SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH COUNCIL | WORKING PAPERS

SECURITY CONSIDERATIONS FOR CONDUCTING FIELDWORK IN HIGHLY DANGEROUS PLACES OR ON HIGHLY DANGEROUS SUBJECTS

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DRUGS, SECURITY AND DEMOCRACY PROGRAM
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ABOUT THE PROGRAM

The Drugs, Security and Democracy (DSD) Program strives to create a stronger, more systematized knowledge base on drugs, security, and democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean; to build capacity—both institutional and individual—by supporting relevant research; and to encourage policy-relevant, evidence-based research that could lead to the development of alternatives to present-day drug policies. Support is provided for research across a variety of disciplines—anthropology, criminology, economics, history, international relations, journalism, legal studies, political science, public health, public policy, sociology, and other related fields—to create a network of scholars interested in developing alternative approaches to drug policy.

ABOUT THE SERIES

Over the last generation, activists, journalists, and researchers working in Latin America have increasingly faced the challenge of operating in areas affected by chronic police and non-state violence. Further, rising crime rates are leading a growing number of scholars to conduct research on high-risk topics, which involves gathering data on communities that experience conflict, writing and publishing on these difficult and sensitive issues, and developing and implementing programs to deal with the needs of communities affected by violence as well as the wider conflicts in which those communities are embedded. Despite these trends, the literature on safe practices for those working in high-risk environments remains thin. The DSD Working Papers on Research Security series seeks to address this deficit by examining a range of research security concerns, providing a framework to help those working in the region consider how they can enhance their own safety as well as the safety of their associates and research participants.

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What constitutes a risky place or highly dangerous research project varies enormously. That the site of an active war is a very dangerous area is usually a good assumption. But even in a war zone the level of insecurity and what kind of research is possible vary greatly. The capital of a country, for example, may not be as violent as peripheral areas being contested by several combatant groups. Or the capital may be even more dangerous to researchers visiting from other countries because the concentration of foreigners creates many opportunities for kidnapping networks. What is or is not dangerous will, of course, be determined by factors beyond the researcher's control. But the chances of surviving fieldwork in highly dangerous areas and on highly dangerous subjects are also influenced to a great extent by the researcher's own conduct.

There is no such a thing as perfect security. Interviewing criminals and militants can get one arrested, kidnapped, or killed. I present below a set of fieldwork guidelines I have used while conducting research on criminality and militancy around the world, which has frequently entailed interviews with active criminals and militants.

While many of the guidelines I use are common sense, they should not be considered exhaustive or a guarantee of security, nor are they set in stone. A great deal of security, as well as effective research, comes from having the skill to stay calm under pressure while turning adrenaline to one's advantage, engaging in quick, on-the-spot reasoning, and making constant judgments about what action to take at any particular moment.

PREPARATION BEFORE ENTERING DANGEROUS AREAS

Good security starts with extensive preparation at home. Just as good fieldwork is enormously enhanced by having read available literature and interviewed experts in advance, good field security to a large extent depends on having prepared for the impending local security requirements. This includes familiarizing oneself with government advisories about the area and, more importantly, consulting with researchers, government officials, workers at nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and newspaper correspondents who have worked there. Sources such as these will be invaluable for providing advice about a myriad of security issues, such as "no-go" areas, tips on safe travel, appropriate clothing and behavior, and trusted local drivers and facilitators. The amount of time spent on good background research can easily equal time spent in the field.

A second preparatory phase involves consulting with a similarly knowledgeable set of interlocutors closer to the dangerous fieldwork area. For example, when conducting research in Somalia, one might cultivate sources in Kenya, where many government offices, NGOs, and businesses operating in Somalia are based. In Afghanistan, it could be Kabul for going into the highly war-torn provinces of Helmand, Kunduz, or Paktya. In Karachi, for conducting research in the violent Lyari slum, it could be the exclusive Clifton neighborhood.

While conducting these preparatory interviews—which will focus on logistics and security—the researcher needs to be diligent about not divulging detailed information about his or her plans, such as specific movements in the area and their timing, where one will be staying, and what security arrangements one will be adopting. Such information should be shared only on a strict need-to-know basis. It is one thing to give the security official of one's embassy a detailed itinerary and quite another to share it with an expatriate businessman or someone at a local NGO operating in the area. The latter individuals' intentions may not be malicious, and they may not plan to

sell the researcher to a kidnapping ring, but one cannot be certain about the operational security of local organizations. Local government officials may also collude with armed actors or criminal groups.

An equally key security precaution: refrain from discussing research plans on social media or emailing any sensitive information. Established researchers or journalists, for example, cannot be certain whether their email has been compromised. Any necessary sharing of information on a strict need-to-know basis—such as with one's security monitor at the home base (discussed below)—should be done on a reasonably secure telephone. In other words, one should avoid landlines in hotels in countries with pesky intelligence services implicated in crime and militancy. Communicate any sensitive information only in private where you cannot be overheard.

The strict need-to-know basis also has important implications for carrying around sensitive information about one's movements, interlocutors, and security arrangements. The known existence of such paper or electronic documents may, over time, create dangers for the researcher or his or her interlocutors, with attacks on either or both motivated by the desire to seize the documents. Thus, maps to military bases or militant camps or the names and cell phone numbers of sensitive interlocutors or anyone else who may disclose the researcher's affiliation should ideally not be taken out of a secure location, such as a military base, and should be destroyed as soon as they are not needed.

To be able to enter and safely leave a very dangerous locale and conduct research there with potentially dangerous individuals, planning for repeated trips to a country is often necessary. If repeated trips are not an option, allowing for as much time in the field as possible during a single trip is highly desirable. A one-time research project in a place the researcher is entering for the first time calls for, ideally, several weeks or months in the field just to make the proper security and logistical preparations before going into particularly dangerous areas. Still, an initial trip may only establish a set of contacts that can function eventually as a gateway to problematic areas and risky interlocutors. Writing multiple trips into grant proposals is, in fact, a security measure.

Finally, the great substantive research value in being able to interview the same interlocutors over time to obtain time-series data needs to be weighed against the complex security implications entailed by repeated trips and re-

peated interaction with the interlocutors. Time-series data help mitigate a variety of biases and inferential problems and can also get around the problem one frequently encounters in a militarily contested area of interlocutors who, as their survival mechanism, tell the researcher what they expect he or she wants to hear. In Afghanistan, for example, I have met with some people over many years before they finally told me what they actually knew and thought, having dissembled or withheld information on many previous occasions. Nonetheless, repeatedly entering a dangerous area carries risks of its own. The safety environment of interlocutors may change, and they may come under irresistible pressure from militant groups and be tempted or forced to betray the researcher at some point. Re-vetting interlocutors in dangerous areas is key when returning to a research site.

PLANNING THE EXIT

Planning one's exit from a dangerous area is as important as planning how to get in. It involves not only issues about whether one has a flexible return ticket (which many granting organizations will not permit a researcher to buy because of costs) but also thinking about alternative means of escape. Are there any interlocutors who could be mobilized to escort the researcher out? Is there a military base where one has contacts who could help lift the researcher out of an extremely dangerous situation—such as when militants are breaking through the security perimeter of where the researcher is staying? A detailed map is critical to exit preparation, as well as to any movement in the field. Reliance on the global positioning system (GPS) can lead people into serious trouble. The signal may be weak, and the GPS or smartphone navigation may malfunction; or the GPS may be programmed for a shorter route through a really dangerous slum. A detailed, up-to-date map and good basic compass skills may seem woefully old-fashioned, but they can be far more reliable safety tools than fancy electronics.

Getting in and out requires flexibility and imagination. If no regular flights take off from an area, can one hitch a flight on an NGO's helicopter? If strikers block roads, motorcycles or mopeds might become an option. If movement during the day is too dangerous, sneaking through the fields at night on a horse or ox cart may be possible. In each situation, the creativity and the need for movement must be judged against whether greater security would not be achieved by staying put longer in a safe location. If the location itself becomes dangerous, movement may be necessary. Researchers have

to realize that the more ad hoc, on-the-spot, and creative the entrance was, the more difficult a safe exit will be during a security emergency.

Getting into and out of difficult areas can be greatly facilitated by working with or through local organizations such as NGOs, which can provide security advice and great access to local assets. But merely consulting local academic organizations or NGOs or even security outfits is fundamentally different from actually being embedded with or working for them. Before a researcher decides to work with or seek the support of any such organization, he or she needs to check out the institution for the same security, legal, and due-diligence issues for which one needs to check one's consultants, as I describe below.

Finally, before leaving an area where one has had to deal with dangerous or untrustworthy actors, a researcher should check luggage for unwanted and potentially illegal or embarrassing items, such as drugs or pornographic materials, that someone might have slipped in to compromise the researcher.

ESSENTIAL SUPPLIES

What one brings into the area of research is as important as what one makes certain is not in his or her luggage. While traveling light is desirable, obtaining even essential supplies might be very difficult in dangerous areas. Unless one is certain the essential supplies described below can be obtained on location, carrying them in from home is more than worth the baggage fee.

Money and Critical Documents

Researchers should recognize that good security is a function of money. Small research budgets compromise one's ability to stay at safe accommodation facilities and to hire reliable drivers and logistical operators. Other businesses, NGOs, and foreign correspondents operating in the same danger zones with far greater resources will have conditioned providers of safe logistical services to expect fees many times higher than an independent researcher can usually afford. Thus, grant requests should budget for and explain expenditures higher than the typical costs of conducting research in a permissive environment.

Researchers need to consider how to bring money to dangerous research areas. In war zones or conflict-ridden peripheries, ATMs may not operate, and credit cards will be unusable. Yet if research is to take place over several months, the researcher may not be able to pay for most logistical and security arrangements in advance. Sometimes, though not often, a local NGO or university can help establish an account to which money can be wired beforehand. Similarly, wiring money beforehand to logistical operators who will organize transport or accommodations will reduce the amount one needs to carry. This is especially important if a country imposes limits on how much cash can be brought into it.

Despite the undesirability of carrying large amounts of cash, situations do arise when a researcher is forced to do so because it may be otherwise impossible to get access to funds from the location. Researchers should consider whether they can establish a base in a safe location and leave most of the money there, traveling within the country with the least cash necessary. It is always wise to divide the money one does carry among various locations in luggage and money belts and use luggage with secret compartments.

Finally, researchers working in these areas need to consider the risk of theft. It is a bad idea to let any valuables, such as a computer, lie around exposed or in unlocked luggage in a hotel room or even a private house where one is staying. Moreover, as in all other travel, the researcher should have multiple copies of his or her passport and visa, distributed among different pieces of luggage, as well as scanned onto a computer or a flash drive. Copies should also be left with the security monitor at the home base (see below), who can email them to appropriate recipients in case of robbery or kidnapping.

Means of Communication

In addition to having one's regular smartphone, obtaining a simple local telephone is often highly desirable, since it may become the only means of communication in a country with an extraordinarily poor cell network. For extremely dangerous areas, a satellite phone is also highly desirable—and, again, a key security item that supporting organizations are surprisingly reluctant to fund. Without one in parts of the world such as rural Africa, the researcher needs to be ready to cope with weeks of not being able to communicate with the home base or even with interlocutors elsewhere in the country. It is essential to remember, however, that a mobile phone can

be tracked. Removing the battery when it is not in use or carrying a Faraday cage (a shielding device that blocks electrical fields) will reduce the chances of having one's movements compromised. And, as the information can be dangerous and compromising to oneself and one's interlocutors, researchers should be cautious when storing any data on phones and choose at times not to carry them at all.

Understanding local connectivity is critical for establishing effective procedures with a security monitor—a trusted individual with whom the researcher regularly checks in. In highly violent environments, check-in may occur every evening, every few days, or even every few weeks, with specific days identified and agreed upon by the researcher and the security monitor. When the researcher will be conducting an interview with very dangerous individuals, he or she may check in before going to the interview and after safely exiting from it. Failure to check in should activate emergency procedures by the monitor, such as contacting government officials, military officials, and other rescue assets. In areas where the chance of kidnapping or detention by authoritarian or corrupt government officials is high, having an agreed-upon safety code to establish identity and communicate that the researcher is truly safe and not merely forced to communicate at gunpoint should be a part of the check-in procedure.

Given the gravity of activating an emergency protocol, researchers should make themselves aware of issues that may impede their ability to check in as previously arranged. For example, in Afghanistan, the Taliban routinely shut down cell phone towers, and entire provinces may be without cell coverage for days or weeks. The researcher may be perfectly safe but unable to check in, which may activate emergency procedures unnecessarily. Some such circumstances may warrant building flexibility into the frequency of check-ins and into emergency protocols.

Food and Other Vital Supplies

Besides money and means of communication, essential supplies include backup batteries for cell phones; a reliable flashlight with backup batteries; a knife or multi-tool; repair tape, such as duct tape or specialty tapes sold by outdoor equipment stores; and a full medical kit. In addition to any medication the researcher regularly takes (with emergency backup amounts, if refilling in the field during several months of research is not possible, even if insurance will not cover them), the medical kit should include a good

supply of antibiotics, bandages, and tourniquets, clean needles, and allergy medications. Medications should be carried in the original containers and all essential ones in one's emergency pack—that is, a carry-on bag that contains as much of the above as possible without violating airline safety rules—not in a piece of checked luggage. Once on location, the rest of the essential supplies should be placed in the emergency pack, as well. For women, the kit should also include sanitary supplies; tampons are difficult to buy in southern India, and that's not even a war zone. (Receiving the full range of available vaccinations and, as necessary, antimalarial prophylactics before leaving home should go without saying.) In an actual war zone, such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, or parts of Pakistan, a helmet and flak jacket and a lightweight, insulated sleeping bag may also be essential.

Some researchers think about carrying firearms into dangerous areas to augment their level of security. Doing so will likely make you appear to be a threat or even an agent of the state or foreign power, however, and put your life immediately at risk. So, bottom line: Do not make yourself look offensive or aggressive. Do not carry firearms. Your safety as a researcher comes from sound judgment, good safety procedures, and maintaining a low profile, not the extent of your firepower.

Unless one wants to subsist for an extended period on highly uninspiring dry pack meals, a research sojourn spanning several weeks will likely require the researcher to eat local foods. In many parts of Africa, Asia, or even Latin America, the food can be highly unsanitary, and the odds are substantial that the researcher will need to cope with intestinal problems. One should bring medication to help with acute intestinal distress and, in some cases, consider carrying a portable water filter (or water purification tablets) and emergency food and water supplies.

Sharing a meal or a drink with local interlocutors may not only greatly facilitate interviews; it may be essential for security, since in some places locals may consider it an offense to refuse to partake. The researcher thus needs to judge which threat is more immediately dangerous—refusing to drink filthy river water mixed with sorghum and called a beer with heavily armed Afar elders in Ethiopia or the acute intestinal catastrophe and dehydration that are likely to occur within four hours.

KEEPING A LOW PROFILE . . . OR CHOOSING TO STAND OUT

In some places, a part of the researcher's necessary equipment may be local clothing. In many Muslim countries, a female researcher will need an abaya (a long robe) and/or a burqa (a similar external cloak used, for example, in Afghanistan), a hijab (a head scarf), and possibly also a niqab (a face veil that reveals only the eyes). (Indeed, blending in aside, conservative attire that covers as much of one's body as possible in a place where sexual attacks on women are common, such as South Africa or India, may be critical.) But male researchers may also want to avoid standing out in a war zone or highly insecure area. Many male journalists routinely adopt local clothing in places such as Afghanistan and Pakistan. In many South, Southeast Asian, or African countries, locals frown upon men wearing shorts, or consider them ridiculous.

Even so, some circumstances may call for compromising the ability to blend in by wearing garments that may well give away that one is not local. In places such as Afghanistan or Somalia, for instance, I will wear Merrels or hiking boots with my burqa or abaya, hijab, and niqab, even though the shoes make clear I am not a local and increase the chances of kidnapping. But I make the judgment that if the risks of kidnapping are high anyway, it is much better to be abducted in comfortable shoes, in the event I will be forced to trek across the Hindu Kush.

All of this requires some planning. While some local clothes may have to be purchased after arrival, bringing all essentials from home, if possible, is far safer as a general rule. For research in Islamic areas such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, men will also have to start growing their beards well before arrival.

Blending in is also a consideration when choosing a mode of transport. Traveling around in a beat-up local car is more discreet and may provide better security than using a flashy armored car, for instance, but one should always make sure that, despite its looks, the car is in working order and will reliably start in an emergency. Nonetheless, sometimes—such as when one is in a contested part of Colombia—traveling with a police or military convoy may be safer than traveling alone. In short, decisions whether to use official protection if available or travel with a low profile should be based upon research as to what kinds of targets are most frequently attacked.

Varying one's times and routes of travel—having previously established they are reasonably safe—enhances security, and can facilitate blending in. The timing of movement can be particularly important to establishing security in a war zone or an area of violent criminality. In places that are frequently mined or where improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are a major concern, leaving movement until later in the morning increases the chances that bombs planted during the night will have been located. Even so, while most attacks do take place in the early morning hours, the practice of using the night to prepare for them is hardly set in stone; bombs may be laid at high noon after insurgents have observed an outsider entering an area, knowing which route he or she will have to take out. But leaving travel to later in the day may also lead to the researcher's traveling in a dangerous area after dark. In general, whenever possible, restricting movement and interviews to daylight hours is highly desirable, but one needs to use one's best judgment of the situation, given up-to-date local circumstances.

Learning basic social mores enhances not only the substance of research, but also basic security. This includes knowing whether a woman may touch a man, how to shake hands, what hand to use for what purposes, and being aware that entering a home with shoes on or pointing the soles of one's shoes at someone may cause terrible offense. Implementing the learned social mores may be complicated, however, and may compromise security in other ways. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, for example, locals in general detest it when foreigners speak to them with sunglasses on. Yet the local sun is so blinding that without sunglasses, one's situational awareness is drastically diminished. Similarly, not wearing shoes in a home can slow down escape in an emergency. Again, such difficult choices and tradeoffs will have to be determined on the spot.

Finally, having maintained throughout the above discussion that keeping a low profile is the best way to stay safe in dangerous places, I have to add that, at times, choosing to stand out can be a purposeful strategy for the academic investigator. One famous researcher of the Italian Mafia, for example, lined up spectacular interviews with mafiosi by going to bars in areas where the organization operated and loudly saying, "I would like to interview the Mafia men." And, even though the vast majority of the time I would wear long pants and a long-sleeved shirt in the field, in some circumstances—though not in Afghanistan or Indonesia—I have gone around in a miniskirt and tank top to get attention from local criminals whom I wanted to interview.

THE PLACE OF GENDER IN RESEARCH PRACTICE

For female researchers, the likelihood of sexual harassment needs to be assumed, and one needs to be mentally prepared for it in many parts of the world. Problems of sexual harassment do not pertain merely to interacting with criminals who may have many rapes in their records. Males in some places, including members of military forces, the police, or government officials, will make sexual advances to a young female researcher no matter what and refuse to take no for an answer. Taking public transportation in India is a major gamble for a woman—indeed, the greatest danger of sexual violence I have personally experienced was not at the hands of a criminal or insurgent I interviewed but on an overnight public train to Calcutta.

Even men socialized to Western standards of male–female professional behavior may not take seriously a pretty young researcher studying presumably hardboiled men's topics, such as insurgency or crime. Staying calm but confident and establishing one's professional credibility and depth of knowledge may take some time and effort, but it can be done. Being able to use and understand military jargon when dealing with soldiers is of enormous help. Remaining self-possessed and showing no sign that one is intimidated by rank, power, or guns thrust into one's face will help in getting male interlocutors to stop thinking about the interviewer as "merely" a woman. In many ways, conducting a successful interview under such circumstances may be more broadly about exuding confidence, so this advice may well apply equally to young male researchers as to female ones.

Despite progress toward professional equality in many parts of the world, being a female researcher poses unique and significant challenges. In many Islamic countries, men will not converse with a woman. A woman will not be able to enter a restaurant or drive a car, and having a male driver, translator, or fixer (a consultant who arranges appointments for interviews and has a good knowledge of local conditions) may be absolutely essential for conducting research and handling crucial logistics, such as acquiring food. The lack of toilet facilities in male-dominated conservative societies can pose great logistical hurdles; running off into the bushes may not be an option during twenty-hour drives in Somalia or Afghanistan. In many Islamic countries, particularly those stressed by war, the sentiment may well be widespread that a Western woman inherently has loose morals—a personally insulting assumption that can hamper research.

Similarly, in many Islamic countries and parts of Africa, being an unmarried, childless female researcher is a sign of either personal misfortune or a lack of moral virtues. This can cause "proper" folks, including "good" local women, not to associate with the researcher. In such circumstances, pretending to have a husband and children is a lie, but it may be a lie essential to getting people to talk to the researcher at all.

Another potentially difficult aspect of being a female researcher has to do with reacting to the mistreatment of local women. Voicing disapproval of genital mutilation may antagonize not only the males but also the older females in the village. Interfering in beatings of women by local men can similarly generate strong social opprobrium. Male researchers, too, will often be put in the position of having to react to or ignore behavior that would be morally and socially intolerable or outright criminal in their home areas.

A female researcher's hierarchical relationship with local men, such as translators and drivers, can also create significant social challenges, especially if the researcher chooses to admonish those workers in public. An angry and humiliated male prodded by social pressures may become a source of danger to the researcher. By the same token, local females hired as assistants can be placed in untenable social situations and exposed to physical as well as psychological abuse in their homes and communities.

Being a female researcher, however, also brings some great advantages. Male researchers may not be able to interview women in Islamic countries. Touching a woman, even merely shaking her hand, can put her in mortal danger and require that a severe retribution be exacted upon the male researcher. In parts of Africa, young male researchers may be seen as threatening to virtuous local unmarried women. Female prostitutes and victims of sexual and other violence may be unwilling to interact with male researchers. And in chauvinistic societies, a woman may be seen as much less threatening, even to criminals or insurgents. A female researcher may even be able to establish confessional, maternal situations in which unique information is divulged.

Special security and research considerations regarding self-presentation and conduct during fieldwork also pertain to gay researchers. In many Asian and African societies, homosexuality can elicit not only strong social disapproval, but also physical violence and legal sanctions. Concealing one's orientation may be essential for one's safety. At the same time, highly margin-

alized subgroups, such as homosexuals in highly oppressive environments, may be able to open up to a researcher who can uniquely relate to them and convey empathy by the fact of his and her own homosexuality. Thus, to the extent that the researcher can trust his or her presumably gay interlocutors not to reveal the researcher's sexual orientation beyond a secure group, one may choose to do so to establish a connection. But discretion should be the rule.

WORKING WITH FIXERS, INTERPRETERS, AND DRIVERS

The researcher may find it necessary to have a local "fixer," who sets up contacts and interviews and has good local knowledge, as well as an interpreter or local driver. If one works with local fixers—as the vast majority of foreign newspaper correspondents do, for example—or local drivers and interpreters, it is essential to vet them.

Governments, NGOs, or foreign correspondents may be the first sources of information about reliable fixers, interpreters, and drivers. Even those recommended by reliable sources, however, should be vetted further. That may involve checking their other references or, in the case of an interpreter, secretly bringing someone fluent in the language into a conversation to test whether he or she is competent and accurate. In Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, many interpreters frequently provide faulty translations on purpose and sometimes outright make up offensive comments to provoke local conflicts and compromise the security of the Westerners. More frequently, the translator may simply not be competent enough or may—because of local social norms—be too timid to translate problematic, challenging, or offensive information. Not understanding what one's interlocutors are actually saying can ultimately create far more threatening situations than the interpreter's conveying such information and your having to react to it.

Equally important is spending time with one's local assistants—to learn about them and how they will react in dangerous situations—before heading out with them into risky environments. Heeding local assistants' judgment about what areas are too dangerous to enter or what questions will get one killed is crucial. Also imperative is to consider their security; unlike the researcher, they will not have the luxury to pack up and leave the country once the research is over. In short, failing to be keenly mindful of assistants' input and to treat them with respect jeopardizes your security and theirs, as well as compromising the research. Nonetheless, one needs to establish clear

lines of authority with regard to who is in charge of interviews and who decides what time and where the research team goes. Clarifying the terms of the employment and research early on avoids difficult situations later.

When working with fixers, researchers should consider the variety of problems they may face. A fixer who is an established local researcher or someone from a high social class may be reluctant to take guidance from the researcher. He or she may produce a skewed set of interlocutors, such as his or her high-class friends, and refuse to deal with lower-class locals or sleep in cheap accommodations, or may mistreat other local members of the research team. Some fixers overpromise what kind of interviews they can deliver. Perhaps the most dangerous circumstance is when a previously reliable fixer starts working for actors who may pose a threat to the researcher. Indeed, in a recent case, a fixer working for a foreign correspondent provided help to individuals who kidnapped the correspondent. Government officials and other journalists had warned the correspondent that the fixer had switched sides, but he badly wanted an interview the fixer was promising him with an insurgent leader.

I faced a similar situation during one research trip to Mexico, when I was going to an area contested by two highly violent drug-trafficking organizations. After several vetting interviews, I hired as a fixer a local journalist recommended to me by a foreign correspondent. Within several days of work, it became clear the fixer was failing to deliver promised interviews; worse, he was actively sabotaging the interviews I set up myself. I became persuaded he was on the payroll of the narco-traffickers and, under questioning from me, he admitted as much. Although once reliable, the fixer had been kidnapped and beaten. Out of fear, he had started working for them. I ended up paying him for the work he had done and told him to meet me the following day at a certain time for more interviews. Instead, I snuck away hours earlier, having rented another car on my own, and drove off to conduct research in another area of the state.

In other circumstances—during fieldwork in the Horn of Africa and southern Africa—I had to cancel some parts of research for which I had already activated contact networks and made logistical arrangements. Although I do not give my interviewees any form of payment—so as not to have any part of my research misconstrued as providing material support to criminals or terrorists, which may expose me to legal liabilities—obviously I do have to pay fixers, drivers, and interpreters. The fact that this research would not

take place meant I could not pay the logistical operators and tribal actors because my supervising organizations would not allow me to pay for services contracted for but ultimately not executed.

To be in compliance with US and other laws, researchers have to vet local assistants to ensure they are not themselves part of criminal or terrorist groups. Still, the assistants may not take kindly to having research aborted and hence losing expected income. In this case, I ended up with angry tribal elders and fixers descending on the place I had been staying to extract—by force, if necessary—the money from me. Sometimes a fistful of money thrown into the air and a speedy exit from an area—which ended up being my way out of this particular situation—may be the only option left, even if the sponsor will not reimburse the researcher.

As suggested by the Mexico story, firing compromised or poorly performing assistants can also produce serious security consequences. Their own fury or threatened "honor" may even push them toward violent revenge, particularly when shame is attached to being fired by a woman. Or they may be able to activate criminal or clan networks to threaten the researcher, suggesting his or her safety is best served by rehiring them and, ideally, as many of their relatives as possible. These possibilities need to be taken into account before actually firing someone. If doing so is too risky, one way out may be to assign him or her time-consuming, but irrelevant, work that cannot compromise the safety of the researcher and his or her interlocutors or the quality of the research.

With or without the help of fixers or other assistants, the inability to plan research activities ahead of time is always a nuisance and can be particularly troubling in dangerous areas. Prevailing cultural norms may make it difficult to arrange interviews before arrival at a particular site. Having to hang around an area for an extended period increases exposure and, thus, the chances of kidnapping. In Latin America, the "show up mañana and mañana and mañana" culture, especially for interviews with the local crime don, can complicate security. In Africa and Asia, the opposite is frequently the problem—that is, an interlocutor whom one asks for suggestions for potential interviewees will whip out a cell phone and arrange the interview on the spot. That can be very dangerous because the interviewer can lose control of the security arrangement and the conduct of the interview and be unable to vet the proposed interlocutors. At the same time, refusing to go into the interview can greatly offend the first interlocutor and thus compro-

mise the researcher's security. Establishing before your interlocutor places the phone call that you only want to know who the contact is or to make an agreement as to time and place for an interview helps avoid such situations.

All that said, good research can almost never be fully planned before arriving in the area of the investigation. Inevitably, new leads to interesting interviewees and fascinating new strands of research and hypotheses will arise on the spot. Good research will be designed flexibly enough—including from a security perspective—to allow pursuing those new lines of inquiry.

MISREPRESENTING ONESELF AND DISCLOSING INFORMATION ABOUT ONE'S INTERLOCUTORS

Great risks are associated with misrepresenting oneself when doing research in the field, and deep moral complexities are associated with misleading any interlocutors. The researcher's safety is, to a large extent, a function of establishing trust with local interlocutors and overcoming suspicions that the researcher is seeking to deceive them. Indeed, suspicion that the researcher works for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) or the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) or local security forces can create dangerous situations, and violating trust can easily get one killed. Ideally, the researcher describes his or her research honestly and fully.

Full disclosure can occasionally lead to greater risks for the scholar and the research team, however, and may prevent research. Poppy farmers in Afghanistan, for example, may become hostile and call in their Taliban protectors if baldly asked to speak about poppy cultivation. Instead, researchers may find it necessary to describe—though not inaccurately—the interview in terms of a broader context of inquiring about their livelihoods and conduct it that way.

As this example suggests, there are, of course, degrees of disclosure. Under most circumstances, the researcher can be honest without fully disclosing sensitive information to dangerous interlocutors. But what happens in East Asian settings, for instance, where presenting a business card is obligatory, and the risks of providing a real one affect not just the researcher but also any assistants or translators working with him or her? It might not always be desirable for the criminal boss to be able to track down the researcher afterwards. If interviewing Indonesian or Japanese crime gangs is thought

to be extremely dangerous, the researcher may consider presenting a card with a fake phone number and email information.

Minimizing misinformation is, nonetheless, imperative. The judgment researchers need to make in situations in which safety would be severely compromised by full disclosure is whether the aggregate public good the research can produce, such as advancing human rights, significantly outweighs the ethical and security costs of incomplete disclosure or even some deceit. Journalists face many of the same ethical and security dilemmas when they do undercover investigations. My rule is always to be completely honest about issues that can bring harm to individuals or groups—for example, I never violate promised nondisclosure of names, and I strictly adhere to rules regarding the attribution of information to sources. This does not mean I will tell the criminal I am interviewing my phone number and what hotel I am staying in.

Academic researchers and journalists often work within different sets of professional expectations. Journalists believe they need to have an interview on the record. My operating principle is that the safety of my interlocutors is as important as my own security, and I have a deep moral obligation not to compromise it as a result of the interview. Considerations of human subject security must also include the lengths to which one is willing to go to protect one's sources from compromised government officials or criminal groups—and, hence, contemplation of how much pressure one is willing to absorb. If one is not ready, when under pressure, to keep secret information that could expose interlocutors to great danger, one should not undertake those interviews.

In the same vein, I also will not take on a research project where the sponsor or contracting organization would require me to hand over the names and contact information of my interviewees. Short of being served a legal subpoena, the maximum information I am willing to present about my interlocutors in research on criminality and militancy is the type and number of interviews conducted and the general areas (such as districts) where the research was undertaken. Only to prevent a terrorist attack or a serious crime, like a murder, would I compromise that operating principle.

OPERATIONAL SECURITY DURING THE INTERVIEW PHASE

Conducting a safe interview is not only a function of preparation, but also of good habits and proper methods during and after the interview itself. Just because one was able to gain access to a difficult area and obtain a desirable interview does not mean one is safe; in fact, new security challenges may well arise during and after the interview. Maintaining good situational awareness and establishing trust with one's interlocutors are important.

Situational Awareness

In addition to all the preparation described above, keeping keenly aware of one's surroundings during the actual interview is a key aspect of maintaining good security. Practicing good habits before one leaves for the field is extremely useful in habituating safe operational practices. One can train oneself to be observant, such as by playing the "Sherlock Holmes game"—that is, observing people on public transportation or in the supermarket line and trying to notice, memorize, and recall as many details about them as possible. Sitting with one's back to the wall and watching windows and doors and what is happening outside is a good basic rule. It may seem silly to do it in one's safe home area, but good practice makes for good behavior in the field—and if the researcher permanently lives in the dangerous area where he or she conducts research, maintaining good situational awareness and safety practices at all times is not an option; it's a necessity.

Researchers considering conducting research in their home countries or cities should give special thought to the particular risks they may face. On the one hand, a native researcher can have prior superior and detailed knowledge, a great list of contacts, and an invaluable ability to assess an evolving environment and its dangers. On the other, he or she may face long-term threats after completing research. If you are thinking of conducting research on dangerous topics in your hometown, consider that you may have no safe area to retreat to, unless you move elsewhere or apply for asylum abroad. Not divulging information about exactly where you or your relatives live is all the more important under such circumstances. At the same time, maintaining sufficient operational secrecy may be infeasible if your neighbors are your research subjects. If you decide to conduct such research anyway, despite the fact that your subjects can readily resort to violence from which you cannot be protected by law enforcement or informal

security arrangements, be psychologically and physically prepared to move away speedily. If you don't want to leave, don't undertake such research.

Regardless of where research takes place, maintaining high situational awareness for more than a few hours at a time is, realistically, quite difficult. Similarly, although safety is a function of prior preparation, postponing going into a very dangerous area until late in a project may not be optimal, especially if the researcher has been working hard and constantly for weeks on end, coping all the while with very challenging logistical and security environments. Exhaustion, inattention, and irritation will start setting in and undermine good operational security. This can compromise one's work even in more benign environments, such as places where scams and con jobs are frequent and arrangements and contracts collapse all the time.

In this regard, building breaks into the research—taking a day or two off—in a secure environment where one can relax can be essential for physical and mental health and for maintaining good operational security. Sponsoring institutions—despite their security exhortations—may refuse to pay for time off, but it is well worth paying for out of your own pocket for safety reasons. Taking such opportunities for respite and recreation while in the field promotes mental health and allows for a recharging of intellectual and emotional energy, especially if the researcher is continually listening to stories of violence and abuse—whether from victims or perpetrators.

Trust and Access

Getting to interview criminals and insurgents usually involves getting to know the man who knows the man who knows the man who knows the man who knows the criminal. And, most of the time, they are, in fact, men. Arranging for the really exciting interviews frequently entails dozens of more ordinary interviews beforehand and establishing trust with one's interlocutors over a prolonged period of time. The most dangerous situations arise not when the first layer of interviewees does not trust the researcher, but when trust breaks down after a sensitive interview has commenced. Aborting that interview and leaving the interview site as rapidly as possible is imperative, but it can be extremely difficult. One needs to take care that the speedy exit does not further the interviewee's suspicions.

Whether or not to undertake a particular interview is a judgment in itself. The researcher must constantly evaluate whether it will prove truly neces-

sary for research by generating uniquely important information and/or contacts with others who have such information, or whether having interviewed a Mafia capo or insurgent leader will merely impress one's colleagues or potential publishers.

Having decided an interview is essential, finding out as much about the interviewee as possible before going into it is a good policy, not only for security reasons, but also to obtain useful information. Doing background research on the subject is analogous to doing background research on the area of research. Sometimes, however, such advance preparation is not possible, and the researcher will have to make on-the-spot judgments about the likely risks and benefits of such an interview.

If the interview is deemed essential but extremely dangerous, the researcher should remain focused on gathering data as safely as possible and then leaving the research site promptly. Some cultures, however, require many hours of preliminaries before a serious conversation can take place. In Nepal, the "important" men are used to having those who seek audience with them loiter and spend time in their presence for hours or days before they consent to talk. A lot of time may thus need to be passed in a dangerous area before the meaningful interview is conducted, and that time can be exploited by unscrupulous characters to organize a kidnapping or assassination.

A key part of establishing operational security during an interview is setting its parameters—including, particularly, that subjects will not receive payment; as explained above, there are many reasons not to pay for interviews. But a researcher who is permitted and does consent to pay to obtain an interview must clearly set the amount of payment before beginning. In any case, criminals and insurgents often will be eager to talk without payment, simply to tell their stories and justify their actions by taking their one chance to have a confessional conversation with an outsider. The de facto payment—your willingness to listen—may be the most useful and generous of all. But the researcher needs to be mindful of remaining only a listener and not providing any information that can be misused by the interviewee, keeping in mind that the interviewee may be manipulating the researcher far more than the interviewer is manipulating his or her subject.

Maintaining a nonjudgmental attitude toward the interlocutor may have a bearing not only on being able to proceed with the interview but also on

walking away safely. Yet remaining detached may be extremely hard if the interviewee starts disclosing information about murders he or she perpetrated or otherwise demonstrates an abject lack of empathy or remorse for profoundly immoral acts. Listening to stories of crime also carries great security risks; after the confessional moment ends, the interviewee may decide the best path to continued freedom is to do away with the researcher.

The objectives of the research influence what kind of information the researcher is after and hence also the risks associated with sensitive information being disclosed by one's interlocutor. Since I am neither a psychoanalyst probing for subconscious motivations nor an investigative journalist eager to expose illegal activities, staying clear of deeply dangerous information may well be much easier for me. I am interested in configurations of behavior, power, and rules that emerge in dangerous areas and in the effectiveness of policies adopted to mitigate criminality or militancy, not in the individual stories of criminals or insurgents per se. Thus, I may have an easier time striking a balancing between obtaining pertinent information and remaining safe than an investigative journalist who wants to prove individuals' culpability, or even an anthropologist who wants to record in detail the careers of criminals. That said, what often produces interesting data is precisely allowing people to narrate their own stories, even if knowing their secrets may be dangerous.

In any case, the risk can be mitigated somewhat by the choices one makes in how to conduct the interviews. Making recordings or taking photographs greatly reduces security. They are also ways to very quickly get people to lie or speak in platitudes, with minimal usefulness to the research. In dangerous situations, it is wise to avoid doing either. (This is a choice I make as a trained political scientist interested in patterns of behavior and policy effectiveness. Many journalists scoff at such a policy and insist valuable research is that which is recorded and on the record.)

Even taking notes may be risky during the interview; a safer approach may be to write things down as soon afterward as possible. Actively training one's memory beforehand for such situations can greatly enhance the researcher's skill set. If the researcher does take notes during the interview, it is important to keep doing so as diligently and frequently when the interviewee is merely restating platitudes as when he or she is disclosing interesting information so as not to clue the interviewee into what kind of information one is really after. I tend to write all sensitive information in code, and, de-

spite the complaints of my elementary and high school teachers, I see it as a great advantage that even my normal handwriting is mostly legible only to me. Another good policy is to email fieldwork notes to yourself frequently and not store any records locally, particularly those containing interviewee contact information, that are not absolutely necessary.

Finally, remember that an in-depth interview may last an hour or more, which provides plenty of time to organize a kidnapping or an attack. If ominous security signs emerge, such as people massing on the street or, conversely, everyone disappearing, abort the interview and leave the location immediately.

Just as recording or photographing interviewees creates security risks, so does allowing oneself to be photographed, especially if the photographs are to be published in a newspaper or on the internet. Sometimes interviewees very much want the photo, and it is difficult to refuse the request. Standing in the shade or somehow "inadvertently" blocking a part of your face may help if having your personal information floating around in this way presents real dangers. And it is always best practice to postpone participating in any TV interviews until your research has ended and you are about to hop on the plane out—or have already returned home safely. For those who live in the area of the research and do not have a safe place to retreat to, making considered choices as to how much public exposure of oneself to permit can become difficult. If, for professional or policy impact reasons, such exposure needs to be extensive, researchers should adopt strict security measures around their homes and maintain good situational awareness while operating in their regular environments, remaining mentally ready to expect an attack even at home.

PROBLEMS DO HAPPEN

Even with the most thorough preparation and diligent adherence to best safety procedures and practices, problems will arise. It is important that the researcher be mentally prepared for that. Scheduled transport may not arrive, leaving the researcher hanging in a gang-controlled area late at night. Local villagers may get furious over the researcher's refusal to eat offered eyeballs and kick her out of their village, as they did to me—forcing me to hike for six hours during a pitch-dark, stormy night through a rainforest, getting caught in a landslide, and ending up with a concussion in the middle of a jungle. And—as many a gentle scholar has experienced—you may find

yourself in the crossfire of a battle, with shots flying all around, and some even being fired at you. Having thought through in advance the best possible reactions to and alternative means of escape from such situations can help.

Quick thinking can make a big difference. A researcher may talk him- or herself out of a kidnapping by, for example, an Afghan pro-government militia by emphasizing to them that the US government and the organization one works for never pay ransom, and that the kidnapping would really annoy the US government and nix any hopes of the group becoming certified as officially funded and supported Afghan Local Police. Not allowing oneself to panic is critical, even when ducking and covering may be the only available response. Ways also often arise not just to survive the dangerous moments, but to turn them to the researcher's advantage. A town siege by striking cocaleros that prevents the researcher from leaving for several days, for example, may yield interviews that were undreamt of during the research design phase.

Nevertheless, as was emphasized at the beginning of this discussion, sometimes grave security situations do arise. If one gets seriously wounded, there may be little left to do beyond sending off a text giving one's situation and location, trying to stanch the bleeding, and hoping for rescue.

The situation in which one maintains the most control under extremely difficult circumstances is during a kidnapping. Kidnapping preparation courses can be taken from security firms or firms who negotiate release. But here are just a few very basic tips: Prepare yourself for a long-term stay with the kidnappers or whomever they ultimately sell you to. Kidnappings of Westerners by Salafi groups (that is, groups representing a particular movement within Sunni Islam) have resulted in their being held hostage for years. If you are kidnapped along with someone else, try to avoid being separated. Having companionship will ease the mental and physical suffering. Try to exercise as much as possible, even doing only sit-ups and push-ups if your movement is restricted. Do regular mental exercises, even if they are only multiplication tables. Try to keep yourself clean and as well-groomed as possible. Personal optimism, faith, self-discipline, and maintaining good physical condition and appearance are crucial for enduring prolonged difficult situations. Indeed, a common practice kidnappers and executioners adopt is to dehumanize their victims. Try to avoid that by telling them positive stories of your childhood, your families, the children whose lives depend on you. Try to make them sympathize with you and see you continually

as a suffering human being. Avoid negative language. Such activities are vital to enduring long-term captivity with dignity—a posture essential for surviving it.

Making the decision to try to break free is an extremely risky one. The judgment to be made is whether one's best chance of survival is remaining in captivity or trying to make a run for it. If the assessment is that there is no immediate threat to one's life, then the best decision may be to remain in place and hope a release is negotiated or a rescue raid successfully undertaken. Hostages held for months have, on occasion, successfully escaped, or at times avoided being whisked away along with other hostages during the confusion of the kidnapping. But it is a highly risky decision, and one needs to be prepared for great physical abuse or execution if the escape goes wrong.

Having a previously established proof-of-life question to which only the monitor and hostage-release negotiating team know the answer is important. So is having an established code phrase to trigger a raid. Rescue raids are highly dangerous situations, and hostages are frequently killed during them. A request by the hostage for a raid—via the previously agreed-upon code phrase—only makes sense if his or her life is imminently threatened, such as by grave illness or upcoming execution.

MAINTAINING SECURITY AFTER RETURN TO A SAFER PLACE OR HOME

Good operational security often does not end when the researcher returns home. If planning to return to the dangerous area or even go to other dangerous areas, one needs to remain conscious of one's public profile. Violating anonymity rules or being highly critical of an authoritarian government may not only result in a visa being denied next time around but in being arrested upon arrival. Aggrieved criminals may seek revenge if they learn the researcher has returned after betraying their confidence. Former fixers who feel wronged by previous payment settlements may tip off kidnappers. Think hard about what you will say to whom and how before bragging to TV shows about the pirates you interviewed and showing photos of yourself with them.

IN CONCLUSION

In sum, many factors cannot be controlled by the researcher, but surviving fieldwork in highly dangerous areas and on highly dangerous subjects while conducting productive research is, to a great extent, influenced by the researcher's own conduct. For independent researchers, security does not come from the extent of one's (fire)power, but from blending in, maintaining a low profile, and establishing trust with one's interlocutors. Betraying a trust that was established is extremely dangerous as well as ethically problematic. Often some of the most dangerous moments arise when trust, for whatever reason, breaks down.

Sharing any information about one's movements and security procedures should only be done on a strict need-to-know basis. Not taking one's interlocutors into one's home and having a safe place to retreat to after interviews greatly increase security; so does having a security monitor with whom the researcher regularly checks in.

In dangerous areas, varying one's routines as much as possible should be a basic rule. Be purposefully unpredictable. The unpredictability does not mean you should fail to follow check-in times with your security monitor or ignore code and security procedures within a safe installation, such as a friendly military compound in a war zone or a safe house. Unpredictability that enhances operational security simply means not falling into behavioral patterns that others can observe and exploit against you.

Laxity greatly increases operational risks. Maintaining appropriate levels of situational awareness is critical for safety. Practicing sound safety procedures at home helps develop and maintain good situational awareness habits. Maintaining good physical and mental health and getting enough sleep are also essential for maintaining situational alertness. No one can remain on high alert forever, though. Building physical and mental relaxation into prolonged periods of fieldwork in highly dangerous environments is important.

Good security starts with extensive preparation at home, before one enters the dangerous area. A key aspect of security for a researcher is to know what normal behavior in the area of research looks like and, conversely, how attacks are typically conducted. Planning the exit from a dangerous research area is as important as planning how to get in. Being responsible

about one's commitments to the anonymity of one's interlocutors and being conscious of one's public profile at home can affect whether or not the researcher will successfully pull off subsequent fieldwork.

If one works with local assistants, such as translators, drivers, or fixers, they need to be carefully vetted and every so often re-vetted. But equally important is to put their safety on par with your own and do everything possible to minimize dangers to them, not only to fulfill basic ethical obligations, but because their safety critically affects the principal researcher's own.

Anticipating problems and being prepared, including mentally, for collapses in security should be part of the researcher's preparation. Having a ready grab bag of essentials—containing passport, money, cell phone, medications, water, emergency food—is a basic procedure. The old sergeant major's advice (with a modern twist)—to eat and sleep when you can, shower when possible, and charge up your cell phone when electricity is available—still holds. If one is kidnapped, maintaining one's humanity and impressing that humanity upon one's captors will be critical for surviving the ordeal.

And my last bit of advice: Always—but always—shake your boots out before putting them on.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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