Ethical Complexities of Civically Engaged Research

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Enthusiasm for civically engaged research (CER) is growing steadily within the field of political science (Smith 2019). Characterized by collaboration, intersectionality, reflexivity, and relevance (Bullock and Hess 2021), CER requires academics to include community partners as equal contributors at every stage of the research process. However, *how* we go about including community partners in academic research should matter more than this inclusion.

This article examines the ethical complexities of engaging in CER that should be considered regardless of Institutional Review Board (IRB) processes. We describe three ethical violations that can occur while doing this work and discuss various methods that political scientists can use to avoid them. We begin by discussing how researchers may unwittingly extract value from communities without providing tangible benefits or engaging in norms of reciprocity. Then we explore how political scientists can disrupt the power dynamics in the communities that they research and discuss ways that we can empower community partners even after a research project concludes. Finally, we analyze how political scientists can monitor their own positionality to reduce the power disparities that exist between researchers and communities with which they engage.

These ethical violations represent only a fraction of the conflicts and dilemmas that may arise when conducting CER.[1] By evaluating scenarios in which political scientists must go beyond a general commitment to "do no harm," we provide a framework for further discussion about the underlying ethics of research that prioritizes the inclusion of community partners.

EXTRACTING VALUE WITHOUT REPLACING IT

When political scientists use a community's resources to collect information without providing some benefit to that community, an ethical violation has occurred. CER is an inherently reciprocal endeavor. For community partners, CER "must have some payoff in terms of benefiting the organization if it is to be viewed as relevant and credible" (Barge et al. 2008, 248). If researchers contribute nothing to the goals of their community partners, then they are not conducting CER in an ethical manner.

Exploitation reflects an "*unfair* distribution of the *benefits* of cooperative activity" (Ballantyne 2008, 179, italics in original), and numerous communities have "witnessed a history of academics having either no impact...or an impact characterized solely by increases in regulation, surveillance, and control" (Glass and Newman 2015, 34). Political scientists who engage in CER nevertheless can harm their community partners despite the collaborative nature of the process. Cronin-Furman recounts a time when she witnessed an official set up an impromptu meeting between undergraduate students and war-crimes survivors (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018). The short duration of the undergraduate study trip implies that these students received vital information about civilian victimization and torture without giving the survivors anything of equal value. In a similar vein, failing to give community partners full credit for their research contributions also constitutes an extraction of value that is fundamentally unethical in nature. For example, although local research collaborators have a critical role in helping researchers gather data on sensitive subjects, they often do not make it "further than the acknowledgments section"—when they do, their extensive contributions rarely are featured in the final research "results" (Eriksson Baaz and Utas 2019, 158).

Reciprocity is the bedrock of CER and it has important implications for the validity and quality of academic research (Jackson, Shoup, and Williams 2021). Both researchers and community partners have distinct experiences that can enhance research processes, including analytical training and local expertise and knowledge. However, when researchers take from communities without giving anything in return, it reinforces academia's disturbing history of exploitation (MacFarlane 2010) and increases the likelihood that "research fatigue" will occur within vulnerable populations (Clark 2008). Our definition of vulnerable populations encompasses participants and communities that may be at risk as a result of their intersecting identities including gender, age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and legal status. We recognize the need for this definition to go beyond IRB definitions of vulnerability (which often are tied to federal standards) and recognize that vulnerability may shift depending on the context of a particular study (Lake, Majic, and Maxwell 2019).

There are several ways that political scientists can facilitate mutually beneficial CER. Community partners often benefit from the policy recommendations that are derived from the research in which they participate (Newman and Glass 2014).

Organizations or group members may ask for training or program support (Pittaway, Bartolomei, and Hugman 2010). Finally, political scientists can always add value to communities by engaging in long-standing relationships that are built up over time (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018). Because we

are changed in this manner when members of the LGBTQ+ community come out to their family and social networks, when undocumented community members publicly disclose their citizenship status, and when youths challenge older family or community members as a result of academic

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typically initiate partnerships with community groups, we have an ethical duty to ensure that they benefit from participating in our research.

DISRUPTING DYNAMICS WITHOUT REPAIR

Another ethical violation that often goes unnoticed occurs when researchers disrupt the power dynamics within a community without attempting to repair them once the research is completed. CER typically works toward amplification of community power and individual transformation. Political scientists have an obligation to inform community members about how the political empowerment that stems from their involvement in research may change the community as a whole.

The psychological changes that individuals and communities experience from political empowerment are particularly important to consider. Research shows that individual and community empowerment leads to increased knowledge and political participation; it also can reinforce a sense of political identity for community members, which is necessary for other forms of political-movement participation (Friedman and McAdam 1992; Snow and Soule 2010). For example, most racial and ethnic minorities increase participation as a result of successful efficacy initiatives by community groups and other political actors (Barreto, Segura, and Woods 2004; Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Gay 2001). Because CER creates more avenues of political participation for community partners, researchers should examine the details of participation involvement (e.g., election laws, registration deadlines, voting rights, protest rights and safety, and social media harassment)

research. CER should consider how to help community partners safely navigate these changes.

Beaumont (2010) highlighted tools for assisting community partners to process the psychological and behavioral changes associated with their participation in research and to solidify political learning. Researchers can incorporate opportunities for partners to provide feedback about the project, guide reflection on community experiences and ideas, and initiate discussions about how political engagement is affecting the community at large (Beaumont 2010). It is in this space of reflection that communities strengthen their political identity and consolidate their political efficacy, which in turn can lead to continued political activism among community members (Hunt and Benford 2004; Klandermans 2003; Zepeda-Millán 2016). Coordinating pauses to assess the impact of political socialization in its entirety allows researchers not only to protect community partners from ethical violations; it also nurtures the growth of a political community, which is necessary for continuing community empowerment after CER concludes.

USING POSITIONALITY AS A FORM OF CONTROL

Power and hegemony often underlie both qualitative and quantitative research processes (Karnieli-Miller, Strier, and Pessach 2009). To ethically conduct CER, political scientists cannot use our status as researchers to control the research agenda. Many of the communities that we work with already face a wide range of systematic and structural inequalities on a daily basis. As researchers, we have an obligation to ensure that we are not replicating these inequalities during the

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and work through the benefits and drawbacks of increased participation—especially if it could be dangerous for community partners.

Political empowerment often affects interpersonal relationships within the communities with which we engage long after our research is done. Comparative analyses of women's empowerment in global development programs show that family decision making is altered irreversibly when gender and cultural mores are broadly challenged as a result (Moser 1993; Upadhyay et al. 2014). Interpersonal relationships also

research process (American Political Science Association 2020). CER includes community members *as equal contributors*, in partnership with researchers; their input should carry equal weight. Political scientists must acknowledge the power dynamics inherent in academic research in order to share the creation and ownership of knowledge with community partners, who are experts on their lived experiences (Karnieli-Miller, Strier, and Pessach 2009).

Our positionality—that is, our social position (i.e., status) as academic experts—shapes the way that we design research,

build relationships, and analyze data (Dryden-Petersen 2020). Researchers cannot assume that community partners share a common understanding of the academy's role in the research process (Pittaway, Bartolomei, and Hugman 2010). Moreover, without establishing norms of open communication, the goals of researchers and community partners may not be aligned. Under these circumstances, it is more likely that the positionality of researchers will override that of their community partners, allowing the former group to define the research design, decision-making processes, and levels of power sharing at the expense of the latter group (Muhammed et al. 2015).

When researchers make unilateral decisions about the purpose and/or direction of a research project, they are using

The prevalence of the ethical violations described in this article suggests that political scientists have more to learn about how to do CER (Udani and Dobbs 2021). However, it also is important to remember that, under certain circumstances, conducting CER is itself an ethical violation: there are many instances in which CER is not appropriate regardless of how ethically it is conducted. For example, using the ambiguous circumstances in a war-torn country to gain access to vulnerable refugees can be highly unethical regardless of how much information is learned or how accurately their stories are portrayed.[2] Similarly, establishing research partnerships with communities in the midst of traumatic events can be unethical if they are being approached by multiple

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their positionality as a form of control. Compared to community partners, researchers can use inherent power disparities to determine payment, negotiate working hours, and control research tools (Mwambari 2019). Some researchers have used their positionality to imply that compliance with their vision for a research project will result in benefits that they are not well equipped or even permitted to provide (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018). There is an imbalance of power concerning the creation and dissemination of knowledge. In positivist approaches to research, knowledge production is hierarchical. Because experts are at the top in this approach, researchers may impose their "knowledge" onto community partners, effectively ignoring how knowledge is produced and analyzed by those perceived as lower in the hierarchy (Gaventa and Cornwall 2008).

CER reduces the power disparity between researcher and participant. From the beginning to the completion of a research project, community partners should be involved in co-developing research questions, gathering and interpreting data, eventual dissemination of findings, and development of policy proposals (Foster and Glass 2017; Glass and Newman 2015). We always must remember to allow narrators to speak for themselves, to take cues from them, and to listen with minimal interruption (Riessman 1987). The relationships that form the basis of academic research can be unequal or even manipulative (Cunliffe and Karunanayake 2013). Political scientists must be particularly diligent to avoid the tendency to dominate community partners.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

When conducting CER, it is important that political scientists remember to (1) add value as a researcher, (2) help community members navigate the consequences of political empowerment, and (3) refrain from using our status as academic researchers to exert control over the research process. We are responsible for establishing working relationships that are founded on trust, reciprocity, and equality. If we do not make a concerted effort to establish these principles, it is highly unlikely that ethical CER will occur.

researchers simultaneously. Although the information that vulnerable populations possess undoubtedly is important, ignoring research fatigue in the pursuit of new data can negatively affect their willingness to share experiences in the future. We must value our community partners enough to know when our presence causes more harm than good or when the value of the knowledge gained does not outweigh its costs.

The evolving field of CER has resulted in a greater understanding of the challenges associated with conducting it. Political scientists must continue to address the ethical complexities that arise when community partners are included in academic research. ∎

NOTES

1. For further exploration about the ethics in CER, see Foster and Glass (2017); Gaventa and Cornwall (2008); Muhammad et al. (2015); and Newman and Glass (2014).

2. Areas characterized by contested territorial control "...pose a series of unique challenges. Various stakeholders may level formal and informal fees for research permissions, access to public records, and access to territory. Which fees constitute legitimate research expenses and which constitute forms of graft are rarely clear cut" (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018, 608).

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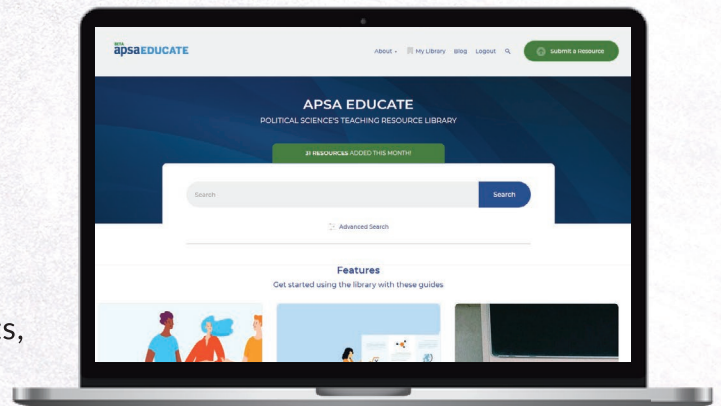
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