

Conducting Research in Difficult, Dangerous, and/or Vulnerable Contexts: Messy Narratives From the Field

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Abstract

Organizational communication scholars have historically conducted research in large for-profit businesses, governmental agencies, and a few high-profile nonprofits/NGOs—all of which are relatively easy to access and presumably “safe” to study. It is largely unsurprising, then, that limited scholarship addresses the challenges associated with conducting research in less standard contexts that are often perceived to be difficult, dangerous, and/or vulnerable (DDV). In this forum, we offer lived stories—unfiltered messy narratives—to

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demystify three core ethical challenges inherent in conducting research of this nature and share how we (imperfectly) navigated them. In addition, we offer *practical strategies* for conducting research in DDV contexts. Taken together, our overall collective aim is to successfully prepare future scholars to conduct research projects in DDV contexts.

Keywords

Access, fieldwork, ethnography, interviewing, risk

“Are you sure that you really want to do this? You know how hard it is going to be, right? Getting it through IRB will be a total nightmare. You have your whole career to do this kind of work...maybe you should just pick something a little bit easier for your dissertation.”

~ One author’s recollection of a senior scholar’s advice regarding their dissertation

Disheartened. Dismissed. Discouraged. Disappointed. And yet, “Decidedly determined to not come undone” (Peterson, Harter, Walker, Forthcoming). Having a senior scholar dissuade you from doing the very thing that beckons your soul is crushing. Certainly, this scholar and others like them did not intend to smash dreams; rather, they sought to offer sound advice to a young scholar just starting their career. Who could fault these scholars for offering these words of wisdom as the road to conducting research in “difficult,” “dangerous,” or “vulnerable” contexts (DDVs) has been largely undocumented in our discipline? It is a tough path to navigate without any charts. And yet this author, like the rest of the participants in this forum, persisted. We pressed through challenges and pursued projects that moved us, the ones we could not let go.

Organizational communication scholars have historically focused predominantly on large for-profit businesses, governmental agencies, and a few high-profile nonprofits/NGOs—all of which are relatively easy to access and presumably “safe” to study (i.e., present minimal threat of physical or emotional harm to researchers or participants). It is largely unsurprising, then, that limited scholarship addresses the challenges associated with conducting research in less standard DDV contexts. Yet, those challenges exist. Accordingly, our goal herein is two-fold. First, we offer real stories—unfiltered messy narratives—to *demystify three core ethical challenges* inherent in conducting research of this nature and share how we (imperfectly) navigated them. Second, we offer *practical strategies* for conducting research in DDV

contexts. Taken together, our overall collective aim is to successfully prepare future scholars to conduct research projects in DDV contexts.

We begin by defining what we mean by “difficult,” “dangerous,” and/or “vulnerable” contexts and describe three ethical exigencies inherent in conducting research in DDVs: identity, emotional safety, and physical protection. For each ethical challenge, we offer stories—penned by the authors—where we invite readers to experience the events as we lived them. Next, we share our strategies for navigating challenges of access, collapsing role boundaries, and the physical and emotional weight of this work. In the end, we do not strive to tie up all of the loose ends of our stories; rather, we let the ethical unsettlings linger. And even though we conclude by sharing wisdom and recommendations rooted in our lived experiences, we do not profess to have all of the answers.

Difficult, Dangerous, or Vulnerable Contexts

Difficult, dangerous, and vulnerable. These are weighty words, which we decidedly attribute to contexts, not people.¹ Below, we offer definitions of each term and in doing so introduce ourselves and our research contexts. To begin, researchers intuitively understand that some contexts are notoriously *difficult* or difficult to access. That is, scholars encounter barriers to entry as they try to gain access to these organizations and as they seek to secure university institutional review board (IRB) approval. And often, these two negotiations must occur simultaneously—as universities often will not approve projects without organizational support, even as research sites may only support university approved projects. Even when researchers have pre-established relationships with key gatekeepers, organizational access is not guaranteed. For instance, Michael, who has investigated a range of hidden organizations that are structured to protect secrets (e.g., intelligence agencies, human rights organizations, terrorist organizations, and secret police), was not able to secure direct access to the information he sought from organizations like the United States Department of State or Amnesty International (nor engage in discussions about them) even though he had personal connections to organizational members. Sometimes organizational barriers to entry force us to pivot and collect data outside of the walls of these difficult to access organizations. One such organization is Foxconn—the world’s largest electronics manufacturer, infamously known for exploitative labor practices and a high employee suicide rate. Jack and his research team spent several years studying Foxconn and other sweatshop employees in an effort understand their clandestine practices. Since Foxconn would not permit entrance without signed non-disclosure agreements, Jack and colleagues conducted their informal interviews outside of the factory where workers

would gather in openly accessible public spaces such as malls, squares, and cybercafes.

Several of our research contexts are also *dangerous*. In other words, many of us exposed ourselves to physical risks and put ourselves in harm's way, by simply being present in the spaces, countries, or organizations. For example, Oana looks at how human rights networks organize in conflict zones (e.g., Western Sahara, Lebanon, and Palestine). Later in this forum, she shares her close call that involved soldiers with machine guns in Tunis, Tunisia while studying activism and technology. Similarly, Sarah's work, in addition to putting her in contexts with difficult to access populations such as targets of workplace bullying and 9-1-1 emergency communication operators, has also placed her in contexts including prisons and jails.² Scholarship conducted in these total institutions is classified as dangerous given the close proximity among researchers, people who have been (rightfully or wrongfully) convicted of crimes, and correctional officers who attempt to manage and control incarcerated individuals. Brittany has become quite familiar with conducting research in prison organizations as she has spent time in prisons in several parts of the U.S. and Norway. Though she typically felt safe, Brittany recalls a moment when she was left alone in a locked, nearly windowless room with an incarcerated male who implied he would later picture her in his mind's eye when he masturbated. For a brief moment, she wondered if anyone would be able to intervene should something go awry.

Finally, many of the situations we describe below occur in highly *vulnerable* contexts, where the study participants are exposed based on their willingness to engage in dialog with researchers. For instance, Craig's interest in exploring the experiences of members of hidden organizations could create conditions of vulnerability for participants who reveal organizational secrets. These stakes were on full display in Darvelle's dissertation work where he focused on experiences of Black gay men in Black church organizing where homosexuality is often perceived to be a sin. As such, individuals who participate in same-sex intimate relations often secretly maintain their non-heterosexual identities under the "don't ask, don't tell" custom. Thus, participation in Darvelle's research created conditions of vulnerability as these individuals disclosed their identities and experiences to an academic researcher.

These labels are not mutually exclusive—as some research contexts comprise all three designations. For instance, Kirsten's research on cross-sector collaboration within efforts to counter human trafficking requires trust-building with law enforcement agents and survivors alike—where both groups are difficult to access. Additionally, these groups share a reluctance to interact with social researchers for multiple reasons, including fears that they will be misunderstood and/or misrepresented (i.e.,

vulnerable context) and concerns for their own or others' safety (i.e., dangerous context).

Collectively, we have explored DDV research sites including conflict zones, politically repressive environments, authoritarian states, total institutions, as well as sweatshops, and various other hidden organizations.³ Our work encompasses studies of extremist and terrorist groups, activists, social movements, as well as socially stigmatized and/or incarcerated individuals. We examine issues related to human trafficking, bullying, human rights, and organizing amid crises. Yet even with all these decades of lived experience, we continue to find ourselves constantly challenged by the emergent exigencies that confront us, unsettled by the impromptu decisions we must make to protect ourselves and those around us, and sometimes haunted by the lingering implications of our choices. In what follows, we aim to share those challenges, own paths for navigating them, and suggestions and support for other scholars considering research in DDV contexts.

The Ethical Exigencies of Researching With/in DDV Contexts

If you identify as field researcher, there are moments that will never leave you. They live in your bones, rattling and reverberating through your system. They can be resurrected unexpectedly, decades after the initial encounter, and bring about a visceral, corporeal response—a response that is at times embraced and at other times reviled. These moments, and the embedded exigencies, invite (force? compel?) us to make decisions, often with great urgency, under extreme duress, and in the face of intense consequences.

Entering DDV contexts involves ethical dilemmas that are rarely covered in methods texts. Meisenbach (2017) reminded us that as researchers we bring varied ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions to our field research settings, which shape our decision-making processes, and as such, “*ethical assumptions* are inherently tied into human communication and organizing” (p. 147, emphasis added). Historically, scholarly understandings of ethics have been rooted in rationality—with researchers positing that we seek out justifications to support our actions, particularly when those actions conflict with our values (Plaisance, 2009). In recent years however, some of these assumptions have been upended as social psychologists and communication scholars alike have illustrated that ethical decision-making is not always a rational choice but is instead strongly influenced by our upbringing, cultural norms, and embedded communication patterns (e.g., Bisel, 2017; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). Still, even with this knowledge, we expect that as you read the narratives below you might question our choices because, truth be told, at times we question them ourselves.

The narratives Brittany solicited from the authors to inform this forum coalesced meaningfully into three core ethical exigencies of conducting

research in DDV contexts: a) identity, b) emotional safety, and c) physical protection.⁴ For each challenge, we highlight two in-depth narratives that epitomize the richness of the inherent ethical quagmires in order to prepare scholars to address the ones they might encounter in their own work.

Ethical Exigencies of Identity

Research in DDV contexts regularly challenged us to make identity-based decisions about “who we were” and the roles we played in the scene. We struggled to understand our identity/ies as scholars, participants, volunteers, aid workers, parents, siblings, and citizens—and really, just as people. One of the greatest challenges that affronted us was when the walls between our identity-laden roles were broken down—when we could no longer compartmentalize who we were as scholars in the scene and who we were outside of the DDV sites. In those situations, we wrestled with what part of our identity would “win out.” Like Jensen and colleagues (2020), we found that our social identities were not stagnant but moveable. At times, these decision points pitted what might be “best” for us as researchers against what might be “best” for us as people. In the worst-case scenarios, the ethical exigencies of identity forced us to choose between what was “best” for us versus what was “best” for our participants. Unfortunately, Darvelle often found himself struggling to resist the identities of counselor or confidant—identities that his participants wanted to ascribe to him but ones he worried would challenge his own capacities. Following Darvelle’s story, Brittany narrates the ethical unsettlings she experienced navigating the identities of researcher, mediator, mother, and sister of an inmate.

Darvelle’s Story

Setting the Scene. The stories below are ones I encountered during my dissertation project, where I examined the shared stigmatizing experiences of Black gay men (BGM) in Black Church organizing. BGM often feel torn between their allegiance to their Black churches, which form the cultural backbone of Black communities, and their desire to openly enact their non-heterosexual identities. Participants in my dissertation project appreciated my willingness to listen, my transparency, and the chance for them to be heard. For many BGM, the interviews were their first time opening up about their inner grapplings with their sexuality concerning their Black churches. Below, I share a bit about my conversation with Silas, a 27-year-old former member of a non-denominational Black Church, and how I navigated my competing identities of researcher, pastor, and friend after he alluded to his thoughts of suicide.

What Happened. The process of engaging in in-depth interviews with BGM was deeply emotional. When I asked Silas to provide more depth to his mental illness experience, he mentioned that it had been a few years since he last attempted suicide. Silas called me back a few days later and shared with me that he wanted to be honest and explained how his most recent attempt to take his own life was a couple of months before the interview. My heart broke, and I provided him the phone number of the National Suicide Hotline. Silas had assured me that he was in a good place and that the opportunity to talk through his lived experiences with me was far more beneficial than he had imagined. I struggled to find assurance that Silas would be okay because I had learned through other interviews that participants might engage in the performance of happiness to hide mental illness.

Like Silas, several other BGM called me after the interview to share other stories and experiences. One participant asked me if he and I could build a friendship and hang out, and another asked if I could provide a financial favor. He needed food and did not have the support of family and friends and hoped that I might be able to help. As much as I wanted to be all things for all of these beautiful souls, I found myself overwhelmed. Partway into data collection, I took a break from this dissertation project to pursue professional therapy.

In Retrospect. The emotional labor involved in listening, noting, and processing my research participants' lived experiences alone did not drive me to seek professional therapy. Before conducting this study, I had just experienced my oldest brother's passing during my last semester of doctoral coursework. I had put on hold the time necessary to grieve, to finish comprehensive exams, and to draft my dissertation proposal so that I could graduate a year early. I was caring for my mother long-distance, preparing for the academic job market, and publishing research. On top of all this, I had taken on the roles of therapist and friend for some of my participants—titles that I did not have the capacity nor strength to uphold, not effectively anyway.

I felt conflicted as a researcher because, after the interviews, participants were left to sit with feelings that they had not felt comfortable verbalizing before. Their lived experiences were powerful and provocative, and I so desperately wanted to hug each of these BGM as we shared tears. As the interviewer, the conversations I had with participants after the recording had stopped were even more powerful, thought-provoking, and in some instances, even unsettling. I struggled to unblur the lines of my commitment as a researcher and my commitment to my study participants. I wanted to save them from the misery of having to navigate life as "straight" due to sexual stigmas in U.S. society that are amplified in Black churches, Black families, and Black communities. I tried to revive them from members' hurtful words and deeds at their Black churches by concluding each interview with words of affirmation, strength, and hope.

As I reflect on my research on BGM in Black Church organizing, I would have liked to have been transparent with my participants about what they could expect from me throughout and after the research process to unblur and clarify the boundaries of my role as a researcher. I felt that I had opened up a wound and left my participants to care for it alone. I ghosted them. I was a struggling graduate student trained by some of the best in qualitative research methods and determined to advance the field by giving voice to the lived organizational realities of Blacks and other minoritized identity groups historically underrepresented in organizational communication research but quickly realized that I was ill-equipped for the challenges associated with researching hard-to-access populations and BGM in particular. It hurt me to know that someone needed my help for food, and I was not in a position to help. I prayed earnestly for Silas and wondered how I could live with myself if he had committed suicide and I had not done more than offer him the Suicide Prevention Hotline number. To this day, the stories shared by BGM remain in my thoughts, and the duty I feel to best represent their experiences through my work keeps me up many nights. This project taught me that the relationship between a researcher and participant can take on a life of its own.

Brittany's Story

Setting the Scene. The story below is situated in a prison nursery program where moms keep their babies with them in prison from just after birth to up to 3 years of age. In this program, Janet was the prison nursery program director, and Kacie and Allison were both incarcerated moms who had a long-standing feud with each other. While in the scene, I struggled mightily to navigate the push and pull between my, at times conflicted, identities as a scholar, a mother of young children, a conflict mediator...and as the sister of a former inmate. At times, these identity confluences felt like too much to bear, and I wrestled with the ethical implications of the identity/ies I enacted throughout the day.

What Happened. "If you hadn't been here, something else would have happened." The words came tumbling out of my co-researcher's mouth the minute we hit the record button to start our routine data dump debrief. She was right. If I had not been in the prison that day, one of the women would have most certainly been immediately dismissed (likely without investigation) from the program. As the story went, the night before we arrived at the prison a few of the moms were walking noisily down the hallway of the nursery wing. Unfortunately, they woke one of the sleeping children (Allison's son Gabe) and a fight ensued. At one point, Kacie entered Allison's room and "swiped" or "smacked" (depending on whom you ask) the pacifier from Gabe's mouth, and he immediately started screaming bloody murder. The next morning, Allison told Janet (the program director), what had happened the night before.

Janet lost it. I was chatting with one of the other moms in a semi-private room (none of them were really all that private because there were no ceilings in the nursery), when Janet burst in. "I need you to tell me what happened" she demanded of the mom I was interviewing. "I'm -bout to smack her" Janet went on, "I want to put her in handcuffs and drag her down to seg, she's getting kicked out. YOU CAN'T hit a baby!" Then she started crying and put her head down on my shoulder.

So I made a choice. I could see that Janet was livid and hurt and filled with both rage and desperation. "Janet" I said, "now would be a great time to give us a tour of the property. Let's take a ride and take a breath." She responded, "yeah, I need to get the hell out of here." During the tour I tried to help Janet to see that all stories are partial. Janet ultimately agreed to have a mediation meeting. After we all settled in, Janet turned to me and said, "so do you want to start?" Shock and discomfort rippled through my body. I had not intended to enact a conflict mediator identity in addition to being Janet's therapist, but I now had to make another choice. I could intervene to assist the process or decline to facilitate. After taking a quick beat to reset my own expectations, I employed several de-escalation and perspective-taking techniques. Ultimately, we collectively brought the women to a place where they agreed to be civil moving forward.

In Retrospect. The whole day (and particularly during and after the meeting), I just kept thinking, what if I had not been there today? As I oscillated through my varied identities, I mused: What is right? What is best? What is ethical? What is my role? I intervened and changed the outcome. Was that right? Best? For whom? I am still not certain what the "right" decision was in this circumstance. Was it right for me to use my knowledge as a communication professor to facilitate the conversation that day? I felt uncomfortable enacting that role in the moment, wholly unprepared and yet feeling as though I could not decline. A few short months later, Kacie was involved in yet another incident and this time got kicked out of the program. So again, I reflectively wondered whether or not I should have intervened that day. I still feel unsettled about the whole experience—but yet, I am not sure I would have done anything differently if given the chance.

The Ethical Exigencies of Emotional Safety

The next two exigencies that confronted us in the field are both anchored in our desire for self (and/or other) protection and preservation—first emotional and later corporeal. When working in difficult or dangerous contexts, we regularly found ourselves exposed or on full display. The emotional vulnerability in both Darvelle and Brittany's stories above was unmistakable—so

much so that Darvelle ultimately chose to leave the field for a time to care for his own emotional needs.

These innate tendencies toward protection are also on full display in the stories below. Sarah's narrative illustrates how even when she wanted to emotionally shut down and leave the scene because of extreme embarrassment, she was able to turn the experience into an opportunity for building trust and camaraderie. In Jack's story, the emotional stakes were more intense as he found himself managing his own fears during his encounter with a violent factory guard. In each encounter, there were mere moments or minutes to make a choice—to decide a path forward based on the emotional pressures that confronted them. In hindsight, the choices collectively anchored back to a deep desire for emotional safety.

Sarah's Story

Setting the Scene. For better or worse, embarrassing incidents in the field can trigger a researcher's fight, flight, and/or freeze responses. The story I share below, however, illustrates a different kind of response—one imbued with vulnerability. To create comfort for those in closed organizations and to help the participants trust the researcher, it is quite important for researchers to be vulnerable themselves. Take, for instance, one of the most embarrassing moments in my then 26 year-old history, which occurred about 5 months into my correctional officer fieldwork.

What Happened. Lt. Bernie Sands sat across from me behind a big desk, answering my questions about the ways correctional officers are trained to deal with the emotional highs and lows of the job. I was thrilled when he agreed to let me review some training videos, which he said I could grab from a low shelf behind me. After jumping up, and retrieving the videos, I turned back around to a then red-faced Lt Sands. I cocked my head in confusion, and he finally stammered, "Uh, um, you have a bit of a hole in your pants." I was aghast and hurried to the restroom where I discovered the entire back seam of my pants had ripped open, veiled until I stretched down to that bottom shelf. This level of research "transparency" was beyond either of our comfort levels.

So, what to do next? I was mortified for both of us, and I really just wanted to run out to the car and drive home. However, my desire for keeping a decent relationship with this key research participant overruled. After about 5 minutes of self-talk and reflecting on options, I side-stepped my way back to Lt. Sands' office with my back against the wall. When I returned back, he and I were able to share a laugh, and together found a sweatshirt to tie around my waist. He and I were able to work together in several meaningful ways in the coming months, even as I endured the scent of embarrassment during each interaction.

In Retrospect. Although I never would have purposefully orchestrated this situation, the embarrassment and vulnerability it evoked for both of us served as a bonding moment. In an instant, I went from being the “professional researcher” to being a fellow imperfect human being. Meanwhile, Sands went from being “the researched” to being a protective (if mortified) comrade. As I noted in a previous discussion about fieldwork,

I had spent most of my time in the facility up until then gazing upon and analyzing my participants, and in that moment, the roles reversed. It’s sometimes easy to forget that research participants are quite justified for feeling self-conscious and judged by fieldworkers who are often taking notes on their every move. When we as researchers are vulnerable enough to share and laugh off our own shortcomings, this suggests a depth of empathy for other’s human foibles. (Tracy, 2014, pp. 459–460)

And, such empathy can be especially valuable in contexts that are considered difficult or dangerous—creating connection and humanity in what can otherwise feel like a sea of uncertainty and mutual suspicion.

Jack’s Story

Setting the Scene. My research team and I tried to negotiate formally with Foxconn, the world’s biggest electronics manufacturer, to access their facilities, and we were turned down. However, we did not need the company’s approval to operate *outside* the factory where workers would gather in openly accessible public spaces such as malls, squares, and cybercafes in Longhua, a district of Shenzhen (the mainland China city adjacent to Hong Kong). At that time, Foxconn employed approximately 400,000 workers, half of whom lived inside the factory campus. The unexpected encounter took place in one of the eateries when a thuggish Foxconn guard approached me. To this day, recalling it still makes me uncomfortable. In 2010, 15 Foxconn workers committed suicide in 5 months, and nine of those incidents occurred in Longhua, where the guards were notorious for their brutality. There was a palpable culture of fear, fear of physical punishment, which we had learned by this point from worker interviews. Some of the suicides were also believed to be cases of murder when Foxconn guards were said to have pushed disobedient workers from balconies or thrown the corpses from rooftops, pretending they were suicides. Again, we could not uncover truth for each suicide. But we wondered, were the guards really so violent? If yes, why? I had been curious, although it never occurred to me that I might get a chance to conduct a life history interview with one of those guards.

What Happened. “Hello, teacher! How should I address you?” He sat down in front of me with a big grin. He told me he had been observing and

figured out who I was from my looks and the way my students addressed me. And he thought he had a “good idea” for me. “Teacher Qiu, listen up. Probably you can bring me some business, and that will benefit both of us.” A couple minutes into the conversation, I realized that he mistakenly thought I was another kind of teacher. Essentially, he thought I was a teacher from one of those vocational schools that sent “student interns” into Foxconn, where the students were abused as cheap labor, and the schools took a cut from their wages. Well-paid by the schools and labor intermediaries, these “teachers” came not to teach anything educational, but to make sure students were obedient and would not run away. If those poor “interns” dared to resist factory work, they would be taught a lesson, not in class but in the back alleys. The guard reasoned that he and this “teacher Qiu” were in the same business, the business of labor discipline. This was how I recorded this encounter in my book (Qiu, 2016):

This well-built guard thought I was one of the “teachers.” He came to me. “Teacher Qiu, phone me if you need my help,” he said and offered me his mobile number. Looking at me straight in the eye, he added, “But no need to call me if it’s not big business.” He made the hand gesture for money, indicating clearly that by “big business” he meant some considerable amount of cash. Does that mean he was offering to hurt people seriously if I want to hire him? How seriously and how much would it cost?

Astonished by his candor, I was speechless for a minute, as he started rambling about why he needs to “help” me. He said he was a seasonal migrant, almost killed during the 2009 Urumqi ethnic riots in China’s Muslim northwest. “From then on, I’ve decided all I want to do in this lifetime is to fucking enjoy myself: to eat well, drink well, and find good female company.”

He boasted about his gang activities in another city, which kept him busy fighting every other day, and he won most of the fights — or so he said, perhaps to assure me of his abilities. For him, it was exciting, lucrative, although it meant he was too busy to find girls. “But this year in Foxconn, it’s not exciting at all because we cannot hit workers like before last year [2010, the year the British press deemed “Suicide Express”]. It’s so boring.” He complained, “Although I have free time now, more than enough time for girls, I find myself short of cash. This is why I need more business from you, Teacher Qiu!”

Again, I have no ground to judge if he was exaggerating or lying, although it was clear he was trying his best to sell me a violent service, disciplining my students so long as I paid him well. Wearing the Foxconn guard uniform, he looked relaxed and confident, talking to me in broad daylight at a major intersection of the dormitory area, a sign that he probably took this as “normal business.” (pp. 63–64)

In Retrospect. I never called him back or saw him again as I am too familiar with victims of guard brutality and the terrible miseries brought to workers and their families. Recalling this encounter makes my stomach churn. Thinking back, I would not have learned about the experiences and mentalities of this Foxconn guard had I explained to him who I truly was. Had I contacted him to conduct a formal interview or pretend to offer him “business,” there was a good chance that I would have endangered my own physical safety.

The Ethical Exigencies of Physical Protection

The final type of ethical exigency we wrestled with was that of physical protection. In the field, we strove to preserve our own (and others’) safety and to keep ourselves from corporeal harm. Above, Sarah and Jack’s stories certainly hint at the physical dangers present in research sites like prisons and jails, and perhaps surprisingly, open air cafes. Jack noted that he felt both emotionally *and* physically vulnerable in his conversation with the Foxconn guard. He struggled to know how to act in the moment, torn between a feeling of repugnance and a scholarly longing to know more.

In the narratives below, we explore the ethical exigency of physical protection in greater depth. Kirsten shares how a seemingly low risk context can quickly become dangerous, and Oana follows up with a tale where luck was ultimately on her side. In both situations, the scholars could do little “to escape,” and even after the immediate physical risks passed, the emotional effects lingered. As a gentle warning, Kirsten’s story might be challenging to read for individuals who have experienced a sexual assault.

Kirsten’s Story

Setting the Scene. I was at the beginning of what I thought would be a year-long study of international internet policy and infrastructure development processes in the Eurasian region, following the deliberations of a particular network of international experts. I had invested many hours finding and reading relevant documents to orient myself and crafting a research design. Through academic networks, I had negotiated permission to attend a 3-day “launch summit” organized by a large intergovernmental organization and held at a conference center located in a rural area about an hour’s drive from a large city. There were about 60 summit attendees, mostly leaders of government agencies from several countries, technical experts, and policy experts, along with a few academics there as observers, including myself. I was one of four women, but the only one from outside the region, and the only American. I observed every session, tracking the discussions and evolving plans, but I had only minimal one-to-one interaction with any of the attendees until the closing banquet.

What Happened. I was seated in the middle of a long banquet table in-between and across from male attendees with whom I had not had any prior conversations during the summit. The conversations among us before the formal speeches by summit leaders were cordial and light-hearted. From prior experiences in the region, I knew that if I accepted a single alcoholic drink I would be pressed to empty and refill my glass repeatedly all through the banquet, so I declared myself a teetotaler to my tablemates and insisted on water only. Midway through the banquet the man seated to my left, whom I will call Alex, had become noticeably drunk and began asking me more personal questions, leaning ever closer to me. I scooted my chair as far as I could to the right, and to my great relief, the man to my right suggested we switch places; he then made a concerted effort to distract Alex by engaging him in conversation. I left the banquet as soon as I could do so politely, and returned to my room on the second floor of the hotel. As I closed the door behind me, I exhaled in relief. I changed into sweats, and began writing up fieldnotes from the day. The wing of the conference center in which my room was located was quiet, presumably because the other summit attendees had migrated from the banquet to the bar area.

A short time later, I heard a man laughing and singing in the hallway, and then there was banging on my door. When he called my name I recognized the voice; it was Alex and someone had told him which room was mine. He proceeded to proposition me loudly and repeatedly, alternately banging on and slumping against the door. When I noticed that the door lock looked old and rather flimsy, I began to panic. There were no landline phones in the rooms of the retreat center—only in the shared lounges—and no cell phone reception. Alex began fumbling with the door knob while begging me to let him in. I pushed a dresser in front of the door, tilting it to balance the back edge under the door knob. Alex was now yelling irately at me, and as he pounded on the door it vibrated. I hoped my makeshift barricade would hold the door in place even if he broke the lock, but I was not sure it would. The room had two twin beds, and a window that opened fully. I stripped one bed and tied two sheets together, as I tried to figure out where I could tie the sheet-rope to support me if I needed to climb out the window. As I peered out the window trying to see how I could get out and down, I heard another man's voice in the hall calling to Alex, telling him to quiet down and "leave the American woman alone." They argued, then the newcomer and Alex moved away from my door back down the hall. As their voices trailed off, I slumped against the wall below the window, weeping with anger, fear, and relief. Before I laid down, I emptied a glass bottle of mineral water and set it next to me, intending to break it against the wall to create a sharp weapon for myself if he returned. It took me hours to fall asleep that night, as every footfall I heard in the hallway frightened me that Alex was coming back.

In Retrospect. I feel echoes of all that anger, fear, and relief as I recall—and write for the first time—what happened that evening. Until that evening, it had not crossed my mind that I could be sexually assaulted by a co-participant in a professional setting in the course of conducting research. I was deeply shaken by the loss of my naivete and the realization of my physical vulnerability as a female researcher doing fieldwork. I do not think there was anything I could have done differently during or after the event, and that thought angers and scares me further as I realize how very vulnerable I was. There was no authority to whom to report it. I remember making a point of catching the first shuttle bus from the conference center to the airport the next morning, to avoid crossing paths with Alex. I remember tears flowing at seemingly random moments several times during my long flight home, and that at some point during that flight I realized I had lost all desire to execute the rest of the study I had designed—so I simply stopped working on it and did nothing with the data I had collected prior to and at the summit. Quitting meant wasting the time, effort, and resources I had invested, but I was too afraid and angry to continue. To this day, I am grateful to the man who persuaded Alex to stop harassing me, and I wish I had a way to find out who he was and thank him. I also still carry sadness for the losses that stemmed from that incident.

Oana's Story

Setting the Scene. As part of my fieldwork on activism and technology in Morocco and Tunisia, I agreed to conduct a training workshop. I was convinced that it would be unsafe to organize a workshop in Morocco. As such, I moved the training to Tunis, where many international NGOs were routinely conducting similar trainings. I had to do everything possible to avoid activists being detained by Moroccan border police both on their way out and again when coming back. I believe one way to do this was to place a minimum of two activists per flight and spread all participants across multiple flights. I managed to count flight connections, speaking to 12 tour operators to correct activists' names on bookings, and make sure everything was in place. Even more importantly, I managed to talk to each participant about following "code blackout" (i.e., ensuring that no communication would take place between any participants until they reached Tunis) to avoid the interference of the Moroccan border police.

A second challenging aspect was how to buy laptops or smartphones for the workshop in Tunis for the activists who did not have any devices. I expected I would face complications in buying laptops and smartphones in bulk from an electronic shop because in Tunisia at that time an anti-terror curfew and multiple checkpoints were in effect in the aftermath of the terrorist attack of the Bardo museum a year back in 2015. Although I had all the approvals from the research committee supporting the project, I knew that

showing Danish paperwork to the Tunisian authorities in the event of being questioned would be most likely pointless if not amusing at best.

What Happened. The day before the workshop, I flew to Tunis with Faisal and Omri, who were Moroccan activists. Our plan was to buy the six laptops and five smartphones at the local Carrefour shopping center that evening. We all went in the electronic section, and we shared our list of items with the shop assistant. He brought the merchandise and asked if we were buying everything for a company. I explained that the purchases were for personal use. He gave me a questioning look but proceeded to fill out the warranty in my name. Luckily, the credit card transaction was approved, the cashier handed us the receipt, and we picked up the electronics from a different counter without any further questions. As we exited the main door, and jumped into a cab, I sighed partly relieved. But I knew it was not over yet.

I was in the back seat holding up three big boxes on my knees, Omri was holding the remaining three, and Faisal in front was holding the smartphone boxes. Faisal was chatting in Arabic with our driver. But a few minutes later, Faisal became silent as we saw a military vehicle with two young men dressed in military khakis holding machine guns. They waved a red baton, and our cab driver pulled over on the right side of the road. Distinct qualms about our own personal safety started to register (Van Maanen, 1988). One of the soldiers came to the door and as Faisal opened the window, he shouted “Passports!” while putting a flashlight in Faisal’s eyes. We handed over our passports and received the same flashlight treatment. In those moments, I thought that we might get taken to the police station, be detained, or have our equipment confiscated. I knew from my previous fieldwork project in Tunisia that in these potentially volatile contexts I could easily be taken for a spy (a common accusation for Western researchers) or a possible bribe target (Lee, 1995). However, by being together with Omri and Faisal, I felt less conspicuous and more in charge of the data collection process.

We were all quite affected emotionally as we watched the two soldiers talking to each other between machine guns while turning around and leaving with our passports in their hands. Five long minutes later, one of the soldiers came back and handed our passports through the window, without saying anything or asking about why we were holding all the boxes of electronics like pizzas. Luckily, they let us go and we all got back safely to the hotel.

In Retrospect. The next day we discovered the likely reason we had been pulled over. There had been a “hit and run” and the authorities were looking for specific suspects. In the following days at the workshop, both Faisal and Omri were retelling the moment several times to other activists, each time causing rounds of laughter. I felt that this encounter really reinforced the trust among us. It also made it easier for me to blend among the activists during the

workshop while maintaining the critical distance necessary for the shifts among my various statuses (e.g., insider, outsider, participant, and observer). Since then, every time I embark on fieldwork in such settings and make the first step out of the plane, I am accompanied by an inescapable feeling of vulnerability and fear in the face of the unknown both for myself, my family that I leave behind, and my informants. Crossing the Rubicon, so to speak, has high risks that we cannot predict. There are no authorities to seek help from or report anything that may go amiss because when researching human rights social movements—as too often the authorities are the very cause of persecution. The dénouement of the project or the role of the researcher is difficult to predict, which makes such fieldwork challenging in terms of seeking institutional approval or funding.

Summary

Overall, the ethical challenges of conducting research in DDV contexts were at times unsettling and others upending. The impromptu decisions that confronted us were largely unexpected. We were ill-equipped to choose between fostering trust and following the rules, as tales of this nature are rarely told. Consequently, we learned, lived through, and continue to live with the choices and pivots we made—ones that we were grossly unprepared to handle. We now move away from the murky ethical dilemmas we encountered and toward more practical challenges that we faced in the field.

Navigating the Challenges of Working With/in DDV Contexts

Below we identify three key practical challenges of conducting research with/in these sites and offer suggestions for how to navigate them. This advice is warranted because—although we were taught as graduate students how we were *supposed* to conduct research: secure organizational access, receive Internal Review Board (IRB) approval, commence study, and so on—the stories we have shared make clear that some research projects push the bounds of our prescribed processes. DDV contexts challenge our training; they disrupt our standard practices. Each of us reckoned with the fissures between what we were taught/trained and what we encountered in the field with respect to navigating challenges of a) project initiation and access, b) managing multiple roles amidst collapsing boundaries, and c) emotional harm and physical danger. In what follows, we speak directly those reading this forum and offer advice to help you prepare to navigate future challenges that you might confront in researching DDV contexts.

Navigating Challenges of Project Initiation and Access

The process of conducting research in these niche contexts was highly complex. From IRB applications to negotiating initial and continued organizational access as well as access to organizational information, we had to navigate many challenges that demanded our attention and stretched our capacities.

Navigating Project Initiation and DDV Access. Even in the best of circumstances, the nuances of receiving IRB approval in DDV contexts are a bit more complex than traditional interview-based or ethnographic studies in non-DDV contexts. As such, we suggest that you talk directly to your human subject's office in advance of submitting your application to receive advice about required application content and options. For instance, some IRBs permit the researcher to sit in on the full board meetings to answer questions in real time, which can expedite your study's approval. Also, plan ahead and check the meeting schedule. Many IRBs only hold full board reviews monthly and sometimes not at all during the summer months. Another challenge of project initiation is figuring out who the gatekeepers are and what they need to hear to permit access. In some DDV contexts, like prisons, both the organization *and* the IRB might require a letter of approval from the other entity prior to officially approving your study, resulting in a double bind. In those circumstances, we recommend talking with the organization to see if they will provide a letter that gives you conditional approval so that you can complete your IRB application first.

Another unique feature of DDV research has to do with protecting the privacy of members in DDV contexts. One way to ensure privacy is through a modified informed consent process. In Craig's case, he committed to audibly read the form and would provide the participant with a copy if desired, but nothing would be signed. Craig agreed to destroy contact information as soon as possible. In addition to these commitments, we also recommend asking participants if they would like to choose a pseudonym for their audio-recorded interviews. This practice ensures that their names are not tied directly to any data. That said, for security and privacy reasons, interviews are often *not recorded* in DDV contexts. In these cases, we recommend that you practice data dumping on an audio recorder immediately after leaving the scene to preserve information (see Tracy, 2020; Wolfe & Bliethe, 2015; Zimbra et al., 2010). We also recommend taking scratch notes while you are on site and focus on documenting both what happened (reporting the facts as you see them) and describing your five senses (noting what you see, hear, smell, taste, and feel in the scenes). These senses will spur memories as you work to recreate your experiences and narrate your day in your audio data dump. Likewise, we suggest completing your extended fieldnotes and reflections

within hours of (or at max 1 day after) being on site, as memories quickly fade. A final noteworthy aspect of the IRB application is related to participant disclosures. Craig, Brittany, and Sarah all committed to advise their participants not to disclose any information that would reveal a criminal felony or something that caused bodily harm to others. If participants were to do so, we would be bound to report their confessions to the proper authorities. This reminder can be used to foster trust with participants. If delivered as a “helpful tip,” then participants may see you as being on their side.

Often in tandem with IRB approvals is the negotiation of organizational or site access. Typically, knowing someone inside the organization makes access markedly easier. Such was not the case for Michael when he set out to study United States government decisions on distributing foreign assistance (both humanitarian and military) in the 1980s. Even though Michael had network and organizational ties, he received clear and resounding “no” answers to his requests. Consequently, these two access failures forced him to slightly shift his focus. Michael’s experience is not unique, as many of us have experienced closed (or very heavy) doors when trying to access DDV contexts. After receiving approval from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and the IRB to conduct her study, Brittany cold called over 40 prisons before getting the go-ahead from only three wardens. In light of these access barriers, we recommend that as you plan your study, you consider possible pivots. Ask yourself: Are there other ways to study the topics I am interested in? or Are there peripheral studies I could conduct to get started? Sometimes you need to gain trust with the local organizations before they welcome you in—put the relationship before research.

Access to Information. Scholars must also consider how to access the information DDV contexts contain and/or attempt to hide—about personnel, resources, and operations—as information of this nature is among their most protected secrets. For example, in Michael’s line of research, he has encountered the U.S. National Security Agency, which to this day is known as No Such Agency, given the lengths that it has gone to deny its actual existence. Indeed, the agency and others in the intelligence “business” continue to maintain the secrecy of their budgets. Additionally, even when scholars secure interviews at such organizations, they are often forced to endure dangerous and harrowing security protocols before entering.

We have several recommendations with respect to information access in DDV contexts. First, after gaining access, we recommend that you remain cognizant of your organizational entry point. Consider the possibility of schisms within these organizations, leadership struggles, political undertones, etc., as arriving from the “wrong” entrance may close down any possibility of future attempts. We also suggest that you be slow to speak. If you accidentally align yourself with one faction of people, the other groups might be less

inclined to share information with you as they might doubt your allegiances or promises of confidentiality. Because of this, we recommend that you use nonverbals to encourage participants to continue as opposed to verbally expressing agreement to extend the conversation.

Second, it is also important to consider the nature and quality of information you receive. In Jack's case, he advised his research assistants to be suspicious of interviewees who seemed eager to share information a little *too freely*. Jack worried that if there was an "easy" flow of information, that the information might very well have been a "honey pot" meant to ensnare the researchers in a web of deception or even legal jeopardy for having possession. Michael worried that being given access to information that he knew he "shouldn't" be able to access (because of lack of "clearance") might trap him into not being able to actually use or publish the information. Much more helpful in his experience were informants who suggested time-consuming, yet legal, paths to explore. As participants share information, we recommend that you question yourself as you evaluate the legitimacy of the information—or at the very least consider the nature of the stories based on the storytellers. Asking questions like—Who is my storyteller? What do they have to lose or gain in this conversation? What are their motives? What is their truth? And what other truths might be told?—will enrich your fieldwork and broaden your understanding of the site and your participants.

Navigating Challenges of Managing Multiple Roles Amidst Collapsing Role Boundaries

Working in DDV contexts radically challenges the boundaries that we strategically—or perhaps artificially—erect among our varied roles. Certainly, past scholarship has already considered how our identities shape our experiences in the field (e.g., [Albu & Costas, 2018](#); [Jensen et al., 2020](#); [Peterson & McNamee, 2020](#); [Tracy, 2014](#); [Tracy et al., 2014](#)). Perhaps unique to researching DDV contexts, however, is the prominent *collapsing of boundaries* that occurs across our varied identity-anchored roles. Where Jensen and colleagues primarily spoke about social identities like race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and the like, and [Peterson and McNamee \(2020\)](#) talked about the benefits and challenges of sharing deep identities ties with their participants and/or sites, we are most concerned with identities linked to the *roles* we enacted in (and outside of) DDV contexts. Many of us found that our identity-laden roles like "friend," "mother," "pastor," "activist," "mediator," and "confidant" were involuntarily brought to the forefront, even as we struggled to keep them shelved, hidden, or separate. Much of the time, this collapsing occurred spontaneously, apart from our own volition. For instance, participants asked both Darvelle and Oana to lend them money—an act that would collapse the role boundary between researcher and friend or researcher and activist, respectively. Being the only parent of

young children around, Brittany had no choice but to install a toddler seat into a vehicle so that a child whose mother had been removed from the prison nursery program could go home with his grandparents—effectively collapsing the boundary between researcher and mother.

A complete preservation of the walls between these roles is often impractical, if not impossible. Still, we offer several suggestions for scholars seeking to maintain some fencing around particularly personal roles. To begin, it is important to understand participants' expectations for reciprocity as well as your own inclinations toward offering support. We walk a fine line when we study DDV contexts. To some extent, we want to share pieces of ourselves to establish trust—as vulnerability and authenticity breed the same. That is, if we share parts of our stories with our participants, or speak about common roles (e.g., if you have a family member in prison, or if you have been a victim of violence, or if you have a family member who worked in a sweatshop), participants might be more likely to reciprocate with their own stories. Choosing to enact a particular role such as “sister of an inmate” (in Brittany's case) can be productive from an information gathering perspective. However, sharing too much of ourselves might put us at risk. If we disclose too much information about our personal lives, then participants might be able to seek us out to make future requests (or, in the worst-case scenarios, threats or manipulations). As you prepare to enter these contexts, consider: What am I willing to say and share? Where is the line I will not cross? What part of myself will I keep private? What role will I hold close? And then, do your very best to uphold those boundaries.

Additionally, the collapsing of role boundaries occurs, in part, based on the shifting nature of the relationship between researcher and participant. Most of us found that our participants freely shared their stories with us. They poured out deep hurts—including their past and current hardships, traumas, abuses, and addictions. Because of these disclosures, their view of our relationship shifted. No longer did they view us as a researcher but as a friend, a source of companionship, kindness, and support. And then, they made requests of us—requests for time, for money, for favors. We recommend that you prepare yourself for these requests and have a plan for how you will respond when queried. One strategy Darvelle employed after the initial incident he described above was to tell all future participants at the outset that offering financial assistance or fulfilling requests outside the parameter of the IRB-approved research project posed an ethical risk that could jeopardize the project in its entirety. A kind word can go a long way, as can sharing informational resources (e.g., support services, government programs, and nonprofit connections) to which participants might not be naturally privy. We recommend sticking to offering informational materials and basic emotional support, if you feel equipped. Consider compiling a list of resource centers specific to the

population you are studying, and include this list with the research consent form or in a follow-up thank you email as a standard process.

Beyond participant requests, we also recommend you do some self-reflection and consider how *you might feel* as the recipient of these stories and what *you might be compelled to do* as a result. We found that many of us deeply desired to give participants something in return for sharing their stories with us. It is terribly difficult to say “no, I cannot help you” or “no, I cannot loan you money” or “no, I cannot give you a ride” to someone who has just shared their entire life story with you, to someone who helped you advanced your professional career, or to someone who, perhaps, you have grown to care about. You need to have a strong sense of what your own boundaries will be on such issues before you enter the field and emotionally prepare yourself to decline requests of this nature if they are outside of the scope of your study and/or your capacities. Telling participants that you are unsure about the ethical and research implications of a request is also sometimes an option that may give you time to consider, and consult with mentors about, your choices and their implications. In this vein, we recommend that you have a few trusted scholarly mentors who can provide you with advice on what to do when you encounter murky circumstances and how to handle problematic requests.

We need these self-reflective moments to help crystalize who we are in DDV contexts. With respect to managing our roles and boundaries, Sarah has embraced advice that she first encountered in Arlie Hochschild (1983) *The Managed Heart* about the importance of not fooling ourselves. In some situations, including some field settings, to perform an illusion or an alternate role can be integral to successfully accomplishing the task at hand. However, we need to recognize and consistently interrogate *why we are performing these roles* and *for what ends*. When fooling (specific) others transitions into fooling ourselves, we come to distrust ourselves and our own feelings. And especially in DDV contexts, it is crucial that researchers trust their feelings and tune into the signal function of our emotions (Allen et al., 2014).

Navigating Challenges of Emotional Harm and Physical Danger

Conducting research in DDV contexts is typically exhausting—emotionally and physically. Often your body feels like it is on high alert even when nothing is happening, even when all is calm. In the most extreme DDV contexts, high levels of cortisol course through your veins, sweat collects, heart elevates, and respirations shorten. It’s hard to take a deep breath until you are out, until you leave...until you feel “safe” again. And even then, the physical and emotional tolls that this work can take on your body are intense. Kirsten’s story above still lingers in her bones today—putting her on high alert in seemingly mundane circumstances. Brittany recalls weeping in her car after interviewing a man who looked so very much like her (formerly incarcerated) brother; the man was in

prison for shaking his infant to get the child to stop crying. Oana still feels a wave of anxiety every time she gets in touch by email with former informants from the respective fieldwork zones. Jack continues to feel the disgust in his stomach while recalling the encounter with the thuggish factory guard.

Navigating Challenges of Emotional Harm. It is imperative to take care of yourself when engaging in especially emotionally risky or anxiety-filled research, and we recommend several simultaneous paths to self-care. To begin, Darvelle, like many of us, is a big proponent of counseling to help scholars manage the intense emotions that we experience while conducting field research. Having access to a trained therapist or counselor to help you process your experiences is particularly important when you are unable to talk about the work you do with your friends or family for confidentiality reasons. Also, counselors are able to help you perspective-take and reflect on the emotional burdens you assume when working with/in DDV contexts. At the very least, Michael suggests that even if you cannot share the specifics of your work, make certain to check in and talk with people who provide you emotional support. Moreover, both Jack and Oana recommend meditation, mindfulness programs, and breathing exercises to cope with the everyday psychological distress induced by fieldwork.

We also recommend conducting work in DDVs alongside other trusted colleagues and/or students. For instance, when Sarah and her colleagues studied targets of workplace bullying, after every focus group, the set of collaborators would hold a debrief session where they discussed issues that were especially striking, surprising, or troubling (Tracy et al., 2006). These sessions, which were recorded and used later as another layer of data and analysis, provided a sensemaking and collective care function for the research team. This practice was similar to the dialogic data debriefing that Brittany and her students practiced after their visits to a prison nursery program where they simultaneously bounced babies on their hips while conducting research interviews with the moms (Peterson, Hook, Sloat, Forthcoming). Notably, engaging in collective sensemaking or debriefing is key to releasing the weight of the day and healing open wounds.

Navigating Challenges of Physical Danger. In addition to the emotional weights we carry, many of us have also put ourselves in physical danger to conduct research in DDV contexts. We have ventured into conflict zones and sweatshops as well as prisons and jails. And although we all conduct research in these seemingly “dangerous” contexts, sometimes the greatest physical danger has confronted us in spaces we believed to be “safe.” As we consider the physical risks inherent in DDV research, Kirsten’s words offer wise caution: “I want to see myself as able to protect myself from sexual assault or other violence and carry out any fieldwork-based research I find intellectually compelling without

having to consider those risks—but my experiences have taught me that humans are unpredictable and that I must recognize my vulnerability.” *We all* must recognize our own vulnerabilities. Too often we walk into DDV contexts feeling ready and equipped to handle the emergent challenges; in reality however, we are often woefully unprepared to do so.

As such, we recommend encouraging graduate students and colleagues who are learning fieldwork-based research methods to also learn and practice multimodal skills pertaining to situational awareness, personal safety planning, recognizing and countering manipulation and other forms of psychological coercion, and physical self-defense. Specifically, we recommend that scholars practice situational awareness *before* entering the DDV research site/setting by consciously observing various physical and social settings, with great frequency, so that these sensibilities become routine. For instance, regarding a physical setting, you should take notice of the location and status (i.e., open/shut and on/off) of doors, windows, cameras, microphones, and objects that could be employed in self-defense. Try to position yourself so that you can scan the setting frequently, and practice doing so casually. Regarding a social setting, notice who is present, who enters and/or leaves, whether and how people in the setting interact with each other, how relaxed or tense anyone else seems to be. Pay attention to changes in both the physical and social settings. Consider how you could distance and defend yourself from someone who approaches you from the front or back and how you could exit the site/setting if the main doorway is blocked.

When traveling to other countries, we recommend that you have an emergency exit plan. Think through how you might access essential supplies (money and critical documents, means of communication, food, and other vital supplies) in the event of having to exit a dangerous situation. We also suggest that you consider how you will maintain security after leaving the field and returning to a different safer location or returning home (see also [Felbab-Brown, 2014](#)).

We also recommend that you trust your gut. If the hairs on the back of your neck stand up, take notice and take your leave. No research is worth your life. Read up on de-escalation techniques and practice them in your everyday arguments so that should you be confronted with a hostile situation, you will be (somewhat) prepared. As communication scholars, we know that words can be both swords and sleeping pills—they can cut to the core or soften the situation so choose wisely. Safety is an illusion and recognizing that is the first step toward self-protection. Overall, we suggest that as a discipline we consider how we might better prepare graduate students and seasoned scholars alike for the physical and psychological risks, ethical dilemmas, and emotional weight of doing fieldwork.

Paths Forward

As we consider our paths forward, we call other scholars who conduct research in these contexts to articulate how they have managed to do so, especially for the sake of those who hope to in the future. In addition to publications, we also need workshops, trainings, and pre- or post-conferences addressing these challenges that provide practical guidelines *and* allow for more sharing of experiences. We need to create forums for continuing conversations to help each other process difficult research experiences and to learn from one another's experiences.⁵ Moreover, we believe that as a discipline we need to get out of our narrow and confined views of what counts as scholarship (see Boyer, 1990) to recognize the value of, and the need for, doing research in these contexts, even if they are viewed as "difficult," "dangerous," or "vulnerable." We must reward innovative work that has greater potential to affect change in DDV contexts as much as we do "safe studies" that produce multiple publications (see Ellingson & Quinlan, 2012).

In this piece, we began a much-needed dialog we hope will continue beyond our time in the academy. We shared three types of ethical exigencies that confront scholars who conduct work in difficult, dangerous, and/or vulnerable contexts. We also offered practical suggestions for navigating challenges of project initiation and access, collapsing role boundaries, and coping with the physical and emotional weight of this work. Ultimately, we hope that by demystifying some of the ethical and practical challenges of this work, we have convinced you to that it is worth the risk.

Research of this nature holds up a mirror. It calls for the deepest form of self-reflection available. It reveals your weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and insecurities. It shows you what you are made of. When conducting work in DDV contexts, you are constantly confronted with your own biases, perspectives, and inclinations. You learn what you value by your knee jerk responses. Simply put, this work reveals who you are. More importantly, however, this work matters to the people who live, who thrive, or who perhaps simply survive these contexts—spaces and places which are often untouched by scholars. Through partnership and engagement, research in DDV contexts has the capacity to challenge dominant organizational scripts, to shift communities, and to meaningfully reshape lives. Thus, we invite you to join us in embracing your soul-projects however "difficult," "dangerous," or "vulnerable" others deem those contexts to be.

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Notes

1. We made the intentional choice to describe *contexts* and *not people* as difficult, dangerous, and/or vulnerable, yet we remain mindful of the consequentiality of our labeling decisions. As a collective, our goal in this forum is to offer scholars insights on conducting research in these specialized, important, nuanced, and often neglected research contexts, and to do so without further marginalizing particular contexts. Admittedly, this is a challenge as all labels are consequential. We own that our definitions of various contexts as DDVs are shaped by our own identities, our personal views of the world, our years of experience engaging people in these contexts, and social influence from media and public discourse. In many ways, the choice of label for this forum stems from a desire to reach both those who may have avoided researching certain sites due to DDV concerns and those who may have been overlooking the vulnerabilities and challenges associated with the contexts they are in or intend to move into. Moreover, we believe that a researcher's perception of doing work in DDV contexts is in itself deeply contextual. For instance, a researcher with minimal exposure to the U.S. criminal justice system may perceive their research at a jail or prison as dangerous while a researcher who has more experience interacting with incarcerated individuals might argue that the danger is minimal. We are at a particularly poignant time in the history of our discipline in which we are powerfully grappling with what we value and devalue (see *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 2020; volume 9, issue 2) and with who we are and how that affects our research (Jensen et al., 2020). Thus, although the stories we share are real and raw, how we present them and how they are received reveal our and our readers' biases, stereotypes, identities, and/or privileges.

2. As aforementioned, all labels are consequential. However, naming prison or jail as a “dangerous” context is especially so. This label can be difficult to grapple with for some racial groups who experience discrimination. For instance, white people are not held to the same standards of consequence for their actions when compared to Black people (Rehavi & Starr, 2014). This history of racial inequity and systemic oppression in the criminal justice system runs deep (see Alexander, 2012; *The Sentencing Project*, 2018).
3. Craig Scott reached out to a group of scholars with a proposition for ICA 2020 to see if we would be interested in participating in a panel about conducting research in contexts that were difficult to access or potentially dangerous. Our panel was accepted and slotted to take place in Gold Coast, Australia in May 2020, but then instead of traveling down under, our world turned upside down. We pivoted and met virtually; it was an exhilarating session which left us feeling as though we had more to say and much more to learn. Consequently, we invited a few more voices into the conversation and decided to pen this collaborative essay. As a forum panel, we represented a diversity of ages, genders, races, ethnicities, organizational tenures, and roles.
4. Brittany Peterson solicited two narratives from each author of this forum. She asked for stories that stuck out in the authors’ minds as “powerful, challenging, upending, disturbing, dangerous, unsettling...one you can’t forget though you might want to.” Author story submissions ranged from two to 12 pages single-spaced. After that, Brittany did a high level read to see what the data was “saying” collectively. The internal ethical battles that each author faced were prominent across the stories. Accordingly, she took a second pass at the data looking to determine the nature of these ethical challenges and see how they might coalesce in meaningful ways. The ethical challenges in the data were deeply tied to our own identities as well as our emotions and our corporeal presence in the scene. Ultimately, Brittany settled on three core ethical challenges that encompassed most of the struggles we all faced in the field. Outside of the ethical challenges, all of the stories touched on the logistical challenges inherent in this work—the nuts and bolts of doing research with/in DDV contexts. As such, the latter half of the paper is designed to offer some practical advice for scholars seeking to conduct research in these sites.
5. Several of us have participated in two Blue Sky workshops hosted during the International Communication Association Conferences in 2020 and 2021. In 2020, a handful of us met via zoom and each presented about our work. We then dialoged briefly about our experiences before saving and submitting the pre-recorded video. In 2021, we shifted the format slightly. We included more voices and started with a lightening round where each presenter introduced themselves and shared one tip for doing work in DDV contexts. The session drew the interest of around 40 participants. We used most of our time to engage in collaborative conversations with these session participants about the work we all collectively have done or hope to do in these contexts.

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Author Biographies

Brittany L. Peterson (PhD, University of Texas) is an associate professor in the School of Communication Studies and the Director of E-Learning for the Scripps College of Communication at Ohio University, USA. She has been conducting research inside the prison system for over a decade. In an effort to

explore the communicative construction of involuntary membership as well as incarcerated motherhood, Brittany has worked with incarcerated individuals, correctional staff, and volunteers in various total institutions in both the United States and Norway, including public and private facilities and men's and women's prisons.

Oana B. Albu (PhD, Copenhagen Business School) is an associate professor at Copenhagen Business School, Denmark in the Department of Management, Society and Communication. Her research takes a communication-centered perspective and uses ethnographic methods to examine how human rights networks organize in conflict zones (e.g., Western Sahara, Lebanon, and Palestine). One of her recent research projects focuses on the new forms of control and surveillance introduced by information and communication technologies in dangerous work contexts in which organizing is intimately related to questions of visibility/invisibility.

Kirsten Foot (PhD, University of California, San Diego) is the Dart Endowed Professor in Trauma, Journalism, and Communication and adjunct faculty in the iSchool at the University of Washington. Dr Foot's research on efforts at organizing cross-sector collaboration to counter human trafficking has required trust-building with two types of actors that can be difficult to access: law enforcement agents and survivors. Although differing in obvious ways, members of both types often share a reluctance to interact with social researchers for multiple reasons, including fears that they will be misunderstood and/or misrepresented as well as security needs.

Darvelle Hutchins (PhD, University of Missouri) is Director for Diversity and Inclusion Education at LSU Health New Orleans. Darvelle's research seeks to give voice to marginalized populations and focuses on issues related to diversity, power, and stigmatized identities in organizational contexts. As a former ministerial leader at Black Churches throughout the Midwestern United States, Darvelle believes that Black Churches can benefit from productive conversations around diversity and identity. His dissertation project takes a communication approach to explore Black gay men's experiences of stigmatization in Black Church organizing.

Jack Qiu (PhD, University of Southern California) is a professor and research director in the Department of Communication and New Media at the National University of Singapore. Dr Qiu's work targets some secretive organizations such as Foxconn (the world's largest electronics manufacturer) and other sweatshops producing digital gadgets, clandestine social movement organizations including youth and labor activists, as well as labor intermediaries that provide forced labor such as student "interns" to Chinese companies in the high-tech sector.

Craig R. Scott (PhD, Arizona State University) is Professor and Department Chair in Communication Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. His current research examining anonymity in various settings (whistleblowing, social media, etc.) and a range of “hidden organizations” (where the identity of the collective and/or its members is communicatively concealed from certain audiences) can involve contexts that are sometimes dangerous and often difficult to access.

Michael Stohl (PhD, Northwestern University) is Professor of Communication and Affiliate Professor of Political Science and Global Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). His research focuses on political and organizational communication and global relations with special reference to political violence, terrorism, and human rights. He is the author or co-author of more than one hundred scholarly journal articles and book chapters and the author, editor or co-editor of 21 books.

Sarah J. Tracy (PhD, University of Colorado) is a professor in The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication and Director of The Transformation Project at Arizona State University-Tempe, USA. She has conducted research with correctional officers, targets of workplace bullying, 911 emergency call-takers, and total institution employees.