimea. Presenting at a workshop at the University of Ottawa in 2015, one of the authors faced pushback from her description of how some subjectively identified in Crimea as discriminated by virtue of their Russian identification, that to be Russian was to be discriminated, as if the researcher was stating an objective position that ethnic Russians *were* discriminated in Crimea (rather than some participants' viewpoint). The point is that this discourse of discrimination can also be triggering to those who seek to automatically delegitimise such a perspective as if it is necessarily a Kremlin narrative, as opposed to something autochthonous within Crimea.

Nested within the issue of representation is the challenge of selection (Currier, 2011). Typically, we think of selection as a methodological concern of rigour; but selecting data is also an ethical concern concerning the knowledge that is produced as a result of these decisions. When one of the authors presented her research findings to her research participants at a meeting in Sarajevo, to bring knowledge back to those who contributed in its production, she confronted the question – on which findings to focus. When presenting her findings on women's contribution to the debates about post-conflict justice, including female moderators, research participants were vividly surprised by the evidence that points to the gendered dynamics of those debates. This act of sharing knowledge raised questions about gender equality of the justice-seeking process in the Balkans, ultimately resulting in a degree of its delegitimation, in the eyes of the research participants. But shared knowledge can also have the opposite effect by legitimising the topic

of research. When hearing the research findings concerning the reconciliatory nature of the regional level of justice seeking, a research participant got up and said: 'That finding of yours is very important to me,' adding, it would motivate his continued engagement within that particular initiative to find justice for his killed sibling in the Kosovo war.²

In both cases, it was neither possible to predict the implication of sharing and discussing new findings nor how the participants might interact with the findings and the researcher. The effect on the researcher could also not be foreseen, as it placed a burden on a researcher. In hostile post-conflict environments, this is pertinent where the advocates of human rights and justice are exposed to risks, and research findings can serve to inform research participants' decisions to continue to expose themselves to those risks.

The unpredictability of the research relationship: ethics of change in research interviews

As well as facing the unpredictability of the act of knowledge sharing and its ethical implications, the researcher enters the field uncertain of how relationships with participants will develop. In this section, we discuss the ethical questions that can emerge from the unpredictability of the researcher–participant relationship. We focus on who is asked and entitled to share information, building on our discussion above in terms of questions of power and knowledge.

Who is asked to share?

Power to share knowledge is often established in the context of an interview by asking questions (Fujii, 2017). Naively, we might approach the interview as a site where researchers ask questions and participants answer questions. Indeed, the ethical implications of the role reversal and participants asking questions has to date not been addressed because, as researchers, we do not expect our lives to be made the topic of an interview in the way that we expect our participants' lives to be. In the course of research in Crimea, one author found themselves constantly posed questions about her age and marital status by participants. Within the context, the author came to realise this was a banal introductory exchange; it was so common that she did not even note them in interview transcripts or field notes. However, such a line of questioning, in the realm of the sensitive and personal as a young female researcher alone in the field, was still unsettling and an affirmation of power existing between researcher and participant, the majority of whom were older men. Other questions that researchers might face include the legitimate topics of funding and reasons behind the research. In Crimea, one author was posed these questions often and predominantly from an innocent, rather than accusatory, perspective. The point was that participants were intrigued to know whether the research was motivated by personal initiative (which it was) or requested by a third party, such as a foreign government.

Equally, researchers do not necessarily expect to be asked their opinions on the research topic. These questions range from rhetorical or leading to open-ended. For example, in studying questions of identity in Crimea, it was common to have the same questions pivot back about a researcher's identity and feelings about personal identity,

that is, whether and how the author felt British. The author was also once asked, as an implicit representative of the West, to comment on the likelihood of Ukraine's accession to the EU.

These questions can be probing and difficult to answer because researchers have to navigate the space between a desire for some degree of objectivity and the need to take a side (Clark, 2012). We have to acknowledge that how we provide answers to these questions might determine the way the research relationship plays out, which raises another ethically delicate issue of how and what, as a researcher, to disclose about oneself. At the same time, these moments of discomfort are illuminating for understanding the magnitude of what we ask participants: to share often intimate details of their life with a relative stranger. The point is to recognise that, within interview settings, researchers may be asked unpredictable questions that can have murky but consequential answers. And researchers can prepare better for the idea that interviews are not linear situations where the researcher asks the questions and research participants simply respond.

Who is entitled to share?

Foregrounding the unpredictability in the dynamics of the research relationship primarily focuses on a researcher and a research participant, including a broader circle of collaborators and assistants in the specific research project. Ethical risks to a researcher can also come from the legacy of other fellow researchers' work on the same conflict, not only the sensitivity of the research topic or the volatility of the research site. Specifically, in the field, researchers are often surprised to be impacted by the manner that knowledge has been created and disseminated by previous researchers, with whom they have no connections whatsoever. For example, there has been a backlash among communities in a range of fieldwork sites in the world's fragile contexts to extractive, even predatory attitudes by researchers to research and research participants, centred on knowledge extraction. Fleeting visits of foreign researchers and equally fleeting interactions with research participants, which can primarily serve researchers' interests of professional promotion, have been highlighted as examples of this ethically questionable practice (Mackenzie et al., 2007: 305). These legacies create situations laden with unpredictability and with ethical questions.

In the field, a researcher might find herself confronted with value judgements concerning the researcher's claim to produce 'valid' knowledge which draws on the interview data during the very interview process, and even before the analysis has started. For example, in Crimea, one of the authors was often confronted with the idea from participants that what their project needed was not participants' opinion but 'facts' and 'numbers', as a source of more 'objective' knowledge. Some participants referred the researcher to their boss, constructing a knowledge hierarchy between themselves and those they conceived to be more valuable sources of knowledge in the field. These value judgements affect *a priori* what should be the researcher's legitimate claim to knowledge creation. Equally, these judgements result from complex dynamics of research practices of previous researchers in the same field site as well as the research participant's exposure to some academic findings.³ In an interview with a human rights activist in Serbia, one of the authors was told in no uncertain words:

In large part, the academic community does not understand what it can learn and has learnt very little. I must say, few exceptions notwithstanding, there are few of those who know how to interpret, really interpret on the basis of what they hear from people. [. . .] That is a big problem. That's why people are desperate when they see academics; there's an avalanche of them. (Serbian civil society activist, Belgrade, Serbia, 24 September 2014)

Similarly, another interviewee in Kosovo offered his view that

the Balkans and the former Yugoslavia have become a kind of very good laboratory for various experiments also by the academics, by scholars coming here doing some research, giving some ideas, yes some of them are useful but some of them [aren't]. (Kosovo Albanian civil society activist, Prishtina, Kosovo, 24 May 2016)

Statements like these put the researcher unexpectedly on the spot and require a response so that she can assert her ability to make valid knowledge claims. Such statements also raise ethical issues concerning the ownership of interpretation that is part of the research process. As King and Horrocks (2010: 134) note, researchers actively shape and manage how the interaction in qualitative interviews unfolds. The unpredictability of this interaction puts an additional strain on the researcher. She has to be able to respond sensitively, while retaining autonomy in the research process – from conducting an interview to publishing the findings.

Ethics of change: engaging with unpredictability

Finally, we propose some solutions to the issue of unpredictability and ethics in research interviews, primarily concerned with the question of how we can conceive change ethically. Drawing on debates about the role of deliberation in outlining the precautionary principle in the scientific community can help guide the development of research ethics in interview research in conflict studies. Adopting a deliberative approach to research ethics can help at two inter-related levels: within the interview relationship, between the researcher and the research participant, and at the institutional level, where ethical procedures are devised. In particular, it is important to rethink how researchers can respond to the unpredictabilities and exigencies of the field more effectively, because it is increasingly evident that 'more' rules and guidelines do not mean 'better' ethics, or more ethical sensibility.⁴

The deliberative approach is key to addressing and reformulating how we conceive of harm and thresholds of harm, meaning when harm caused by the participation in research interviews cannot be tolerated.⁵ Both existing literature and institutional ethical guidelines that inform such thresholds of harm constrain researchers conducting interviews on sensitive topics in conflict zones and appear arbitrary in nature. Most importantly, thresholds of harm are often misaligned with researchers' and research participants' understanding of the acceptable 'cost' of research to them. For example, these thresholds may be out of proportion and overly conservative and, ultimately, restrict the creation of knowledge in ways that themselves may be unethical, by seeming to forbid any change and distress, as we illustrated above.

For the first level, between researcher and participants, we can address the arbitrariness of these thresholds by drawing on Habermas' (1984) theory of democratic deliberation. Following discussions in the scientific community, deliberation here means considering the views of stakeholders, namely researchers and participants, to reflect 'the thresholds people actually want' (Wareham and Nardini, 2015: 121). In particular, adopting deliberative principles of inclusion and recognition of stakeholders' knowledge and values (Johnson, 2007; Renn, 2007) means consulting research participants about what harm – that is, change – is ethically acceptable. Just as participants in interview research take part in the co-creation of knowledge on substantive issues of research interest, they should also be given a voice with regard to ethics, so that we can better understand harm and its boundaries. In turn, such a deliberative approach to understanding the nature and extent of (acceptable) harm provides legitimacy to the agreed ethical guidelines (Johnson, 2007), both in the eyes of researchers and research participants.

The second level concerns how ethical procedures, which are devised at the institutional level (universities and professional bodies), ought to be deliberative and iterative, rather than a one-off exercise. Again drawing on scientific discussions, such an approach transforms ethical decision-making and regulation to be evaluative over time, by evolving in relation to assessing, producing and responding to new information (Arcuri, 2007). This approach connects with an iterative, emergent and cyclical approach to ethical procedures that is also advocated by those conducting participatory methods (Bussu et al., 2020; Shaw, 2016). In turn, such a transformation reflects a move towards 'pluralization and democratization of risk assessments' (Johnson, 2007: 81), by taking account, for example, of research participants' perspectives on the thresholds and nature of harm. This is critical considering evidence that assessments of harm about the same issues, for example, GMO foods, can markedly differ between different stakeholders (e.g. policymakers and publics), and can undermine the legitimacy of policies (Dryzek et al., 2009; Webb, 2011). As we show above, we observed a similar discrepancy between institutional ethical procedures, on the one hand, and the experience of researchers and research participants, on the other, undermining the legitimacy of such procedures and even the legitimacy of the research endeavour itself. Instead, these discrepancies can be managed by feeding in insights solicited directly from participants into ethical procedures.

Lastly, endorsing a deliberative engagement with the issue of unpredictability and change speaks to developing the ethical sensibility, at an individual, disciplinary and institutional level, that those calling for an approach to ethics in practice have been seeking (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). At present, researchers are encouraged to reflect on their own ethical challenges and dilemmas but not to solicit the perspectives of interview participants on this issue. These deliberative processes would, thus, best serve the researchers of conflict studies if understood as a mechanism to identify, empirically, the range and nature of what are considered ethical outcomes by a broader range of research participants (Mittelstadt et al., 2015: 1034). These procedures will more accurately reflect the real world and the different kind of challenges of research, particularly salient in conflict-affected places. They would help researchers navigate the dilemmas that arise when research takes an unpredictable turn by pivoting it back to the research relationship as the site where knowledge, both substantive and ethical, is co-produced.

Conclusion

In this article, we addressed the need to (re)consider the ethical challenges of unpredictability and change that emerge within research interviews, in particular for scholars of conflict processes where these challenges and their effects are amplified. Thinking beyond the typical ethical questions of consent, anonymity and security, defined by the sensitivity of the research topic or the perils of the field that face many researchers of conflict, scholars also need to consider the ethical questions that emerge from the method itself as an act of knowledge creation.

As relationships of knowledge creation, interviews are infused with ethical questions, including unpredictability and change from acts such as sharing knowledge, which existing literature has failed to explore. These forms of change do not necessarily impart harm on participants, and we cannot consider unharmed and unchanged as analogous; nor is leaving participants (and researchers) unchanged realistic or ethically desirable. As Hallowell, Lawton and Gregory (2005: 150) put it, when conducting research, 'doing the right thing – the moral or ethical thing – is not always straightforward'. It follows that we need to consider how the experience of an interview changes both the participant and a researcher in an ethical way while accounting for the unpredictability of the research process and the ethical dilemmas that arise.

We use these ethical challenges to problematise some of the common-sense assumptions that have guided discussions of interviews and ethics to date. For example, causing distress may not be an absolute wrong – it may offer space for reflection and restore dignity to participants who were harmed by violence. At the same time, we need to recognise that the uncertainty of assessing ethical risks in research interviews comes from uncertainty and limited access to reliable knowledge (both about the research participants and the environment in which they are embedded). In turn, what we learn from biomedical discussions of ethics is that unpredictability can neither be ignored nor eliminated, but needs to be managed ethically. We must move conflict research forward with ways of dealing with unpredictable research processes and relationships when it comes to producing ethical research. A deliberative approach to understanding harm and an iterative approach to institutional procedures can help take account of knowledge gained. An inclusive and democratic process might equip researchers with ethical sensibilities and guidelines that are better able to respond to the uncertain realities and trajectories of the research process.

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Notes

1. On the background of the principle, see Mittelstadt et al. (2015). The precautionary principle is consequentialist 'in the sense that any precautionary measures to be adopted following the principle are to be assessed in relation to their effects'. See (Arcuri, 2007: 360).
2. REKOM: XI Forum za tranziciju pravdu u post-jugoslovenskim zemljama, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 28 and 29 January 2018.
3. It can be difficult to ascertain the nature of a research participant's exposure, which raises a host of other ethical questions.
4. For example, Michelson (2016) describes how ethical procedures have become a 'nuisance' where scholars look for strategies to avoid ethics review or to cut corners to meet the requirements of their institutions.
5. A discussion of probabilities of harm thresholds discussed by the scientific community is beyond the scope of this discussion (Holm, 2019).

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