SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

How (Not) to Study a War-Affected Society: Challenges of Knowledge Production in Ukraine and Elsewhere

Viktoriya Sereda[1,2,3] and Oksana Mikheieva[3]

[1]Forum for Transregional Studies, Berlin, Germany; [2]Institute of Ethnology National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Lviv and [3]Ukrainian Catholic University, Lviv
Corresponding author: Viktoriya Sereda; Email: sereda.vik@gmail.com

Abstract

Critical approaches to research on war-affected societies emphasize the necessity for a more empirically grounded approach to the production of knowledge. Presently, research on war-affected societies is undergoing a shift toward localization with a call for more "voices" with local knowledge and expertise. This research is an attempt to analyze the challenges of reliable knowledge production in war-affected societies and their circulation in academia, the policy-making community, and feeding media discourse. The research focuses on the Russian war against Ukraine since 2014 as a prism through which to examine the main challenges for localized knowledge production. We consider several aspects of knowledge production including the problems and issues of framing and wording that define the character of the conflict, challenges of research design and data collection, researchers' positioning dilemmas, participants' responses, differences between policy and academic research, and the role of the media. The purpose of this study is to engage with and attempts to advance the literature on knowledge localization. We argue that a move toward the localization of fieldwork requires a more sensitive and transdisciplinary approach to knowledge production. Based on our own experience of fieldwork during wartime, we point out possible ethical and methodological challenges and offer workable responses to them.

Keywords: war-affected society; Ukraine; knowledge production; "local" and "practical" turns of peace and conflict research

Introduction and Contextual Background

Critical approaches to research on war-affected societies emphasize the necessity for a more empirically grounded approach to the production of knowledge, as these approaches feed into both policy-oriented and problem-solving discourses (Dutkiewicz and Smolenski 2023). Presently, research on war-affected societies is undergoing a shift toward "localization," with a call for more "voices" with local knowledge and expertise. However, policy makers and other actors are often untrained to identify and evaluate the quality of the fieldwork and data behind the reports or terminology used. A move toward the localization of fieldwork requires a more sensitive and transdisciplinary approach to knowledge production and raises many additional questions. Knowledge production and dissemination are also strongly interrelated with the politics of knowledge (whose knowledge matters and why?). The success of peacebuilding efforts greatly depends on several factors: accurate knowledge about the war-affected society as well as the international expert community's vision of the conflict that greatly influences its vision of acceptable ways of finding a resolution. Whether war is described as an ethnic conflict, a civil war, or imperialist aggression

makes a big difference, as public opinion is shaped by media discourse, which relies on knowledge that is produced by research agents. This research is an attempt to analyse the dilemmas of reliable knowledge production in war-affected societies, their circulation in academia and the policy-making community, and their relation to media discourse. It focuses on several aspects of knowledge production including the problems and issues of research design and data collection, researchers' positioning dilemmas, participants' responses, and differences between policy and academic research.

Both authors have substantial experience in conducting academic and policy-oriented research based on a wide spectrum of methods, with a focus on various groups of Ukrainian populations that have been affected by Russian aggression since 2014, located in the country (including occupied territories) and abroad. Our involvement is not limited to academic research. We were also invited as experts to participate in the preparation of or comment on the policy-related reports produced by the think tanks, international organizations, and foundations. We worked on local, national, and international teams. All these experiences form the basis of our analysis. In this study, we examine the challenges of knowledge production that scholars may face when conducting empirically based research in a war-affected society.

Our time frame includes Ukraine in the context of Russian aggression in 2014 and the later full-scale invasion. The specificity of the Ukrainian case is that it is a long-term conflict with changing character. At the initial stage of Russian aggression, Ukraine faced two conflict-related issues with different characteristics. One was the temporary occupation of Crimea and incorporation of its territories into the legal body of the Russian Federation. The other was Russian military aggression in the eastern part of Ukraine, which did not lead to the integration of these territories into Russia but instead resulted in the creation of the quasi-state entities of the DPR (Donetsk People's Republic) and the LPR (Luhansk People's Republic) in occupied parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.[1] On February 12, 2015, after many long negotiations between the leaders of France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine, a "package of measures for the implementation of the Minsk agreements" (Minsk II) was signed. Although it did not achieve a stable ceasefire, it managed to substantially de-escalate the situation. Minsk II froze the status of the DPR and the LPR in the occupied parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and thus changed the character of the conflict from intense to protracted. Eight years later, on September 30, 2022, Russia, amid an ongoing full-scale invasion of Ukraine, unilaterally declared its annexation of these areas and newly occupied Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts.

Ukraine was also part of intensifying hybrid warfare in which information and knowledge about the conflict became a battleground. As Goetschel (2021, 41) argues, when political tensions prevail in the local context, this may trigger reactions ranging from shrinking spaces for researchers to the promotion of alternative facts as a counterversion to scientific results (or facts). Full-scale Russian invasion intensified the situation by bringing Ukraine into the global limelight of international attention. The Russian-Ukrainian war has been on the front pages of international media for several months. A separate war is being fought on social media platforms. During the Russian aggression against Ukraine, social media was at the forefront of war coverage, not only enabling users to document and share experiences of military reality but also shaping narratives about the war, often through ideologically biased or false representations. On one hand, the demand for expert and reliable information needed for decision making has grown exponentially. It also made even more visible the vulnerability of knowledge production via-a-vis the growing use of propaganda, fakes, and alternative facts technologies in information warfare. According to Andriy Tyushka (2023, 643), there is "a clash of (factual and fictional) narratives in both media, politics, and academia, a good share of which (un)intentionally contributes to the distortion, rather than production, of knowledge." The case of Ukraine demonstrates an even greater need for the reflexivity of academic and expert communities, considering the challenges of knowledge production in war-affected societies.

The conditions under which scientific knowledge of the situation in the occupied Crimea or occupied parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions was produced between 2015 and 2022 can be compared with similar cases in the region and outside. The study of Ukrainian society under conditions of hybrid invasion and direct armed clash and under conditions of information warfare and occupation creates both unique and universal knowledge. An examination of the context of this conflict, with a focus on patterns of behavior and everyday life in wartime, makes it possible to speak of similarities with other societies in protracted war or long-term occupation conditions such as South -Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, Transnistria in Moldova, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Kurdish Territories, and Western Sahara. This universalizes the results and allows them to be included in common knowledge of social conditions and situations in both peacetime and wartime research.

Theoretical Challenges of Knowledge Production in War to Restore Peace

This study contributes to the three bodies of literature. First, this study adds to the growing literature on local and "practical" turns of peace and conflict research, examining a fundamental shift away from the top-down liberal peacebuilding project and the role of knowledge production in this process (MacGinty and Richmond 2013; Acar et al. 2020; van Leeuwen et al. 2020). Second, it contributes to the burgeoning body of research on overcoming the gap between knowledge production and policy (Goulding 1993; Eriksson and Sundelius 2005; Nye 2008; Goetschel & Hagmann 2009; De Coning 2016, 2018; Jones 2018; Goetschel 2021). Finally, it contributes to the literature by examining the difficulties of conducting research in societies living in extreme conditions, such as protracted military conflicts or wars (Riabchuk 2015; Glasius et al. 2018; Kulyk 2020; Kuznetsova and Mikheieva 2020; Sereda 2020; Burlyuk and Musliu 2023).

In the recent decade, in response to critical approaches questioning the predominant views and epistemological assumptions of contemporary peace and conflict, research has had several "turns." Among the most visible is the local turn—associated with analyses of power and everyday resistance against hegemonic international liberal actors, whose dominance is examined through the application of the poststructuralist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks of Foucault, Bhaba, Scott, and other critical approaches (Lidén, MacGinty, and Richmond 2009; MacGinty & Richmond 2013; Leonardsson & Rudd 2015; Paffenholz 2015; Van Leeuwen et al. 2020). There is also the pragmatic turn—conceptualizing a need for a shift from a bureaucratic and technocratic top-down problem-solving peacebuilding approach to an adaptive one informed by concepts of complexity, resilience, and local ownership (Goetschel and Hagmann 2009; Sending 2009; de Coning 2016, 2018; Sidonia and Goetschel 2017; Goetschel 2021).

Recent reflections on the shift toward localism in the conceptualization and execution of peacebuilding have pointed out several issues that need further clarification. First, regarding the relationship between power and knowledge, there is a need to recognize that peacebuilding practices are not universal and that conflict classifications are not agreed-upon concepts and are not free from value judgments. Much of contemporary international relations and peace research "neglects and even denies its normative underpinnings" and has a "tendency to set aside ethical considerations and to substitute logic for values" (Reus-Smit and Snidal 2008, 17–18). Second, there is a need to avoid the construction of local and international as binary opposites, which reinforces the position of the Global North as the "constitutive outside" (Blaney and Inayatullah 2008). Furthermore, local is seen as an unambiguous category that requires further clarification. Whose voices or voices should be heard, and which ones should be considered local (national or regional elites, representatives of civil society, activists, or other groups in the local population) (Paffenholz 2015, 858; Van Leeuwen et al. 2020, 14)? In whom do we trust to become local voices, collecting information and producing knowledge in the form of reports, policy papers, or academic publications? Some scholars also call for intersectionality[2] to be acknowledged, which will permit the

incorporation of a much wider variety of local voices and experiences (Farooqi & Slente 2018, Mikheieva 2020b, Sereda 2023).

Other authors have warned that a conflict-affected social system is a complex system that cannot be easily disconnected from the rest of the world. Scholars point to several interrelated challenges need to be addressed including "complexity and radical alterity" (Millar 2020, 2021) as well as the need for constant (re)assessment to understand how a complex social system adapts in response to policy interventions (de Coning 2018).

Both "turns" locate a question of knowledge production at the core of their debates and demonstrate that the production, sharing, and verification of knowledge cannot be separated from the need for a deeper discussion of the ontological or methodological decisions that underlie peace research and practice.

The main challenges of knowledge production described in both bodies of literature include the weak conceptualization of who (Paffenholz 2015; Sidonia and Goetschel 2017; van Leeuwen et al. 2020) or what should be studied—"limit their purview to the observable, measurable, knowable, and, eventually, controllable aspects of peace intervention" (Millar 2021, 303)—as well as a critique of the methodologies applied that are either insensitive to certain aspects/actors or restricted to specific scales (macro or micro). Therefore, these methods are unsuitable for complex transscalar analyses (Walt 2005; Millar 2020, 2021). Some authors have also pointed to a bias in policy interventions based on false beliefs produced in the Global North and conceptualized it as universal knowledge. The latest privileges the international over the domestic as a source of legitimacy (Goulding 1993; Reus-Smit and Snidal 2008; Sending 2009, 8; Paffenholz 2015). Another point raised by many scholars as the primary factor affecting the quality of knowledge production in conflict-related research is "conflict sensitivity" (Millar 2018, 2020; Goetschel 2021). This refers to the ability to understand the context and awareness of a researcher's role and positionality within a given context. There are several dimensions of sensitivity to conflicts. First, how does it influence certain aspects such as the framing of a research question, defining the conflict and categories in which it is described, the choice of research partners and research cases, the use of a particular method, or the collection of empirical data (Jones 2018). Second, it implies a need to clarify the power relations and local realities that affect scientific independence and research outcomes (Sidonia and Goetschel 2017).

However, little attention has been paid to the challenges faced by the local scholars and experts. This study seeks to bridge this gap by bringing some of these issues to light within discussions on the nature of knowledge production in a war-affected society. It seeks to articulate the main challenges of knowledge production in such circumstances to stimulate and sharpen critical discussions on the subject.

First, we discuss how war is categorized and presented by the academic community and how it may influence research design. What problems arise when applying standard methods to the study of societies under extraordinary war and occupation conditions? The conflict, war, and catastrophic state of society often make them objects of study, and such interests often have an international character. This raises issues regarding the positionalities and interactions between native and nonnative researchers, whose collaboration is often asymmetrical, largely due to access to resources but also because of the level of protection available to nonnative researchers. The next sections discuss positionality dilemmas and what emotional/psychological, intellectual, and physical labor is required from native researchers and interlocutors to produce knowledge in the situation of war. Finally, in the last section, we discuss the challenges of reliable knowledge circulation in academia and the policy-making community.

A critical issue in contemporary research design is the ethical approach, which ultimately shapes the logic of research procedures and ensures the transition from perceiving research participants as objects to their full inclusion in the process of knowledge production. This study considers both institutional and methodological challenges in the ethics[3] of knowledge production in a war-affected society.

Terminological Chaos and Its Influence on the Study and description of Armed Conflict

Speaking about society in times of war and conflict, one should remember that we are not simply using definitions but also activating their semantic content specific to the current moment. Accordingly, attention to the terminology used in describing conflict is not only scientific but also a social responsibility of the researcher. The naming issue has the following three dimensions: First, an understanding of the nature of war and its naming—that is, the specifications of the object(s) under study—precedes any fieldwork research. Subsequently, the chosen terminology and conceptual framework significantly influenced all stages of the study, from the formulation of the research question and design to the recommendation of practical steps.

Second, the issue of terminological localization in the field phase of research has become problematic. Parties find themselves in different social and informational realities under conditions of war or the acute phase of conflict. Accordingly, in the field phase, the researcher usually talks to the research participants with the words they use to define their reality. An error in the choice of terms to describe reality can lead to participant closure or noncooperation and can also jeopardize the safety of the researcher and other participants. Moreover, it is often impossible to predict the terms in which interlocutors discuss a situation. Flexible qualitative methods (above all, in-depth interviews) allowed us to follow the interlocutors' narration and later use their terminological framework. In such cases, the researcher must adapt the language of the research tools to that of the audience being studied. Later, it further complicated data analysis and interpretation, especially for nonlocal researchers.

Third, this issue manifests itself in the presentation and dissemination of the research results. Often the researcher is expected to "recode" or "translate" the language of the participants into the language of a universal terminological apparatus, which is often embedded in the West-prismatic perspective (in case of Ukraine, the Russia-prismatic and West-prismatic or sometimes both), which in conflict or war inevitably becomes an expression of the author's political position and power relations.

In the following section, we illustrate the problems of informed or unconscious positioning by researchers using terminological preferences. One of the first discussions regarding the situation in Ukraine after 2014 was centred on the terms "Ukrainian crisis" and "crisis in Ukraine." The first formula pointed to the complexity of the situation and its broad context and logically led to a description of the situation as a "Russian-Ukrainian war" (Riabchuk 2015; Wilson 2016; Tyushka 2023). The second formulation also acknowledged the complexity of the situation and the difficulty of defining it but shifted the focus to internal and civil conflict in Ukraine itself (Kudelia 2016; Arel 2017). In academic publications, these definitions did not simply define the situation but denoted a certain way of seeing events. All of them frame the reality and create difficulties for the researcher both in conducting the research and in presenting the results because such terms position the researcher in one way or another (Kulyk 2020). Labels such as "Ukrainian war," "Putin's war," "Russian war," "Russo-Ukrainian war," or just "special military operation" are not synonyms of the same war or set of neutral terms but value-laden definitions that bring particular framings or (un) intentional distortions of conflicts' character. Tyushka (2023, 656) analyzed the terminology spectrum and described over 25 ways of "(un)saying 'Russian war on Ukraine.'" These ramifications or distorted visions of the conflict may have important implications for academic and policy research as well as for policy decisions and international aid.

However, the empirical reality of conflict demonstrates the complexity of labeling. In fact, it is quite obvious that war between states can be accompanied by intense internal (including armed) social conflict. Situations of this type (those involving the claim of sovereignty by one part of the state) are often accompanied by a series of simultaneous events that complicate the classification and call into question the possibility of speaking in either/or categories. For example, in parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in Ukraine, one is confronted with a hybrid war that, in its initial stage, involved indirect but active interference by a neighboring state. This interference manifested

itself through financial support, the use of proxy groups, propaganda, rumors, and the sending of specially trained agents to the region. All these actions were ultimately directed at increasing manifestations of dissatisfaction with the state's domestic policies and were subsequently used to legitimize the claim to secession of the territories. Accordingly, the choice between the terms "war between countries" and "civil war" in this case makes no sense because the organization of civil conflict was a part of external aggression. However, in conflict-ridden societies, we not only use the definition itself with its supposedly neutral meaning but also activate all its contextual content. Accordingly, the use of any definition requires considerable detail and clarification in the text of the academic paper or report and especially in the presentation and dissemination of research results. A similar problem is the naming of conflict by a third party such as other states or international organizations. The requirement for impartiality and neutrality in assessing conflict leads to a search for a language that is acceptable to all parties involved. Most international organizations and monitoring missions in Ukraine used the terminology "government-controlled area" and "non-government-controlled area" in a claim of neutrality. Such terminology leads to a distorted perception of the situation and creates the conditions under which the main territory of an independent state from 2014 to 2022 (except for Crimea and parts of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions) was labeled as subordinate to the Ukrainian government, which was self-evident and did not need additional emphasis. The additional problem of using such neutral terminology is related to the pragmatic turn in the study of societies at war declaring reliance on empirical data and localization (with attention to the details of everyday experience at the local level and a claim to describe reality on the ground). However, in an ongoing war, this approach shifts the attention from the aggressor to the victim. This frame of perception renders the active aggressor invisible and presents a state of conflict as a characteristic of the local community. As a result, the term "nongovernment territories" loses neutrality.

Under these circumstances, justification for the chosen categorical apparatus is inevitable. In this text, as Ukrainian scholars, we share the official position of the Ukrainian state and use a set of definitions that express the external character of aggression. Accordingly, we will use the term "for the temporarily occupied territories of Crimea, parts of the Donetsk, and Luhansk regions of Ukraine (since 2014 and before 2022), refer to the so-called unrecognized republics as quasi-state formations in the occupied territories, and describe the situation as Russian aggression against Ukraine, Russian full-scale invasion, and Russo-Ukrainian war.

However, this set of terms is not a solution to the terminology problem in the field toolkit. Because all parties in the conflict develop their own definitions filled with contextual meaning, our task is to be attentive to these definitions and the semantic content they produce. The important thing is not to declare one's research position but to carefully and correctly identify all possible points of disagreement, with the ability to see them in a broader political context. However, for local researchers, this might also be a traumatizing experience if their vision of the character of the war is different from the frame used by interlocutors. This causes difficulties of terminological translation of obtained knowledge at the stage of analysis and the researcher's positionality issue (discussed in the following section).

Issues of Research Design and Data Collection in War-Affected Society

Research in international relations and peacekeeping operations has traditionally tended toward quantitative methods of gathering information. Quantitative data sets allow for the exploration of important trends and define causal relations between the phenomena in focus. It should be noted that standard survey methods are unlikely to be effective when planning such studies. Below, we review the main problems associated with the use of quantitative methods to study war-afflicted societies.

Typically, conflicts cause an intensive movement of populations in search of protection, safety, and humanitarian aid. People are forced to move, find themselves on opposite sides of new lines of

demarcation, and may be recruited into the army or for labor. In Ukraine, after 2014, part of the population in the occupied territories fled to other regions to escape political and physical persecution and military action. Approximately 2.4 million inhabitants of Crimea and 3–3.5 million inhabitants of the temporarily occupied territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions were found behind the new dividing lines. However, reliable statistics are not available for proving or correcting these numbers. Studies of the IDP (internally displace person) population in Ukraine show that up to a third did not register officially as IDPs and remain "invisible" to the official statistics (Mikheieva and Sereda 2015; Tronk and Nahikian 2020). Since February 2022, the number of displaced people or those who find themselves in the occupation has constantly changed depending on the situation on the battlefield. Unregistered displaced persons in Ukraine or other countries, the manipulative nature of data on forced displacement to the Russian Federation, and limited access to temporarily occupied territories' data make it impossible to define the general population and, as a result, to specify a sample and sample error.

Full-scale Russian aggression brought many new challenges that we only touched on in this article, but they require further discussion and conceptualization. One of these is the time dimension (Howlett and Lazarenko 2023). Under such extreme circumstances, society is extremely fluid in terms of respondents' localization, opinions, and needs. This often causes any data obtained to be almost immediately outdated. This places additional pressure on researchers and policy makers to accelerate their knowledge production. This may influence the ability of researchers to follow standard research protocols and have negative consequences for the assessment of reliability.

In the case of an undefined general population, a random or systematic sample would be a solution; however, under the condition of fear and limited access to the population of temporarily occupied territories, this would be dangerous for interviewers and respondents. In the context of full-scale war and systematic shelling, it is virtually impossible to avoid danger to all those involved in the research. This critically limits access to a large proportion of the population. Another possible technique is telephone interviews based on random sampling. This type of interview is safer for interviewers because it does not require travel to war-affected territories or allows the capture of respondents on move. However, it still endangers the interviewees; phone calls can be hacked and voices recorded and matched with the sim-card data. Moreover, it is difficult to build deeper and more trusting relationships through impersonal telephone calls. Therefore, it is difficult to expect respondents to be ready to provide unconventional answers during telephone conversations. Here, we can refer as an example to the recently published by Ukrainian media, a hacked telephone interview conducted by an interviewer from the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (VTsIOM, a state-owned polling institution established in 1987, known as the All-Union Centre for the Study of Public Opinion until 1992) with a man from the occupied Crimean Peninsula (*Ukrainska Pravda* 2023). This example clearly demonstrates the possibility of external interception of such an interview and its presentation to the general public (which violates confidentiality) and shows the failure of quantitative methodologies in conditions of war, authoritarianism, and increased repression.

In addition, the percentage of people who possess sim cards that are accessible for calls from outside temporarily occupied territories and, in many cases, those who escaped to other countries is relatively small, further narrowing the group that can be reached and interviewed.[4] Other methodologies such as online services, phone applications, and social media platforms are used to collect quantitative data, which often exclude many categories of the population—those who are untrained or uneasy about using such services, who have no access to the internet, phones, or computers for economic reasons and infrastructure, owing to power outages, displacement, regular air raids and missile attacks, and military service. When almost one-third of the population is on the move either as internally displaced or as refugees in multiple countries with different political and migration regimes and registrations, it is difficult to have any informed judgement about the representativeness of the sample. Ukrainian scholars have called for open academic discussions on the challenges and new conceptualizations of acquired experiences.[5] They stressed that one should be open to two

major challenges: representativeness of the sample and extremely rapid changes that might make research outcomes irrelevant in a very short period. This often provides little space for a thorough methodological preparation and reflection. However, they make it possible to obtain information about a population's needs and trends in public opinion (Paniotto 2023). Others argue that to ensure authoritative knowledge about the Russia–Ukraine war, scholars should restrain from a growing number of ad hoc studies that often "utilize weak designs, have limited data quality, and sacrifice participant and researcher safety. The methodological pitfalls of attempting to collect data too rapidly amidst the conflict's dynamism have also been seen when survey questions have proven irrelevant or inaccurate by the time they have been fielded" (Howlett and Lazarenko 2023, 726).

The possibility of conducting face-to-face surveys in occupied territories raises even more questions. First, it requires conducting them through trust networks, following quota or snowball techniques with anonymized questionnaires. However, this technique might lead to unpredictable bias in the sample. In both methods, respondents might be afraid that they have been contacted not by researchers but by military or secret services that check their loyalty. This might have influenced their openness, especially regarding sensitive questions.

Individuals involved in evidence collection must have the skills and knowledge of how to conduct research in occupied territories or war zones, how to protect data (including digital encryption and protection), how to interview people where the "spiral of silence" is at work due to fear and uncertainty, how to look for the voice of the minority groups when they opt for silence and invisibility due to social pressure and stigmatization, and how to talk to people who are traumatized by war or forced displacement.

Under such conditions, it is difficult to perform routine quality control procedures during the fieldwork. This does not mean that quantitative studies are not possible in a war zone, but by employing them, one must understand all the limitations with sampling, response rate, the dangers of fieldwork, and the limits to which issues can be discussed without putting respondents in a life-threatening situation. All these issues are usually discussed in academic publications, so readers can assess the limitations of the presented data that are often missing in policy reports. Therefore, it is important to prepare peace practitioners and journalists to understand these limitations and avoid taking the results for granted.

Furthermore, surveys are designed to provide a distribution of answers to questions that have already been established in public opinion. However, can one talk about public opinion in the environment in the absence of free media and freedom of speech in occupied territories or in a society living with unfolding, full-scale aggression? The situation in the war zone or occupied territories is that active conflict is characterized by high dynamics and a significant level of uncertainty. Therefore, the sociologist cannot formulate questions that are settled or finalized, nor can the respondents able to provide clear answers while located in the turmoil of war in an uncertain situation. Moreover, having a clear position under such conditions can pose a direct threat to their lives. It is important to understand the ethical and methodological challenges that are often present in quantitative research designs and adapt instruments to the given environment. This highlights the need for debate on the ethics and methodologies of obtaining knowledge in the conditions of social conflict, war, and authoritarian and totalitarian states.

The choice in favor of more flexible qualitative methodologies or ethnographic research (Millar 2018, 2021) is also a challenge. Flexible research methodologies allow us to make changes in the research tools in the course of the fieldwork to follow the respondent, but at the same time they pose many questions about the safety of the researcher and the research participant, which encourages reflection on the influence of researchers (e.g., how they are identified by the respondents) on the outcome of the study. It is important to discuss the difficulties involved in finding study participants, their availability, and reasons for agreeing to participate. Individual formats of cooperation between researchers and research participants have become much more important because they can create an atmosphere of trust and allow participants to speak more openly and in detail about their experiences, which are often personal or psychologically difficult. However, collective forms of

flexible methodologies (focus groups, dyadic interviews) are problematic when employed in societies in occupied or war-affected areas. These groups of people may face denunciations; they live under the conditions of distrust of anyone in their immediate surroundings and, therefore, may perceive other participants as a potential threat. This encourages researchers to reflect on their methodology and acquire knowledge on how to obtain, transmit, and protect the collected information. When discussing threats and risks to research participants, we should not forget the problem of storing and protecting the collected data. It is important to remember that the recordings had an identifiable voice of the respondents and that their narratives often contained many personal details that might disclose their identity. These challenges must encourage researchers to work with experts in the field of information technology and data to develop locally specific protocols for preservation during fieldwork. Working on data protection, one should also consider the future challenges of data archiving, access, and publication, imagining the possible consequences and limitations.

Researchers also face other challenges related to infrastructure such as obtaining permits and accessing certain areas. Research on war has been conducted in areas with destroyed infrastructure, poor roads, and varying degrees of security and control. Such studies requires important permits, which are provided by groups that control the area and perform governmental functions. Acquiring permission may mean that the researcher must compromise the range of questions asked or the groups of respondents that can be accessed. Permission-giving authorities may require the researcher to submit collected data for "loyalty control," which is ethically unacceptable. Often, safe movement in those territories requires direct contact with various international organizations that monitor the situation and can provide information on the level of danger. To give a few examples, in March 2015 a fieldwork study (of in-depth interviews) on trust that was conducted in Crimea had to be interrupted because our interviewer was caught and interrogated by Russian FSB officials.[6] In another study, the initial plan was for research participants from temporarily occupied territories to include unsuccessful cases of resettlement—that is, those who returned home. Being afraid of possible persecutions from the Russian government, all respondents approached in Crimea refused to talk if their stories were to be recorded. Local sociologists were hired to win the trust of respondents in these territories, but this did not work.[7] Moreover, in interviews with both the researcher "insider" and "outsider," participants generally avoided detailed descriptions of their experiences in Russia. This calls into question the common recommendation of involving local researchers to ensure better access to the study participants. The intersectoral collaboration model is more productive under these conditions. By involving various actors (external and internal researchers, civil society representatives, peacebuilding practitioners, etc.) in the implementation of a project, various identities in the research process can be activated, opening the way to potential participants and creating the necessary conditions of trust and openness. Such collaboration is equally important at the stage of interpretation of the collected data because the researcher, who is not rooted in the context, in most cases does not read clichés, intertextual borrowings, or sarcasm and is not sensitive to degrees of reticence.

However, many scholars who are conducting research in war-affected societies have voiced growing concern about the current tendencies of increasing bureaucratization of Ethical Boards and West-prismatic approaches embedded in their regulations and practices (Drolet et al. 2023; Robson and Malette 2023). Reacting to the growing number of studies focusing on societies in war or vulnerable groups, such as refugees, trying to combat ad hoc projects without thorough method-ological preparation, reflections, and trauma-related training, Ethical Boards across the EU tend to require increasing amounts of paperwork (a few months ago in Berlin, one of the authors of this article was invited to serve as a member of the Ethical Board, where applicants following all regulations ended by preparing a 130-page file). As a result, the fieldwork was delayed for several months. Moreover, in many cases university regulations in EU countries limit their employees' rights to conduct fieldwork in war-affected societies and require outsourcing it to local actors. The EU also strictly regulates data sharing with third parties in war-affected societies, which additionally

limits the access of Ukrainian scholars residing in Ukraine to the data that are collected from Ukrainian citizens outside Ukraine.

All the above-described challenges should not discourage scholars or practitioners from studying war-affected or authoritarian societies but should become grounds for new ethical protocols and the logic of research design and fieldwork. Overcoming these challenges requires additional research skills and knowledge, cooperation with all potential stakeholders, and careful consideration of the researcher's positionality and involvement in power asymmetries.

Researchers' Positioning Challenges

Many studies warn that attention must be paid to the positionality of the researcher both along the whole "research circle" and at the sociopolitical level (De Coning 2018; Millar 2018; Burlyuk 2021; Goetschel 2021; Burlyuk and Musliu 2023). In contrast to scholarly texts that engage in discussions on the positionality of the researcher and research design and how they influence research outcomes, policy papers or reports rarely articulate this issue. Even less attention has been paid to the influence of war on knowledge producers in domestic and international settings. In the social sciences, researchers often discuss the problem of the insider/outsider or native/ nonnative position of the researcher (Sherif 2001; Liu & Burnett 2022) and the distinct challenges that doing research in the context of the war pose for the researchers.

Often, in war conditions, only native researchers have access to the field for various reasons. Nonnative scholars cannot travel in war areas without notifying authorities and putting themselves and, more importantly, their participants, gatekeepers, etc. at grave risk. In many academic institutions in the EU and US administrations and, in some cases, Ethical Boards prohibit scholars from conducting research in war-affected countries. This incentivizes outsourcing of field research to local scholars and creates knowledge hierarchies.

Often the only possibility for nonnative researchers to conduct face-to-face or primary empirical research is in collaboration with native researchers. This leads to an asymmetric distribution of risks, shifting the risks in the field toward native researchers and research participants. In addition, when native researchers collect data and international experts are responsible for data analysis and presentation in the form of publications or policy reports a labor division may form.

In addition, researchers on the side of conflict are faced with a situation in which they are asked to fulfil the universal requirements and expectations of modern scientists. Kseniya Oksamytna (2023, 676), in her autobiographical study, illustrates that Ukrainian scholars since February 2022 are struggling to conduct research and maintain their productivity level to be able to compete with their colleagues in global academia while they perform physical work of surviving, cope with displacement emotional labor of worrying for nearest and dearest, and feel guilt for not doing enough for Ukraine, delivering care services, volunteering, and engaging in academic and policy discussions. What are the risks and ethical questions faced by native researchers? They often involve the outsourcing of risk and potential trauma to native researchers and asymmetrical power relations between native and nonnative scholars (e.g., nonnative researchers remain far away and safe and might have greater financial resources than native researchers who are doing heavy and risky jobs empirically, emotionally, and ethically). Many of our Ukrainian colleagues and social scholars admitted that they temporarily lost their voice—they had emotional barriers and could not return to fieldwork or public podiums for weeks or months. They struggled between feelings of guilt that they as experts were not doing much of their required professional duties and the impossibility of talking about the war.

Glasius also reminds us that societies run on social networks everywhere; however, in authoritarian or war-affected societies, social networks of trust become increasingly important (Glasius et al. 2018). Therefore, obtaining meaningful information when one is in a stranger position is unlikely. In smaller communities in occupied territories that are often depopulated, people are

easily observed and recognized. Moreover, if a researcher or research team does not understand local sensitivities, they may overlook the biases that their research produces.

Similarly, local knowledge was important when interpreting respondents' narratives and answers. Their answers cannot be simply interpreted as facts but must be contextualized and weighted against media and propaganda narratives. A great degree of contextualized knowledge is necessary for interpreting such research outcomes. In analyzing similar answers, researchers should look for additional ways to verify them as well as understanding the empirical potential of such stories. Even if answers are not factual per se, they are facts of the everyday reality of the research participants that affect their behaviors, actions, choices, etc. If interpreted correctly, this information can be useful for deeper understanding, as it allows us to reconstruct cultural patterns in the way the representatives of the group under study construct their everyday reality. Accordingly, we can identify inconsistencies in the explanatory models of events and obtain important information for choosing the practical steps.

The researcher largely depends on their knowledge of the context of the study area. Having a personal connection with the territory opens access to much larger circles in society and allows them to work more actively with potential "conductors" in the field, especially when scholars are working in occupied territories. Good knowledge of the context also helps to fine-tune the language of the interview and find proper wording to better understand the thoughts and motivations of the main actors and to use appropriate vocabulary and labels. However, the rootedness in the society under study can be problematic. For example, it is more difficult for native researchers to remain unlabeled by participants, who can identify them as representatives or sympathizers of one of the conflicting sides using various indicators; they can even denounce them to the police or security service. There is also the danger of reading too much into the words of a research participant, omitting some issues and recoding the meaning with one's own interpretation of the research participant's words. Such pitfalls are common to all researchers, but they pose a greater threat to those rooted in the context and are involved in conflict to varying degrees. Understanding this makes it necessary to verify the interpretation. One solution was to return to the participants and discuss their interpretations. However, this could be difficult to accomplish under wartime conditions because it might require a native scholar to return to dangerous locations or, in some cases, lead to retraumatization.

Another problematic situation (equally difficult for both native and nonnative researchers but more acute for locals who stay in the community) is when participants perceive themselves as mediators who can inform stakeholders about the research participant's problems or as persons who can provide some assistance. Research on the most urgent needs of interlocutors rarely leads to immediate resolution. Understanding these nuances is very important in building a trusting relationship, and special attention must be given to the introductory part of the interview when the researcher clearly states the functions, roles, and objectives of the project. If this is not done, study participants will feel deceived when their expectations of receiving a reaction or help are unfounded.

Research involving systematic work with the traumatic experiences of other people, their experiences of war, loss, uncertainty, and lack of prospects is also traumatic for the researcher. Accordingly, the researcher must have the skills to work with relevant groups of the population, as well as access to programs for psychological rehabilitation; however, such skills are rarely available in war-affected societies.

In addition to the challenges that relate to fieldwork, researchers from a war-affected society are facing other challenges in knowledge dissemination that arise from the expectations of international academia about what knowledge is more valuable. Above, we discuss epistemological and terminological hierarchies, but there are also hierarchies associated with producing impressions and assessments that research that is conducted by scholars or institutions that are external to the conflict is often automatically valued as being allegedly more neutral and therefore more

trustworthy (Reus-Smit and Snidal 2008; Goetschel and Hagmann 2009; Sending 2009; Leonardsson and Rudd 2015; Convergne 2016; Burlyuk & Musliu 2023).

It is expected that the autonomy of the researcher must be manifested through distance from the conflict and noninvolvement in the discourses of the warring parties, thus maintaining the highest possible level of neutrality during assessments, using adequate vocabulary, and putting empathy for one side of the conflict aside. In general, this creates a complex internal conflict for the researcher, which can manifest itself in a role conflict between the researcher and the citizen. However, Ukrainian scholars (Burlyuk & Musliu 2023; Howlett & Lazarenko 2023; Kurylo 2023; Oksamytna 2023; Tsymbalyuk 2023) following the debates on the hierarchies and inequalities of global and local expertise (Mälksoo 2022) call for deconstructing myths of objectivity because knowledge is always positional regardless of whether it comes from privileged outsiders or native scholars. They call to "re-centre knowledge that comes from the suffering" (Tsymbalyuk 2023, 698), to be aware of "westsplaining as a form of silencing" more collaboration and coauthorship with academics from the Global East and South (Oksamytna 2023, 681), and to prioritize knowledge about intersubjective meaning-making that happens in everyday and the small-scale acts of resistance to discourses and actions of domestic elites (Kurylo 2023, 688).

Native scholars are constantly confronted with double pressure. On one hand, they face pressure from social and political groups that try to censor information on the conflict (both inside and outside the country). There is tension between the protective reaction of some social groups to the ongoing war, which results in a demand to classify certain subjects as sensitive or potentially dangerous for the people or state security or inappropriate for public debate, and the need for scholars to monitor the situation in all its complexity. In recent years, some Ukrainian sociologists have suffered from their labeling of certain questions or topics as "separatist," which caused their research programs to become subjected to a security service inquiry (Radio Svoboda 2019a, 2019b). In a sense, the field of what is possible to study or present publicly to researchers has narrowed. As Goetschel argues, "power will encounter more suspicion when political tensions prevail in the local context, both generically and as part of the politics of intervention and wider conflict dynamics. This may trigger reactions ranging from 'shrinking spaces' for researchers to the promotion of 'alternative facts' as a counter-version to scientific results (or facts)" (2021, 41). For example, after the security service and media scandal about asking the "inappropriate" question about the cultural and political proximity of Ukraine and Russia, labeled as separatist, many sociological agencies would refuse to include similar wordings in the questionnaire or if they would ask not to present results publicly if they would agree to do a survey. Moreover, many studies have been conducted on temporarily occupied territories, but they have only been released within a small circle of experts to protect researchers or informants. On the other hand, one should note that war-free societies face similar challenges and identity wars, but perhaps of lower intensity.

Another challenge for local scholars and experts is how to reconcile the scholarly need to hear different voices and, later, how to represent them (remembering that neither you yourself nor the audience to which you report your results is neutral) with their own sense of social responsibility. In the case of Ukraine, a very telling moment was an open discussion between leading Ukrainian sociologist Volodymyr Paniotto and his Russian colleagues after he refused to participate in a joint research project. Paniotto argued that what was intended to be a liberal attempt to describe the current situation might, in a way, legitimize Putin's occupation of Crimea. His argument was that even if the Russian "Open Opinion" project, which invited him to take part in the research of opinions in Crimea, promised to consider the criticism and correct the mistakes he made about their studies earlier, this would produce distorted results ("I do not understand why we should study public opinion formed through deception") in support of Putin's regime (Annitova 2016).

However, the duality of the choice between native/local and nonnative in the context of conflict and war appears artificial. One could think of this as a spectrum in which scholars simultaneously navigate competing roles. That is not to say that the categories of native and nonnative do not exist

but are rather artificial. Even insiders navigate problems associated with being external (on this point, see Zhao 2017), but being an outsider does not entail insurmountable barriers.

Neither position is self-sufficient, nor is it generally sufficient for deep and truthful empirical research. One possible solution would be to alternate the insider's role with the outsider's role. However, few scholars have had opportunities or resources for constant role changes. Another solution would be to create research partnerships combining certain advantages of both profiles or the creation of interdisciplinary and intersectional collaborative teams (which could be composed of native and nonnative researchers). This would activate different identities and make the field more open to different views and to organizing a permanent feedback loop throughout the study. For example, in several of our studies (Mikheieva and Sereda 2015; Mikheieva, Myronovych, and Sereda 2016; Kuznetsova and Mikheieva 2020; Mikheieva 2021) we had a team that represented scholars of different nationalities from different parts of Ukraine and outside, IDPs, and non-IDPs. Based on the premise that knowledge is positional, we discussed how our backgrounds, perceptions of the situation, and interactions with interlocutors shaped our outcomes. Very important for us were self-reflective debriefings during the fieldwork that helped us navigate better through the challenges of data collection and served as emotional support for the researchers involved. Especially valuable were triangulations of text analysis when each would read the same selection of interviews and later compare the findings. These collaborative experiences taught us that the active reflexivity of one's own positionality is the cornerstone of ethical and sensitive knowledge production that helps minimize hierarchies, biases, or trauma.

However, team diversity does not automatically lead to critical self-monitoring and reflection on participants' positionality and conflict sensitivity (or ethical dimensions), which are of particular relevance in war-affected contexts. Identities and different positionalities involved in intersectional and interdisciplinary collaborations in a research team should be questioned (Rashmi and Majumdar 2020, 180–181) as well as who might be potential bearers of these identities and positionalities in the context of a particular study. It is important to understand that researchers might become part of the conflict context through the power relations embedded in their academic institutional affiliations and the terminologies they use. There is little awareness of the implications that this might have for their partners and the influence of their research results. There are many situations in which research tools and methodologies are given from above, native scholars are included into the cooperation networks to gain access to the population ("give us your contacts") or not included among coauthors of reports or academic publications.

Participants' Responses: In between Objects and Subjects?

When we study conflict and war-affected societies, we must realize that mere declarations of sensitivity toward research participants are insufficient. The relationship between the researcher and the participant often has a pronounced asymmetry. Researchers often come with a predefined understanding of the conflict, hypotheses, and set of questions and often (especially international researchers) have better access to resources and the possibility of leaving insecure locations. The participants are in a vulnerable position and threatened with facing the negative consequences of their participation in the study. They are expected to respond spontaneously to questions concerning the painful aspects of everyday life within a conflict or under military occupation and uncomfortable uncertainty.

Awareness of this asymmetry of power is evident in academic discussions on how to refer to the research participants: "respondent," "informant," "interlocutor," or "research participant." This debate testifies to an understanding of the problematic nature of such hierarchies in which the "superior" and often well-resourced researcher examines the "inferior" and vulnerable conflict-affected people who continue to be at risk. This issue is not as much about terminology as attempting to bridge the gap between the declared humanism of scientific knowledge and the power hierarchies of field research. It is important for researchers to renegotiate their identities and

positionality with their interlocutors and be ready to address questions of power discrepancies. It is essential to choose modes of communication in which participants are treated as active actors whose agency is recognized. They defined the wording and direction of the conversation. Axyonova and Lozka (2023) called this "reflexive interviewing."

One of the constants of ethical research is the signing of or receiving verbal informed consent from study participants. However, this is insufficient when conducting research under wartime conditions. People are often unaware of the possible consequences of their involvement in research, and it is the researcher's duty to warn them. For example, in one study (Mikheieva 2019) that included in-depth interviews with residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions divided by the demarcation line, we moved on to signing the informed consent form and all other documents with participants only after more than a half-hour discussion about potential risks.

The researcher was ready for refusal to answer certain questions by the study participants. A lack of responses may be caused not only by participants' reluctance to speak on the subject or a feeling of fear but also by the fact that people may be traumatized, unable to talk about their experience at all, or unable to articulate something that causes strong feelings of pain, fear, and so on. In one of our studies (Mikheieva, Myronovych, and Sereda 2016; Mikheieva 2021), men who lost limbs refused to be interviewed regarding their experience of war. This refusal was systematic, forcing us to think that the researcher would not have access to all experiences of war because the opinions of certain groups would be left out for various reasons. Understanding this is important for planning and interpreting the research outcomes. All these issues highlight the need for methodological and theoretical cooperation between sociologists, psychologists, peacekeeping groups, and policy makers when working in a conflict zone, as the empirical and interpretive tools of only one of these disciplines are clearly insufficient for organizing and conducting research and analyzing the data.

The peculiarity of the experiences of different groups of people during war also requires special attention. Owing to the significant difference between men's and women's experiences of war, gender sensitivity has become especially important. For example, in the Ukrainian context, widespread patriarchal notions of the defender's traditional male role have led to accusations against men who refused to participate in armed conflict (Mikheieva 2020a). Women's experiences of war have their own specifics, where the feeling of danger is intensified by threats such as rape, dependence, and enforcement. However, in the context of the patriarchal perception of reality demonstrated by the occupants in Ukraine, women are perceived as less dangerous. This provides them with the possibility of demonstrating disobedience at another level and a wider range of other resilience activities. An even greater challenge is researching children's experiences of war, the study of which requires careful training and the cooperation of specialists in various fields, obtaining parental permission, ethical reflection, and an understanding of how to protect the child from retraumatization. It is especially difficult to study children who are affected by shelling, as they often experience not only psychological trauma but also physical injuries and acquired disabilities. Working with the wounded becomes an even larger problem. In this case, the researcher is faced with another ethical choice: finding a balance between the need to inform society about problems and finding a form of maximum protection for this category of research participants.

The primary ethical principle of minimizing power hierarchies in the research process fundamentally changes the procedure for preparing and conducting research. This is especially important when one uses the qualitative paradigm, which is most appropriate for studying war-affected societies. The return of the researcher to the group of research participants to verify interpretations allows us to move away from power hierarchies and simplistic dualities and to understanding the complex, unstructured, multifaceted, and multilayered nature of the reality of the context.

Challenges Related to the Dissemination and Implementation of Research Outcomes

The final stage of the knowledge production cycle is the communication, dissemination, and practical implementation of outcomes, which contributes to the development of new theoretical

knowledge and policy interventions. In many cases, drawing a clear line between policy and academic research is difficult. However, it is important to reflect on some differences in the circulation of knowledge produced in war-affected societies in academia and the policy-making community. Both are feeding the media discourse and could possibly cause the knowledge distortion.

The most frequently discussed are difficulties in maintaining intellectual integrity, freedom to choose the topic or to be critical of the government (Eriksson and Sundelius 2005; Walt 2005), the "biases of false certainty and overconfidence" built into the advisory system (Krasner et al. 2009, 122), and the requirement to communicate research outcomes briefly and clearly (Paris 2011). A particularly important consideration in the dissemination of research findings in war-affected societies is ethical. Several complications were also observed. First, the ethicality of research implies the complexity of knowledge production and representation. Briefly and clearly communicated research outcomes in policy notes or reports often exclude descriptions of fieldwork uncertainties, limitations, embedded threats, possible traumas of researchers or research participants, and interpretation complexities. Depending on the audience and purpose, they either lack methodological descriptions or limit them to brief generalized accounts (Tronc and Nahikian 2020; Amnesty International 2022), which makes it difficult to assess the reliability and limitations of the collected data. Moreover, as discussed above, the emergence of international expertise is prone to epistemic superimposition/injustice/superiority (Burlyuk and Musliu 2023; Dutkiewicz and Smolenski 2023). Such superficial and decontextualized findings produce distorted knowledge. Being open to the public, these reports are often the source of further policy and media reports, with even fewer discussions of data uncertainties and limitations.

We would like to add to this discussion by highlighting the few additional but crucial differences between policy-driven research and academic research. First, both academic and policy-oriented communities have built-in mechanisms that ensure at least some level of research quality, personal engagement, and conflict sensitivity checks (a Code of Ethics or Institutional Review Board); however, in the academic sphere, they are more institutionalized and perceived as obligatory. One crucial difference is blind peer review, which is obligatory for academic publications but less widespread in policy briefs and reports. Policy research and evaluation of interventions are entrusted to external monitoring groups, think tanks, and professionalized NGOs that have less developed tools for quality monitoring (Leonardsson and Rudd 2015; Convergne 2016). Moreover, the expected format of the presentation of the results (academic papers, policy briefs, and reports) is based on different styles of communicating information to audiences. Academic publications seek to preserve the debatable nature of the knowledge produced and the phenomena described in their entire complexity. Policy briefs and reports, on the other hand, require clear, concise, unambiguous statements that are directed at a wide audience of potential stakeholders. Academic publications require a detailed description of the knowledge production procedure, which is not a mandatory requirement in a policy brief or a report. If this becomes an additional debatable issue in academic publications, this information is often perceived as unnecessary and overloading reports. This does not necessarily imply that research conducted outside of academia is less reliable. However, it provides more space for (un)intended distortions and misinterpretations. Scientific research strives for a high degree of legitimacy and acceptance based on its methodological and theoretical rigor, but it is not free of subjectivity at various levels, such as the influence of epistemological and ontological hierarchies, academic institutions, funding agencies, and local stakeholders, especially when their social environment is characterized by political tensions or protracted military conflict (Jones 2018, 7). Nevertheless, there are some built-in national and international mechanisms that help address these problems.

Dissemination of research outcomes in academic and nonacademic environments also occurs in distinct ways. In academia, the main venues for the dissemination of research outcomes are professional conferences and academic journals, the access to which is often limited and paid for services. The waiting time for academic publications is 1–3 years, which makes the results of

research difficult to access and often outdated for policies. In contrast, research outcomes produced by policy-related actors that, in many cases, lack quality or subjectivity checks are disseminated openly and intensively. Many funding institutions have special requirements for the widest possible dissemination of the results and media coverage. Consequently, policy papers concerning conflict and war situations flood the information channels. This knowledge not only influences the character of future peace or policy interventions but also feeds public opinion and attitudes toward those societies or displaced groups. As a result, they can easily feed into media framing and instrumentalized propaganda narratives. As was the case with the Amnesty International Report on Ukraine in 2022, the group accused Ukraine's armed forces of endangering civilians and supporting Russian narratives concerning the invasion and unethical collection of evidence on occupied territories and in filtration camps (Pecheniuk 2022).

Moreover, these policy and media reports gain legitimacy from internally produced knowledge and become an important source for external actors such as the general public, researchers, and practitioners who wish to learn about the conflict. However, scientific knowledge (and open access to it) is lacking, which might help assess social phenomena and processes on a different basis, which will also influence different types of narratives (academic, political, and public). Tyushka (2023, 652) argues that "one can speak of such contexts of collateral knowledge distortion, which refers to the unintended or indirect consequences of knowledge distortion. Thus, it occurs when (already) distorted information or knowledge in one area is used to produce knowledge in another area or on an issue matter, creating a spillover effect for the understanding and analysis of complex, multi-layered, multi-causal, and fluid phenomena."

Conclusions

This article is intended to stimulate discussion about the specifics and ethical dimensions of knowledge production in war-affected areas, from all stages of fieldwork to outcome dissemination.

In times of war, the knowledge of society is of particular importance. On one hand, researchers face several theoretical, methodological, communication, and ethical challenges that slow down the research process and bring into question the reliability of the results. On the other hand, the time from knowledge production to implementation is rapidly shortened, as a crisis situation requires a quick response. Such conditions of knowledge production increase the risk of errors and lead to a significant increase in researchers' professional and social responsibilities. Under these conditions, the importance of metascience (the study of knowledge) increases. A detailed examination of the knowledge-production process discussed in this article, including all possible challenges and disadvantages, generates knowledge that is mostly left out of publication and discussion.

Even if such discussions occur in literature on local and practical turns of peace and conflict research (de Coning 2018; Millar 2018; Goetschel 2021), they focus more on conflict sensitivity and power relations and less on how the empirical evidence is produced including issues around naming and framing, research design, data collection, and participants' response in war-affected societies and what are the main ethical challenges.

Theoretical concepts form knowledge of the world. However, in times of war, uncertainty, and a rapidly changing context, these frameworks for perceiving and describing reality are blurred and transformed along with the context. Our analysis shows that the choice of terminology in such circumstances goes beyond academic discourse and becomes part of competing discourses that pretend to describe reality and in turn shape different perceptions and interpretations of the situation, thus becoming less of an academic than a political choice. Researchers often must make a situational choice concerning the terminology used to describe the conflict, which is required by international organizations and agreements, the terminology officially approved at the level of the conflicting states, and their numerous reflections in the media and at the level of individual social groups. The choice of the conceptual framework and terminology determines the research design and identifies conflicts in a particular way. This leads to a situation where a researcher consciously

or unconsciously compromises the academic value of neutrality. This highlights the importance of disclosing the researcher's positionality and fieldwork limitations when the outcomes are presented.

The study of everyday life in extreme conditions requires the search for new flexible methodologies as well as rethinking the researcher's positionality toward conflict and finding possibilities to involve diverse actors who may voice various identities and knowledge/power positions in the process of knowledge production and dissemination. The process of obtaining knowledge, from the formulation of the study idea to the publication of the results, requires a new quality of interdisciplinarity, intersectionality, and awareness of limitations. Ultimately, this will improve the quality of knowledge verification procedures and minimize the influence of inequalities and hierarchies and their associated risks of distortion or misinterpretation of data. We suggest potential solutions to these challenges, including interdisciplinary collaboration, research partnerships, and self-reflective debriefings within the research teams. This highlights the need for ethical considerations throughout the research process, from data collection to dissemination. Overall, the text provides insights into the complex nature of conducting research in conflict zones and the ethical responsibilities researchers bear in these contexts.

We also explored the academic and political challenges in disseminating research findings, highlighting the differences between academic and policy-driven research. In this context, debates on the ethical implications of presenting research outcomes in a simplified manner for policy briefs, potentially distorting the complexity of the phenomena studied, are particularly important. The challenges of quality monitoring and the differences in results between academic publications and policy briefs are also highlighted.

Research on war-affected societies requires a deeper reflection on the ethical responsibility of any agent involved in knowledge production. Possible significant distortions at all stages of the research raise questions regarding the reliability of the results obtained, which must be clarified in any presentation of the research outcomes. A detailed description of all limitations should be included in not only academic publications but also all types of evidence production (project and policy reports, evaluation notes, press releases, etc.). National and international public opinion is shaped by media discourse, which is filled with knowledge that is produced by academic scholars, civil society representatives, and political and peace-making practitioners. An awareness of the problems and challenges of such interactions is crucial for the growth of the necessary knowledge and expertise of all the actors in the peace process.

Notes

1 Since January 18, 2018, the Ukrainian law "About features of state policy on ensuring the state sovereignty of Ukraine in temporarily occupied territories in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions" (http://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2268-19) recognizes so-called L/DPR as occupational administrations of the Russian Federation in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

2 Intersectionality, originating within antiracist feminism (Crenshaw 1991), has been used in the social sciences to address the relationship between different social categories such as gender, race, age, sexuality, ability, and others. We argue that an intersectional lens is very valuable for critically exploring inequalities of displaced or war-affected populations.

3 For a more detailed discussion of specific of ethical research in authoritarian and war-affected societies, see Marlies at al. (2018) and Howlett & Lazarenko (2023).

4 A detailed discussion on "The Perils and Benefits of Surveying in a Conflict Zone: Cautionary Tales and Results from Donbas 2020–2022." See as part of the ZOiS Lecture Series in cooperation with Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, May 19, 2022, https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/mediathek/zois-lecture-series-ukraine/the-perils-and-benefits-of-surveying-in-a-conflict-zone-cautionary-tales-and-results-from-donbas-2020-2022.

5 A discussion on session devoted to methodologies, "Opening the Black Box of War," as a part of the ZOiS 2023 annual conference, November 17, 2023, https://www.zois-berlin.de/zois-conference-2023-intern/abstracts/session-1-opening-the-black-box-of-war-1.

6 Project "Trust in Insecure Environments: The Case of the Crimean Tartars 2015," funded by the Center for Governance and Culture in the Europe university of St.Gallen conducted from March to April 2015. For more details, see Qualitative in-depth interviews. Projects, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/358987555_Qualitative_in-depth_interviews_Projects.

7 Project "Displaced Cultural Spaces: Current Ukrainian Refugees," funded by the Centre for Governance and Culture in the Europe university of St.Gallen and conducted from June to August 2016, http://www.uaregio.org/en/about/stage-6/.

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