



The Ethics of Engagement Research, Knowledge Exchange and the Military Sector

A workshop held on 11th December, 2018, at the Byre Theatre

Organised and chaired by [Dr Alice König](#), with a panel of four speakers: [Dr Roddy Brett](#), [Dr Kenneth Mavor](#), [Dr Laura Mills](#), and [Prof. Ali Watson](#).

The aim of this workshop was to debate the opportunities, challenges, goals and ethical issues involved in conducting research and knowledge exchange on military topics or in military contexts. The four speakers shared their experiences of working in a wide range of settings (parts of Africa particularly affected by climate change; villages in Iraqi Kurdistan which have experienced conflict-related immigration; areas of Guatemala where genocide took place; the Invictus Games arena) and with very different collaborators (activists and campaigners, refugees, victims of violence, perpetrators of violence, injured veterans, military organisations, governments, the UN). While their research projects have all had very different goals, and the wider impact of their research varies significantly, a number of **common issues** emerged. This summary aims to capture the main points raised in the course of discussion, without trying to forge any artificial consensus. Indeed, one thing that emerged particularly clearly from the workshop was the **diversity of approaches** taken by individual researchers, the **personal** nature of ethical decision-making, and the need for a **pluralistic understanding** of different ways of tackling research and knowledge-exchange on military topics/in the military sector. This summary should not be read as prescriptive in any way; it is designed rather to support future research/knowledge-exchange planning and to stimulate further discussion.

In the course of discussion, it was suggested that:

- researchers working on conflict/peace studies are **duty-bound** (as are many other kinds of researchers) to **'do something'** with their research beyond simply talking to other academics
- **activism** and **research** can (and arguably should) go hand-in-hand; but activism and research are different intellectual endeavours and can complicate as well as complement each other (e.g., combining research and activism can compromise research objectivity)
- research and knowledge exchange should seek to **amplify marginalised voices**
- involving marginalised or vulnerable communities may have **implications for research methodologies**, for research/knowledge exchange activities like workshops (where e.g. attendance might endanger individuals), and for **publication** (which must be done in a way that does not compromise/endanger participants or sources)

- more generally, research and knowledge exchange projects involve entering into **relationships of trust** and/or **obligation** with many different groups and individuals; to avoid exploitation, it is important to consider what the research/knowledge-exchange project can do for everyone involved in it, not just for the researchers; personal good faith is as important as research integrity when establishing such relationships
- identifying **which individuals/groups/organisations it is safe or acceptable to collaborate with** can be challenging; e.g. background checks may be hard to carry out, motivations can be hard to assess
- working across language barriers also involves having to collaborate with **trusted translators**, who convey key concepts (such as ‘consent’) not just individual words
- the **integrity** of research and knowledge exchange involving other communities (whether an institution like the British army or a village in another country) can be compromised both by the ‘**otherness**’ of the researcher(s) or, conversely, by their **embeddedness** in that community (in particular, embeddedness in a community may result in conflicts of interest between the researcher/research project and collaborators/sources, and in betrayals of trust/feelings of obligation – especially where information is passed on ‘in confidence’ or with particular agenda attached)
- the integrity of research/knowledge-exchange projects can also be compromised by **sources of funding** or by the **directives of those commissioning** the research/knowledge exchange, who may want some evidence suppressed or exaggerated; the identity of the people behind the people commissioning the research may not always be clear; the ‘**destination**’ of the research (e.g. as evidence in a court of law) may also exert pressure on the researcher to produce findings that tally with/go against other parties’ interests; researchers will sometimes find themselves uncovering evidence that will be unpopular with powerful organisations, perhaps even endangering themselves; equally, they may find themselves censored by Official Secrets Acts, etc
- the **impact on the researcher** of exposure to, e.g., stories of violence can be significant in terms of trauma; in such cases, researchers need support from their institutions/employees/funding bodies (which is not always forthcoming)
- sometimes researchers will end up conducting research/knowledge exchange with **people who have done unethical things** (with knock-on implications for both researchers and other participants)
- conducting research and knowledge exchange in ethical ways is **time-consuming**, particularly on contentious issues or where participants may be at risk; a great deal of forethought and research must go into the planning of such a project (e.g. identifying methodologies that will not re-traumatise participants; establishing ‘consent’ in complex situations far-removed from the neat ethics forms filled out in university offices), with some of the most transformational research/knowledge-exchange projects often being long-term as well as time-consuming
- the volume of time involved in the ethical setting-up of knowledge-exchange projects raises questions about the **levels of credit and support** traditionally given to this kind of activity: historically seen as ‘extra’ but now increasingly ‘core’ to what researchers do, there is still a disparity between the time and funding typically allocated to knowledge-exchange projects and the time/funds actually taken up by planning and conducting them ethically
- it also raises questions about the need for **mentoring/training researchers**, particularly at the PG or early-career stage; while ethical decisions are guided in part by commonly shared principles, they also come down to personal decisions, which can be enhanced by the **sharing of experience and expertise across disciplines**

- the ethics of research/knowledge exchange on military topics/in military contexts is regularly discussed in some disciplines, but rarely so in others; there is scope for **more regular interdisciplinary discussion**, both to share expertise and to maintain/enhance ‘**sensitisation**’ (i.e. helping researchers remain sensitive to what’s at stake in conflict/war/peace studies, preventing researchers from becoming ‘numb’ to their material)
- there is scope for more discussion of the ethical decisions and responsibilities involved in **teaching** about war in different disciplines, as well as in the publication, wider dissemination and sharing of research
- a number of researchers at the workshop had been involved in designing or supporting new **teaching courses** or **training establishments** with a military/strategic focus; ‘future-proofing’ these courses/establishments so that the learning that takes place within them cannot be used for unethical ends/by hostile organisations can be difficult, if not impossible: teaching about war/military topics can have unforeseen consequences
- the **onward impact of research** can be equally difficult to control: researchers may find their research co-opted by others for unforeseen and sometimes unethical ends; awareness of this challenge at the design stage can help ‘future-proof’ research projects to an extent, but it is hard to mitigate against this challenge completely
- researchers at the workshop often experienced a **mismatch** between the kinds of applied research, working towards transformational change, which motivated them and the kinds of research impact recognised/funded by HE institutions; also, a mismatch between ‘real’ impact and ‘measurable’ impact (true also of many other areas of research)

Discussion turned at the end of the workshop to possible future events, with two options emerging particularly clearly:

- a workshop on the ethics of teaching military topics
- a workshop geared particularly towards researchers involved in knowledge-exchange partnerships with military organisations/policy-makers

There was consensus that more interdisciplinary conversation about the ethics of war-related research and knowledge exchange was desirable in general, with a particular focus on supporting early career researchers.