

RESPONSIBLE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT INSTITUTE

May 6 - 7, 2021

Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security & Diplomacy
Josef Korbel School of International Studies
University of Denver

Sponsored by Carnegie Corporation of New York



One hour session: Approximately 25 minutes intro and slide presentation; 15 minute breakout session to discuss associated scenario; 20 minutes reporting back and plenary discussion. The concluding discussion should allot 5 minute for each participant to write down key takeaways.

Session 2, Part 2: Seduction and the Perils of E-Hacking

Jason Lyall, Dartmouth College

Note: This presentation was originally given alongside Dr. Martino's lecture. It could be paired again or could be a standalone session.

Motivating Example: Helmand, 2010



The purpose of this session is to address some of the unintended (and, in some cases, intended) ethical consequences of policy engagement. The session has three specific objectives. First, we introduce the notion of “ethical redlines” and how scholars should determine the nature, limits, and possible consequences of their engagement in the policy process. Second, we identify the possible pressures that scholars face in policy environment that can lead to “e-hacking” (the progressive erosion of previously held ethical limits on policy engagement) and “seduction” (a desire to support a partner organization that can create pressure to take ethical shortcuts). Third, we provide a template for assessing the ethical implications of one’s research and policy engagement while offering five possible strategies for mitigating the dangers of seduction and e-hacking.

The session is meant to draw generalizable lessons about ethical redlines. But the empirical examples are largely drawn from Jason Lyall’s fieldwork in Afghanistan, where many of these issues arose. Indeed, conflict and post-conflict environments can generate extreme examples of ethical lapses, making them useful for teaching purposes.

What is Seduction?

Seduction: the loss of one's critical stance toward an entity (e.g., a governmental or international agency) due to positive identification with its goals and objectives (Robben 1996, Devereux 1967)

Two pathways:

- (1) Unconscious bias/process
- (2) Deliberate calculation, often in reply to material incentives (including coercion)

The result? E-hacking

E-hacking: The piecemeal, often unnoticed, erosion of prior ethical boundaries ("redlines") on the conduct and use of research due to engagement with policy-makers and the resources/prestige they offer ("situational ethics")

Key: Research and policy engagement are intertwined rather than separate processes; we should conduct our research with an eye toward its possible use by policy-makers

We need to name our problem before we can begin to address it. French anthropologists have coined the term "seduction" to capture the loss of one's critical stance toward a particular entity (in our case, a government, its agencies, or non-governmental organizations) due to positive identification with its goals and objectives. Seduction raises from two channels. First, the process may be unconscious; scholars may come to identify "with the cause" through repeated interaction with the entity's personnel, forming friendships that color subsequent interactions. Scholars may also be convinced of the rightness of the entity's particular mission or set of objectives, or may find initial evidence of positive effects that leads them to discount or overlook potential policy harms. While scholars like Robben and Devereux have focused on implicit bias, seduction also works through a second, more explicit, channel: deliberate calculation through career incentives. Scholars may feel unable to break from an existing organization; perhaps it provides logistics for your fieldwork, or you rely on its continued good graces in order to complete fieldwork that has taken months to prepare. Scholars may thus decide to overlook (or even actively justify) ethically dubious research in order to continue a partnership that promises to yield publications, continued grants, and career advancement.

Seduction, whether explicit or implicit, can result in e-hacking: The piecemeal, often

unnoticed, erosion of prior ethical boundaries (“redlines”) on the conduct and use of research due to engagement with policy-makers and the resources/prestige they offer. These “situational ethics” lead scholars into ethical dilemmas that they may not have anticipated and that they are unprepared to deal with once fieldwork begins. It is crucial to remember that research and policy engagement are intertwined processes. We must conduct our research with an eye toward its possible future uses.

The Benefits of “Bridging the Gap”

Wait: Aren't there advantages to policy engagement? Yes, of course:

1. Generates new research questions and insights into the policy-making process
2. Access to new data and methods
3. Provides opportunities to shape policy and have real-world impact
4. Reputational boost + greater visibility
5. Career incentives: continued stream of research, scale-up that you couldn't achieve on your own

These factors drive policy engagement but can also motivate seduction

To be clear, we are not arguing that all policy engagement is inherently unethical. Nor do we make the claim that scholars will inevitably have “dirty hands” for engaging with the policy process. There are many reasons why “bridging the gap” has advantages for both basic and applied research. I would point to at least five advantages:

1. Generates new research questions and insights into the policy-making process.
2. Access to new data and methods
3. Provides opportunities to shape policy and have real-world impact
4. Reputational boost and greater visibility for your own research
5. Career incentives: continued stream of research may result in a level of scale-up that you couldn't achieve on your own. This is particularly true in instances of policy evaluation, where large-scale field experiments require a costly infrastructure that scholars do not possess.

Again, however, there is a two-edged sword dynamic at work: these same factors that improve our research can also feed seduction and generate incentives to engage in p-hacking to preserve existing (and future) working relationships.

So, What's the Problem?

So you get a little too close to the organization/policy-makers. What's the harm?

Three main "harms:"

1. Loss of your independence and autonomy → loss of control over analysis ("bad science")
2. Increased risk of harmful inputs into policy process due to skewed judgement ("bad policy")
3. Increased risk of undesirable outcomes and harm to vulnerable or targeted populations ("bad outcomes")

Repeated collaboration over time can worsen each of these dimensions as feedback mounts between them

There are at least three harms that can result in becoming too close to an organization or set of policy-makers. First, and most obviously, the loss of a scholar's independence and autonomy can lead scholars to produce bad science by losing control over the analysis. Scholars might find themselves evolving into "house analysts" who are expected to produce favorable findings or to conduct "off-the-books" analyses that lack the rigor associated with scholarly research. In many cases, requests to conduct these "quick hits" are made without the necessary time or resources to conduct a proper analysis.

Second, skewed judgement may heighten the chances that scholars will introduce harm inputs into the policy process itself, leading to bad policy outcomes. Scholars may be willing to work with raw or skewed data to meet time pressures for a "back of the envelope" calculation. Scholars may find themselves relying on questionable informants or data sources, or may adopt second-best research designs in a need to field projects quickly. They may select field sites that promise favorable results. They may ignore warning signs that the intervention is producing negative consequences on the ground.

As a consequence, a third harm arises: bad policy may increase the risks faced by

vulnerable or targeted populations in these areas, creating bad outcomes.

Note, too, that repeated collaboration can worsen each of these dimensions over time. As bad outcomes are produced, organizations and scholars alike will face pressures to find favorable outcomes. These incentives can lead to additional shortcuts and a further moving of one's ethical redlines. Over time, scholars may find that they have compromised their ethical standards not through one major decision but incrementally, in response to changing circumstances on the ground and a desire to produce useful knowledge that fits an organizational mandate, not the scholar's own research agenda.

What Does E-hacking Look Like in the Wild?

E-hacking can take many forms:

1. Loss of nuance in presentation of findings; burying certain findings
2. Off-book analyses
3. Working with dubious data (“unethically sourced”)
4. Relax human subject protections to work in “mission-critical” areas/regions
5. Design research around organizational sensitivities instead of theoretical debates
6. P-hacking
7. Downplaying harm to groups/populations
8. Masking weaknesses in one’s own evidence or position
9. Silencing critical voices/perspectives

E-hacking can take many forms --- and more than one kind of e-hacking can be present in the same research collaboration. Some examples:

1. Loss of nuance in presentation of findings; burying certain findings; exaggerating statistical significance
2. Off-book analyses under serious time constraints that do not permit careful evaluation of data or method
3. Working with dubious data (“unethically sourced”): data may be collected inhumanely (e.g., interrogations) or without informed consent
4. Relax human subject protections to work in “mission-critical” areas/regions
5. Design research around organizational sensitivities instead of theoretical debates. This may result in program evaluations that lack theoretical contributions or that ignore important debates
6. P-hacking: shading of statistical models or results to cherry-pick favorable results
7. Downplaying harm to groups/populations
8. Masking weaknesses in one’s own evidence or position
9. Silencing critical voices/perspectives. One of the most, and underappreciated, sources of seduction is one’s own teams/colleagues. A desire to maintain

working relationship with one's own colleagues can lead scholars to bury their objections or, in some cases, face expulsion from the group.

When is Seduction and E-hacking Most Likely to Occur?

Factors that increase the odds of seduction and e-hacking:

1. Genuine support for the research partner's aims/goals
2. Decisions made piecemeal/multiple decision points → slippery slope
3. Resource imbalances (What do you bring to the table? How dependent?)
4. Time pressures + speed, severity of the policy challenge
5. Desire for long-standing collaboration
6. Team divisions
7. Using quantitative methods
8. Homogenous teams

There are identifiable circumstances where seduction and subsequent e-hacking are most likely to occur. Note that many, if not all, of these factors are especially prominent in violent and fragile settings.

These factors are:

1. Genuine support for the research partner's aims/goals
2. Decisions made piecemeal/multiple decision points can produce slippery slope
3. Resource imbalances: What do you bring to the table? How dependent? The more the scholar is on an organization's resources (including logistics, shelter, etc.), the greater the pressures toward seduction
4. Time pressures and the need for speed, especially if the policy challenge is difficult or complex
5. Desire for long-standing collaboration with the organization
6. Team divisions
7. Using quantitative methods which offer the promise of precision and "science" to policy-makers
8. Homogenous teams: Diversity of opinions and perspectives can help shield against seduction

A Framework for Assessing Ethical Redlines

There is no universal set of ethical principles that can guide our research and policy engagement

We need to be flexible but principled in our approach

We can, however, build a framework for identifying ethical redlines at **five** levels:

1. The individual researcher
2. The team
3. The partner organization or policy-makers
4. The relevant local populations (“group rights”)
5. The general public

These are the building blocks for building your own bulwarks against e-hacking

There is no universal set of ethical principles that can anticipate all eventualities. Nor are we in the business of dictating a particular ethical stance or framework. Instead, we need to be flexible and principled in our approach. Here I set out five different levels where researchers can establish their own redlines. Sample questions follow from the assigned reading (Lyll 2021).

1. Individual level: What types of organization are you (un)willing to partner with? What types of policy work are you unwilling to consider? Are you willing to conduct quick—yield research? Or are you more comfortable with long-term research?
2. The team: Is there basic agreement on the team’s redlines? How will disputes within the team be adjudicated?
3. Partner organization: What are its interests? How dependent are you on the organization? What are the mechanisms for influencing policy?
4. Relevant local populations: What is the potential for harm to the local population? Is the local population a stakeholder? Do you have a means of detecting potential harm and stopping the research if necessary?
5. General public: How will you disseminate your findings? How will you convey nuanced findings to a broader audience without sacrificing rigor?

With this framework in mind, we now turn to the simulation exercise. Allow for 15 minutes for students to read the prompt and discuss the questions.

Possible Solutions

We can take steps to safeguard our integrity:

1. Preregister your ethical redlines publicly before conducting research
2. Create "contracts" for the team
3. MOUs with partners (especially concerning pre-publication review and media outreach strategies)
4. Planned obsolescence (self-imposed data limitations)
5. Exit

What can we do to avoid e-hacking? There are at least five different possible strategies:

1. Preregister your ethical redlines publicly before conducting research. You can post your ethical redlines as a document on your website; give it to trusted mentors to ensure you don't violate your redlines; or add an ethical section to your pre-analysis plan.
2. Create "contracts" for the team: Write up a memorandum of understanding that outlines the team's purpose, shared redlines, and mechanisms for dispute adjudication if/when conditions change on the ground
3. MOUs with partners (especially concerning pre-publication review and media outreach strategies)
4. Planned obsolescence: Use self-imposed data limitations. For example, Lyall (2013) uses declassified Afghan airstrike data that was provided by the Air Force. To prevent the research from being actionable and influencing targeting decisions, Lyall (2013) did not use up-to-date data. Instead, there was a six month firewall between the declassification date and the last airstrike.
5. Exit: Sometimes you need to be prepared to walk away from the collaboration if it threatens or violates your ethical redlines.