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How Far Can We Go with Deliberative Research at Dangerous Places?

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Abstract

This paper reflects on several past research projects that required convening deliberative discussions in dangerous places. It raises questions about the safety of participants, collaboration with government agencies, and working within the constraints of ethical research practices. The reflection offers practical insights into the conduct of deliberative research and practice in difficult and dangerous locations.

Keywords

Colombia, research ethics, consequentialism

Deliberative research is most often done at safe places. When we did our very first research, we read parliamentary debates in advanced democracies, which we could safely do at our computers (Steiner et. al, 2005). When deliberation is actually observed, it is usually at safe places, as when Deliberative Polling brought together at a conference center in Brussels participants from all EU countries (Isernia & Fishkin, 2014). Yet, deliberation is most needed but also most difficult to be achieved in war torn countries. The challenge for the deliberative community is to reflect whether deliberative research in such countries becomes too dangerous for participants and moderators. Is it compatible with standards of research ethics to organize discussion groups in such dangerous countries? I want to discuss this question with the example of a research project that we just finished (Steiner et al, 2016). We looked at Colombia with a still ongoing war, at Bosnia-Herzegovina with a civil war in the recent past, and at Brazilian favelas with often war like situations.

In Colombia, we organized discussion groups of ex-guerrillas and ex-paramilitaries, in Brazilian favelas of police officers and local inhabitants, in Bosnia-Herzegovina of Serbs and Bosnjaks. In all three places, the topic was how to achieve more peace across the deep divisions. From the perspective of research ethics, Colombia was the most critical case, because the war continued in an unabated way. Within a governmental program of decommissioning, many combatants of both sides had given up their arms and tried to go back to civil life. How proper was it to bring together persons who a short while ago were shooting at each other in the Colombian jungles? Was there a danger that discussions between ex-guerrillas and ex-paramilitaries would result in physical violence between the two sides? Was it too stressful for them to see eye in eye with the other side? Was it bearable for ex-combatants to be reminded of the war, when they tried to go back to civil life? Would it also be a problem for moderators to be exposed to too much stress and possibly even physical violence? These were the questions that we had to consider in our research team. In Brazil and Bosnia-Herzegovina the same issues of research ethics came up, but they were slightly less severe, so that we focus on the Colombian case.

As a first priority, we needed a safe place, where ex-paramilitaries and ex-guerrillas could meet to discuss the peace issue. Sometimes luck is needed in a research process, and we were indeed lucky that we got the support of the Office of the High Commissioner for Reintegration. This office was established by the Colombian government in 2006, shortly before we began our research. Its task was to supervise the governmental program of decommissioning and reintegration. It was within this program and its support that we could conduct discussion groups of ex-guerrillas and ex-paramilitaries. The governmental program consisted of psychologists and social workers

acting as tutors to help ex-combatants to be reintegrated into Colombian society. The ex-combatants had to come on a regular basis to the offices of the tutors. Participating in this program was a precondition that the ex-combatants got their regular living stipend. The Colombian government considered it as essential for reintegration of the ex-combatants that they got psychological help and also advice of how to find jobs.

How did our research fit into this program of reintegration? The initiative came from our side in the sense that our two local collaborators (names withheld for review) asked the tutors for help with our research. The tutors found that letting ex-guerrillas and ex-paramilitaries discuss about the peace prospects in Colombia would fit well into their tutorial program. How were ex-combatants motivated to participate in our research? It was done on a strictly voluntary basis in the sense that they had the choice to take part either in a regular session with the tutors or in one of our discussion groups on peace. Many ex-combatants considered the sessions with the tutors as less interesting and were eager to do something new and to participate in a research setting. As a safety measure, the tutors made sure that ex-combatants with obvious psychological problems did not participate in our research program. The ex-combatants were asked whether they would allow to be video- and audio-recorded. For security reasons, they rejected to be video recorded but agreed to be audio recorded if the voices were altered so that they could not be recognized. From the perspective of research ethics, it is crucial that with this arrangement our discussion groups could take place in the safe space of the offices of the tutors. From their regular sessions, the ex-combatants were already familiar with these offices. Therefore, they were not confronted with an unfamiliar stress situation. It was just like a regular session, but this time not with the tutors but with our local research team. The tutors were close by doing their regular daily work, being ready to step in if something unusual happened in our discussion groups.

With this research design, the discussions of the ex-combatants could be held at a safe place that corresponded to high standards of research ethics. To arrive at this safety level, however, there were costs in the selection of the participants in three respects. First, we did not include ex-combatants who refused to participate in the tutorial program of the Office of Reintegration. There were indeed an unknown number of ex-combatants, who preferred not to claim the living stipend and to get the freedom to vanish into society. Second, ex-combatants, whom the tutors considered as psychologically too unstable, were excluded from our research. Third, the selection was biased in the sense that we included only ex-combatants who were interested to take part in a discussion with the other side about the issue of peace. For all three reasons, we had a positive selection in view of the potential for deliberation. A

random sample of all ex-combatants would, of course, have been better from the perspective of pure research. Such random samples are feasible at safe places such as experiments with undergraduate university students. At dangerous places, by contrast, one has to make concessions to usual research standards if one wants to do research at all.

How could we have selected the ex-combatants for our research, if there would not have been a governmental tutorial program of reintegration, or if we would not have received the permission to participate in the program? We would have been required to make our own selection of the participants for our discussion groups. With a system of random walk, we could have tried to identify ex-combatants in poor neighbourhoods where they would be most likely to live. We would have asked them to participate in discussions with the other side on the peace issue. A great problem would have been to find places convenient and safe for all to attend. Such a research design would have been beyond ethical standards. Moderators would have been in great physical danger looking for ex-combatants in poor neighbourhoods. There also would have been a risk of physical violence and even shooting if ex-guerrillas and ex-paramilitaries would meet in an unprepared way.

Having found a safe place for ex-guerrillas and ex-paramilitaries to discuss with each other issues of peace, the next question was how to organize these discussions according to standards of research ethics. Of high priority was to treat the results of the discussions with absolute confidentiality. The ex-combatants were in a vulnerable situation in Colombian society; in a survey, 82 percent Colombians expressed distrust for the ex-combatants (Ugarriza & Nussio, 2016, p. 151). To render this confidentiality, we changed the names of the ex-combatants, and, as already mentioned, we altered the voices of the audio records. For the actual discussion, the moderators were instructed to keep up an atmosphere as calm as possible. After all, participants came out of a war where real killing went on. Thus, there was a danger that the discussion could lead to the outbreak of physical violence between the two sides. Research ethics required to keep this risk as low as possible. Therefore, the question submitted for discussion was as noncontroversial as possible. We did not ask the ex-combatants to debate, for example, who was responsible for the civil war or who did most profit from drug trafficking. Such questions would have been too controversial. The peace issue seemed both relevant and not overly controversial. The question was formulated in the following way: *“What are your recommendations so that Colombia can have a future of peace, where people from the political left and the political right, guerrillas and paramilitaries, can live peacefully together.”* In the ensuing discussions, most ex-combatants were indeed interested to talk in a serious manner about ways to peace. There was not a single incident where the discussions would have gotten out of hand with any sort of physical violence. It helped that the moderators remained passive and let the discussion go wherever it went. After the initial general question about peace, the moderators did not ask any further

questions. They also did not ask participants to speak up. With this kind of moderation, the discussions among ex-combatants could take place in a calm atmosphere, which was important from the perspective of research ethics. The participants were not put under unnecessary stress. They could only speak up on topics of their choice, and they had also the option to remain silent during the entire session, which indeed some of them did. From the perspective of research ethics, we took all the precautions that the safety and wellbeing of both participants and moderators were not put in jeopardy. In less dangerous places than Colombia, research ethics would require fewer such precautions. Thus, standards of research ethics are not universal but context dependent.

Research with human subjects are increasingly submitted to elaborate ethics reviews. Thus, all projects funded by the European Union must pass ethics reviews according to standards established by the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, co-edited by the European Science Foundation and the All European Academy. How these ethical standards are practically applied is described in a book-length publication by Pellé and Reber (2016). The general ethical standards apply to all disciplines from the social sciences to medicine and consider not only the effects on human subjects but also on animals and the environment. It is obvious that these general standards have to be specified when it comes to concrete research projects. What would this mean for deliberative research at dangerous places of the world? What have we learned from our own research at such places? The main lesson is that research standards and ethical standards are often in conflict. What is required from research standards may not be permissible from ethical standards. This may mean that some projects cannot be executed. At other times, however, research standards can be relaxed but still kept high enough, so that a project is feasible from the perspective of research ethics.

A difficult issue is whether deliberative research in dangerous places should also be judged from the philosophical perspective of consequentialism. Pellé and Reber (2016) argue that the usual ethics reviews depend too much on deontologism based on rights and duties. They advocate a much broader ethical approach, which would also include consequentialism. For Colombia this would mean that from research ethics it should also be considered whether a research project is likely to have beneficial consequences on the peace process. I think that we can answer this positively, because we plan to introduce the tape recordings and the transcripts of the discussions of the ex-combatants into the local school curriculum, which in the long term should help to overcome the deep divisions in Colombian society. The same we plan for the discussions in Brazil and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Thus, research ethics should not only consider what happens in the process of a research project but also what can be done with the research results. In this way we get a fruitful linkage between research and practice, which is particularly important for the dangerous places of the world.

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