

The background of the entire page is a light teal network diagram consisting of interconnected nodes and lines. The word "RESOLVE" is written in a large, bold, dark teal font, with "NETWORK" in a smaller, all-caps, dark teal font directly below it. A thin, dark teal diagonal line is positioned to the right of the word "RESOLVE".

# RESOLVE

NETWORK

## **Resilience is for Research Designs Too: Funders, Researchers, & Navigating Study Constraints**

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The views in this publication are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the RESOLVE Network, its partners, the U.S. Institute of Peace, or any U.S. government agency.

# ABSTRACT

Significant challenges to conducting research on violent extremism (VE) occur when funders and researchers have different expectations, particularly when this leads to requests to modify projects after they already commenced. This can happen when the funder restricts available methods and project resources or requests to omit undesirable findings if they are politically sensitive. Although conditions may make it impossible to produce the deliverables originally agreed upon, researchers should be prepared to adapt their studies to collect different data and to promote policy-relevant findings outside of the original scope of the project. In this chapter we detail our experiences with improvising methods as needed while remaining within an approved research design. Despite our challenges, we ultimately published peer-reviewed articles and generated potentially lifesaving findings to share with participant agencies.

# INTRODUCTION

Conducting research in general, but on VE specifically, incurs significant challenges related to funders. Research funders may place limitations or constraints on research processes, ask the researcher to significantly alter their methods and resources, or request that undesirable findings be omitted if they consider them politically sensitive either after the study has already commenced or, in the case of the latter, concluded. Drawing primarily from the authors' own experience conducting VE studies, this chapter reflects on researcher agility in the face of bureaucratic challenges.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the chapter details some common challenges funder requests may pose to the research, including: (1) requests to alter methods and data collection after a proposal has already been accepted, (2) restrictions on compensation for study participants, (3) inflexible timelines, and (4) requests to alter findings coupled with threats to withhold payment or publication for non-compliance.

In some cases, funder priorities and constraints may make it impossible to produce intended deliverables and fully investigate the dynamics originally proposed in the research plan. However, researchers prepared to adapt their studies through collecting different data and adopting new methods may find that there are still opportunities to uncover and promote policy-relevant findings outside of the original scope of the project. The chapter concludes with additional recommendations, based on the authors' experience, that may help to mitigate the challenges associated with late stage research alteration requests, both for the researcher and research funder.

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1 Our study of risk communication was intended to test whether the public would place more trust in information they received via then-new social media platforms, whether participants would respond differently to different types of public safety risks and what levels of risk would be acceptable to them, and whether government and public safety officials reacted differently than the public. This chapter focuses on reflections on the general research process. The specific designs, methods, and results of our prior VE research are not described in this chapter. For our research designs and findings, please see: David Malet and Mark Korbitz, "Accountability Between Experts and the Public in Times of Risk: Results from a Public Communications Experiment," *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 73, no. 4 (2014): 491–500; and David Malet and Mark Korbitz, "Bioterrorism and Local Agency Preparedness: Results from an Experimental Study in Risk Communication," *The Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management* 12, no. 4 (2015): 861–73.

# BACKGROUND: RESEARCHER-FUNDER RELATIONSHIPS

This chapter is informed by the authors' experiences navigating funder requests for alterations to the research process outside of the parameters originally agreed upon and to the ultimate findings of the research once completed. The authors' experiences are instructive for researchers and research funders alike seeking to navigate and prevent similar challenges in their own projects.<sup>2</sup>

Even when projects are developed to meet the specific criteria of a request for proposals (RFP), and are selected by funders because they match the funding organization's objectives, there are many reasons why funders might later insist on changes to agreed research designs, protocols, or outputs. Our experience has been that research on VE preparation and response, in particular, can be politically sensitive. In addition to other bureaucratic constraints, funders may be unwilling to publish any findings that are perceived to cast a negative light on their organization—even when the research team believes the findings would support efforts to garner additional resources for that organization.

Since the traumatic events of September 2001, government agencies and policymakers around the world have a greater responsibility to understand VE dynamics, construct policy based on empirical evidence, and learn how to most effectively communicate information relevant to public safety in the face of real or potential VE threats. Research is crucial to ensuring that governments are able to construct effective programs for preventing or addressing VE and in identifying and adapting those that are not. To fulfil this responsibility, the funders of VE research must allow researchers to adopt the best methods of obtaining accurate information for government policy and funders remain open to research findings that suggest improvements to current government policies.

There are many methods researchers can adopt in carrying out VE research to inform government policy and VE responses. For example, for our own research on government public safety communications in the event of a real or potential terrorist attack, we could use one of two or three methods: a retrospective analysis of historical events, social scientific research designed to experimentally model a scenario and elicit from individuals or groups responses (ours), or meta-analyses. Fundamentally, gaining access to complete and accurate information is hard enough on its own. However, when more intricate methods, e.g. experimentation, are used to derive insights on complex social phenomena, or when funders or government agencies have taken a particular interest in the findings of a study, researchers can potentially be subjected to additional requests or demands from funders. In those situations, funders, government agents, or policymakers may take on a more active role in the research process, attempt to exercise control of research methods or conclusions, or interfere in other ways. While active interest and sponsorship

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<sup>2</sup> See Malet and Korbitz, "Bioterrorism and Local Agency Preparedness," and "Accountability Between Experts and the Public in Times of Risk."

of scientific research is undoubtedly in the public's interest, attempts to constrain or tightly control the results of that research beyond what is responsible and intrinsic to the scientific endeavor itself is not.

Facts and results must stand as the basis for debate and discussion. We therefore suggest developing a broad but specific set of guidelines to help researchers, funding agencies, and reviewers move together toward best scientific practices. When a research funding relationship shifts away from straightforward and traditional scientific quests for truth and the discovery of facts as revealed by the data, and when that shift is the result of a concern for control over research processes and a preoccupation with, or questions of, perception or political ramifications, the process is corrupted.

## The Impact of External Influences on Research

Concerns about bias in research often revolve around the ideologies, theoretical preferences, or professional ambitions of the researchers. However, while rarely documented, there is ample evidence that funders can bias research and its findings. Historically, and in our own experience, research funders have sought to influence the findings of research to advance their own commercial, institutional, or ideological interests. Perhaps the most prominent example was the Soviet Union's suppression of research into mainstream Mendelian genetics by natural selection as bourgeois pseudoscience in favor of ideologically-inspired theories of natural cooperation that could justify Soviet agricultural policy.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, investigations in the 1990s revealed that the tobacco industry had spent decades promoting falsified data indicating that smoking was not harmful and attacking studies that showed otherwise.<sup>4</sup> In both of these instances, the researchers involved had to weigh considerations of funding, contracts, publications, government and industry access, and even their own personal well-being against funder pressures for specific research findings.

In most circumstances, however, funders have legitimate concerns in protecting the interests of their organizations. Individual projects rarely produce the definitive findings that should be used as the basis for policy.<sup>5</sup> Particular studies may produce results that are questionable or that provide data outside of a wider context. And industry, governmental, and nonprofit funders can be vulnerable to backlash from within their own organizations or their sources of political or financial support. Funders can also face legitimate unforeseen constraints, such as government shutdowns or spending freezes, that require them to request changes from researchers.

Beyond the researchers and their funders, policymakers, both governmental and nongovernmental, and other consumers of the research can also be adversely impacted by these challenges. In some cases,

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3 Peter Singer, "A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution and Cooperation," in *Philosophy after Darwin: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Michael Ruse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 343–49.

4 Allan M. Brandt, "Inventing Conflicts of Interest: A History of Tobacco Industry Tactics," *American Journal of Public Health* 102, no.1 (2012): 63–71.

5 Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 17, 26.

the policymakers may even have funded the research directly, but receive the final data without any understanding or awareness of the bureaucratic or political constraints that were placed on the research throughout the study and their impact on the veracity of its findings. Effective public policy and organizational decision-making require accurate and essentially impartial scientific methods of data collection and analysis. Without awareness, policymakers may be using biased or false data to construct flawed VE solutions.

## CHALLENGES

Researchers and their funders bear the responsibility of working collaboratively to ensure that project deliverables are met, and the sanctity of the research process maintained. However, the often-one-sided power dynamic between researchers and their funders means that, regardless of the validity of a researcher's opinion, funders usually have the ultimate say over project decisions. Funders control project resources even after contracts are signed and may choose to exert their leverage over researchers in several ways. This is not to say, however, that funder decisions are nefarious or made with the intention of biasing results. There are many reasons why funders may request modifications to projects in-progress, or even to studies that have already been completed. These reasons may include constraints that the funders themselves are facing rather than disagreements related to researcher conduct or attempts to stifle unwelcome findings. Still, researchers, funders, and research consumers should be aware that project funders can impact both the production and dissemination of data in ways never fully delineated in the original RFP.

## Alterations to Data Methods and Collection

We have had multiple experiences in which funders approved our proposals for research and publications, contracted us for payment, and only afterwards provided us any notice that their own regulations made the project impossible to complete in its originally approved proposal form. There are no statistics available to determine how often this occurs in VE research, how many studies must be substantially redesigned, how many are concluded without producing the envisioned deliverables, and how many are simply cancelled. However, given the politicized and complicated nature of VE research—including, but not limited to considerations of national security and restricted information, political factors, the legal rights of vulnerable populations and accused perpetrators, etc.—funder-researcher challenges are potentially more common in VE studies than in other forms of social science research.

In one instance, we received funding to conduct a multi-year experiment measuring reactions to terrorism. After the contracts were signed and the funding period had commenced, we were informed that we would not be permitted to offer participants any form of compensation, could not ask them any pre-scripted questions, and could not debrief them in focus groups, all of which had been central elements of our approved proposal. In another VE study in which the primary data was to be interviews with prisoners, the agency that had offered its support for the proposal reversed its position several months into the funding period.

In the first instance, as described later in this chapter, the authors were able to develop alternative methods to collect comparable data. The funders approved this backup plan, which eventually led us to uncovering unanticipated but very useful findings. However, the study did not have the representative population that we had originally proposed, which may have impacted the validity of our results and, thus, their predictive value, which is important in recommending the right courses of action for relevant policymakers. In the second instance, the research team was not able to implement a new research design and, as a result, while we continued to receive funding and produce other project deliverables, we were not able to fulfil the primary study objective.

It is important to note that, in both of these cases, the challenges we encountered were the result of bureaucratic and political factors that occurred beyond our funding agency, not a result of decisions made by our funders to not honor our initial contracts. These challenges point to how important it is that: (1) funders fully understanding potential constraints on research when drafting RFPs, and (2) researchers develop research contingency plans, both of which are discussed later in this chapter.

## Inflexible Timelines

Contracts usually require that research be conducted or deliverables be produced within a specified period of time, although in some circumstances, funders will amend contracts to allow necessary alterations in research design. In the case involving prisoner research referenced above, after one agency declined to permit scheduled interviews to take place, the agency sponsoring the study agreed to give us a yearlong extension in the middle of the funding period to allow the research team to develop alternative research plans.

On other occasions, however, funders may not be so flexible with research timelines. For example, funders may not have the ability to delay expenditures, particularly when their own funding is contingent on the publication of deliverables or when there might be other reasons to believe that funding will be interrupted. Alternatively, funders may not have performed sufficient due diligence before approving contracts and, therefore, may be unaware that their own rules and regulations may restrict them from sponsoring particular methods of data collection or working with particular populations or sensitive data, for example. In still other cases, funders may face procedural or bureaucratic requirements that could delay research beyond the originally agreed upon or even realistic research timelines.

In one study, our funder required that we alter the approved study design because of unforeseen timeline constraints. We were informed that the sponsoring office had discovered, after signing our contract, that the regulatory authority that enabled the study required that any interview questions be published and available for public comment for 11 months prior to implementation. To be clear, this restriction is not necessarily a normal constraint on the research process, but dependent on the rules of the sponsoring agency and the funding sources—other VE studies, including those involving interviews with victims of actual major terrorist attacks, had been conducted in the same country within weeks of those incidents. To be fair, the funder had not sponsored social science research before and was, therefore, presumably unfamiliar with this constraint.

Nevertheless, the funding agency refused to delay the study to permit either the 11 month public comment period—which would require publication of the study questions in the *Federal Register*, the journal the US government uses to solicit feedback on proposals, or allow us to redesign the project. The sponsors additionally informed us that they might lose all funding for the project if the research funds were not spent during that fiscal year. They further argued that the possibility of an impending government shutdown accelerated the threat of losing funding should the study not commence immediately. As awardees, it was impossible to know whether these concerns were actually justified or simply justification for our funder’s desire to avoid project delays. Regardless, because these developments were so unexpected, we advise researchers to always ask funders if they foresee any obstacles to implementing proposed research before signing contracts.

## Compensation for Study Participants

Another constraint that can emerge after study approval is that funders may be reluctant to approve compensation for study participants or discover that they are prohibited by regulation from doing so. While not always necessary, compensation for research participation is sometimes needed in order to reach the right research populations who may otherwise be unable or unwilling to participate. Prohibitions on compensation can extend beyond just the distribution of cash payments to study participants. For example, in some cases, the use of research funding to purchase refreshments for volunteers in events connected to the study is also prohibited. Some volunteers are willing to go unpaid in exchange for a modest meal if they participate in events during hours outside of work, but even this may become impossible to provide due to funder restrictions. Some researchers are able to recruit a significant portion of the general public to participate in online surveys that generate quantitative data, but this can sometimes be prohibited within funders’ organizational guidelines and regulations as well.

Compensation, however, is not necessary—or even permissible in some instances—with regard to certain research populations, e.g. government personnel. It is incumbent upon both researchers and funders to determine whether proposals to compensate study participants are legal and ethical. Additionally, as some proposals will involve partnerships with external organizations, all parties involved must be aware of any restrictions on payments to third parties to avoid contract disputes.

Research funders should communicate prohibitions related to the compensation of study participants in the RFP; they should certainly make researchers aware of them before commencing any funded research involving paid participants. Restrictions on the compensation of study participants can lead to samples that are too small or too unrepresentative of the broader population to be valid. For example, when we discovered that we would be unable to pay participants in our study, we ended up with a pool of participants that was less than one-third the size we originally proposed and that did not meet any of our parameters for community demographic representation. It was also not representative because we relied on volunteers who were interested enough to participate and had an atypical degree of education and interest in VE and homeland security. Constraints on available volunteers are one reason why many academic studies involve university students, captive audiences that do not represent general populations in age, education, or income level. In lieu of a representative population sample, many researchers

turn to their own professional and personal networks for assistance, but these are also unlikely to produce representative samples.

When restricted from using paid participants, our research team attempted to compensate by setting up recruiting tables at public events and locations, including the community library, but this strategy also produced virtually no committed volunteers. Additionally, we found out after the project was awarded that we were unable to compensate the partner organizations working with vulnerable communities that provided letters of support for our initial proposal that featured communications with these demographic groups. Those organizations soon withdrew from participation in the study. There may be legitimate reasons to avoid compensation for external partners, but funders should indicate these prior to acceptance of awards.

## Requested Alterations to Research Findings

More problematic than requests to alter data collection or research methods are funder requests to alter the findings of completed studies, including through the omission of particular findings. When funders do not accept research findings or otherwise view them unfavorably—because they are unwelcome for political reasons or because of other organizational interests—funder-researcher disputes can be more difficult to resolve than those over methodology or inference. Funders may “bury” studies by simply never publishing them, asserting their ownership rights over research outputs as the intellectual property (IP) of the funder.

Occasionally funders will take these claims a step farther. In one instance, a VE study funders informed us that our findings were “politically embarrassing” and requested different results that contradicted our own findings. The funder in question even requested removing sections of our literature reviews that referenced studies detailing difficulties in decision-making or policy implementation. When we declined to comply, the funder threatened to terminate our contract and to give our data to other researchers who would presumably be more amenable to producing the funder’s desired product. In this instance we were compelled to seek legal advice and to inform our sponsor that we might be compelled to act as whistleblowers to the broader government and research community before the funder agreed to allow us to complete our contract. This is an extreme example and we recommend researchers attempt to avoid litigation and political fights, especially when their own safety might be compromised. Still, it is important for researchers to understand their rights to IP and payment in every contract.

Ultimately, in our experience, when most difficulties arise, it is still possible, albeit with some compromises, to complete studies and generate new, potentially lifesaving findings to share with participant agencies and to produce peer-reviewed publications. In the next section, we detail our experiences with improvising methods as needed while remaining within the approved research design. Overall, we recommend that researchers undertaking work on VE consider the political and organizational interests of study sponsors and prepare contingency plans for mandated alterations to their research designs or findings.

# ADAPTATION AND ALTERNATIVE DESIGNS

Researchers must be prepared to adapt their studies in light of unforeseen developments related to funder decisions as well as to complications that arise over the course of study implementation. In some cases, the inability to implement a research design might be because of the mistaken assumptions of the researchers. In other cases, it may be researchers who identify flawed policy assumptions or practices. Our study had the goal of determining how social media would impact trust in emergency communications. After approaching potential participants, we discovered that the emergency alerts one local government agency disseminated over social media would not be visible to employees in other local government agencies whose office computers had firewalls.<sup>6</sup> This potentially lifesaving finding was not data that we had sought or anticipated. Researchers studying VE and policy responses should take note of study implementation difficulties, identify public safety issues, and attempt to improvise on their research designs.

## Adopting Alternative Methods and Open Surveys

In some cases, researchers may be required (expectedly or unexpectedly) to alter the methods used to obtain data. For example, we were notified after our proposal had been accepted that we would not be able to ask any questions of the participants to analyze their reactions to risk communications, as we originally proposed. To address this unexpected, but fundamental change to our research plan, we adopted a new design utilizing an open-ended survey that instructed participants to read material supplied to them and then to “record how would you react if presented with this information if it actually happened.”<sup>7</sup> While we used this approach out of necessity, the method proved useful in essentially recording the responses we originally wanted.

While open-ended responses will produce a significant number of irrelevant responses (in our experience, these can include some participants devoting more attention to critiquing the writing style or verisimilitude of an experiment than recording their own reactions), they provide the most adaptable tool available for replacing research instruments when necessary. They can also produce unexpected insights that would not likely be obtained if the scope of questions was limited to issues that researchers consider relevant prior to conducting the study. Unexpected-but-important findings from open-ended questions may also include gaps in knowledge or biases among subject participants. When confronted with unexpected method restrictions, we recommend researchers think through and adopt alternative methods capable of producing comparable results, akin to our own.

However, adopting a new research method and design can prove costly. To get the results from open-ended surveys, researchers would need to perform a content analysis using qualitative data software to identify which types of responses are produced under certain conditions. This requires obtaining soft-

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6 Malet and Korbitz, “Bioterrorism and Local Agency Preparedness,” 10.

7 Arlene Fink, *How to Conduct Surveys: A Step by Step Guide*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2009), 78.

ware and training, developing a response codebook, and having project team members spend significant hours coding the responses, which can quickly become the biggest expenditure of a project. Adopting such a major change is only possible if the funder consents to a new expenditure budget. Our funders agreed to permit us to do this, but we were obliged to cancel the planned professional production and dissemination of our findings to emergency responders to have the funds available.

In addressing the possibility of required late-stage method adaptations, funders should take the initiative to offer alternative means of data collection; researchers should not hesitate to request they do so, although some funders might be leery to offer recommendations about methods with which they are less familiar. The funder of our aforementioned study, who informed us after our proposal was approved that we could not use our previously-approved “focus groups” because that implied the use of otherwise prohibited scripted questions, also informed us that we would be permitted to use “table top exercises” instead. Although we viewed this as a purely semantic distinction, the funder considered the latter an “improvised discussion”, and therefore permissible, as opposed to scripted questioning.

We were able to collect useful data from these sessions, although the results were also unstructured. We were also obliged to code this qualitative content, an added task and expense. Still, we would not have been aware of this option, which proved a viable alternative, had it not been suggested by the funder. Researchers should be receptive to funder-proposed alternative methods but must always be cognizant of the data they are seeking to obtain and how an alternative method may affect the data gathered.

## Budget Flexibility

Funding for research is often strictly regulated and subject to a limited range of uses, which do not always align exactly with all the project requirements. What is more, the guidelines around the use of funds for specific activities and purposes related to the research, but not directly involving research, can be vague and difficult to interpret. For example, when the funder that restricted us from compensating study participants encouraged us to invite them to evening table top exercises, the funder informed our organization, the funding recipient, that, while research funds could not be used directly to pay for food, the organization could still purchase meals using its own budget. This presents an interesting ethical and contractual dilemma. Practically speaking, there was no way to prevent the organization from using transferred research funds for otherwise restricted products and services.

To avoid issues like these involving expenditure ambiguity, researchers should always attempt to secure supplemental funding for projects in line with their funding requirements and institutional policies. In fact, doing so can be an attractive signal to funders that researchers enjoy institutional or community support and will be able to build on their projects. Decisions to use available resources outside of the study contract, however, must be pursued with great caution and transparency to avoid the appearance of or potential for impropriety.

Furthermore, researchers can request that their affiliated institutions assist with costs and logistics not covered by research funding. Funders should always be made aware when this occurs to ensure that funds are not misused. For example, we have observed awardee organizations use research funding to purchase office supplies and for other expenditures not covered by contracts. To address this, we recommend that funders require strict accounting procedures to safeguard against misappropriation. In ideal cases, funders will inform researchers that they can use general contractual payments to cover expenses that the funder is not permitted to pay directly, which can be a useful workaround. Researchers should always be aware of restrictions around their use of funding and opportunities to mitigate them.

## Identifying Findings Outside the Original Scope of Study

Unexpected constraints on studies that have been approved or have already commenced provide researchers with an opportunity as well as a challenge. In some cases, researchers may discover new and interesting results that were not anticipated and, if their use of the study data is not restricted by its funder, these findings can be used in subsequent research. For example, when we sought to test responses to social media communications about risks related to terror attacks, we quickly learned that the dozens of government employees who volunteered would only use email in the event of an actual emergency. The finding did not align with our original study objectives, and, indeed, prevented us from meeting some of our objectives, but it was valuable and potentially useful for other projects, nonetheless.

As a result of an additional study constraint, we also discovered that other volunteers who participated in the study by email remained more active volunteers, potentially opening new avenues for research into social media use. Researchers who manage to navigate unexpected constraints, whether due to funder restrictions or facts uncovered during the study, should maintain flexible thinking and look for unexpected seeds of future research. While potentially demoralizing and frustrating, funder-imposed research constraints can still produce interesting and relevant findings, both within and outside of the project scope.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS – AND FOR FUNDERS

This chapter identified several potential challenges that can emerge in funder-researcher relationships and as a result of study constraints caused by funder interventions and other factors that can arise while implementing a VE study. However, most of these issues can be mitigated through appropriate planning and a willingness to adapt and compromise. Regardless of the nature of the disruption, researchers should plan carefully so that their research designs are resilient enough to withstand unexpected shocks, particularly those undertaking VE studies.

# Institutional Review Boards and Human Subject Research

Most universities internationally require human subject research to be reviewed for ethical and legal standards by an institutional review board (IRB) or a similar body. IRBs will differ between institutions, so it is vital to check what your IRB requires before proposing a research design based on human subject participation. Researchers not affiliated with a university will still find it desirable to work with an IRB to ensure legal protections, and many publishers will require evidence of institutional review before publication of findings.

It is worth noting that regulations vary greatly between institutions, and some are far more flexible than others. In some cases, IRB approval requirements will make it easier to adapt a method or research project because they do not require specific information, e.g. planned participant questionnaires for approval. In other cases, however, strict IRB guidelines will make adaptations more difficult. Researchers should be aware of and communicate any potential IRB issues associated with adapting project plans with their funders. In addition, researchers should be cognizant of the degree to which their research plans require a stricter IRB approval process. For example, some universities have human subject protocols that were created with the strictest standards for medical research that may be unnecessary for the planned research method, i.e. tabletop exercises.

That being said, in our study, some of our participants reported that the materials we had them read left them feeling “anxious” or “depressed” even though they were aware that what they were reading was a depiction of a fictional scenario. Whether these participants were any more emotionally distressed than they would have been reading about real world news is beside the point. Participation agreements provide research subjects with fair warning that they may encounter upsetting material and detail their rights and means of recourse as participants. These agreements not only protect the subjects, but also the researchers, their organizations, and their funders from legal action, bad publicity, or impropriety. We do not advocate avoiding or disregarding IRB approval. In cases where multiple institutions are involved in a research project, the research team should consider which of their institution’s IRB approval they should seek in line with the research methods and topics and consider the flexibility allowed by each of the IRB options should the study need modifications. Researchers should communicate IRB requirements, safeguards, and implications for adapting the study (some of which may be financial) should the need arise to their funders.

## Clarifying Funder Expectations

Whether funders are receptive to flexible proposals or to the collection of data that is different from what they normally collect will depend on the funding organization. For example, we encountered different perspectives from our funder on everything from our literature reviews to valid data inferences while conducting our VE risk communications experiment. Ultimately, our contacts at the funding organization acknowledged that they did not have the background in the social sciences necessary and were funding this type of research for the first time. Although we were clear in our proposed research design in response to the RFP, and the funder told us that we were selected based on the strength of our research

design, there were evidently very different expectations and understandings. We recommend discussing expectations with sponsors, during the RFP period if possible, and identifying any potential problems or misunderstanding well before a research project commences.

Specifically, we recommend asking whether there are particular outcomes that the funders hope to see or if they simply want the most accurate data. If funders express a preference for particular findings, researchers must confront their own ethical principles and answer difficult questions regarding their willingness to continue the project. For example, if a funder pressures the researcher to modify their research results, does that justify potentially altering the validity of study findings through changing research conclusions or the presentation of data? The most fundamental basis of scientific integrity should invariably lead to the rejection of those types of terms or conditions from funders.

## Building Resilience into Study Proposals

Leaving aside the unique challenges that we have encountered, researchers should prepare for the unexpected and have contingencies in mind if the original study design cannot be completed. If key elements of the study cannot be completed for one or more reasons, how will enough data be collected?

While it is important to be nimble and respond to unforeseen problems, we recommend advance preparation and thoughtful consideration of contingencies. Consider what other resources are available, or which would be sufficient to implement at least some version of the original research design. For example, if funds are not available to pay study participants, perhaps it is still possible to entice some volunteers to participate with off-budget incentives. These might include ordering food for participants through the organization's regular accounts. These contingencies do not need to be presented in proposals, but they should be available if requested, and they will be useful to researchers in thinking about just what information is required for the study and the most efficient ways to obtain it. Contingencies may even become preferred options.

We also recommend asking sponsors for suggestions of acceptable alternative methods if they express concerns about aspects of a research plan. If a funder informs researchers that they are not be permitted to convene "focus groups" when those are included in a proposal, the team should ask funders whether alternative forms of data collection could be substituted. For example, "tabletop exercises" that do not have explicitly scripted questions can yield very similar results with moderators who are familiar with the study and who can guide discussion.

## Understanding Researcher Rights

Dynamics between researchers and funders may become contentious, particularly if personnel changes on either side mean that one or both sides of the relationship were not party to the original agreement. In other cases, new supervisors can introduce unanticipated constraints on both funders and research-

ers. Individual funders may face performance review pressures to ensure that contracted research is delivered and meets organizational standards.

However, the relationship between researchers and funders is not an equal one. Funders may threaten to withhold payments or prevent publication of research, and this creates a high degree of leverage over individual researchers. This is particularly true for junior scholars at universities who must establish research and funding records to secure tenure and maintain their careers in academia. Researchers and their institutions also face the indirect costs of time spent developing new methods outside of contracted hours. When funders introduce alterations to projects, it places the burden on researchers to complete contracts even when they have commitments to other work or are now without the resources required to produce agreed-upon deliverables.

It is important that researchers understand their rights to the IP produced under contracted research. Depending on the agreements, funders may have sole discretion over publishing the results. In other instances, it may be sufficient to send articles to peer-reviewed journals with information about the funding source and a notation that publication does not constitute approval of the results by the funder. In our experience, funders may never publish any findings from studies that they have funded, but they can still permit publication of critical findings, including in the instances referenced in this chapter. We recommend that researchers identify potential alternative venues for publications in case sponsors decline to publish them. This could include academic journals and also reports published by privately-funded policy institutes or think tanks that would be amenable to disseminating research when government agencies are not.

In some instances, it is not funders, but other members of academic teams, who claim IP rights to the work of their colleagues because the work was produced while team members were performing contracted work. This may be the case even then the researcher's work is not related to the contracted project simply because their work hours have been earmarked for the contract—we have seen this relationship exploited by senior VE researchers supervising graduate students and junior researchers. From our own consultations with IP lawyers, ownership of ideas can be difficult to establish. However, as with funders, money talks in these situations—the party holding the funding usually has the distinct advantage. We strongly advise all researchers to be fully aware of the terms of any funding contracts before committing to work. Likewise, researchers should be able to identify avenues for seeking redress from funders, whether through internal mechanisms of the study sponsor, conditions expressed directly in contracts, or with external watchdogs.

## Recommendations for Funders

Due diligence about potential constraints is necessary both when drafting RFPs and when reviewing finalists for awards. The same offices that would be contacted during implementation should be contacted prior to approval of a proposal to determine whether it is feasible for the funder to sponsor the study and whether it would require any modifications. “Any” modifications is a better standard to use than “significant” modifications, because even compliance officers in funder organizations are not likely

experts in proposed research methods and would be unable to determine whether seemingly minor required modifications would have major impacts on study designs or even invalidate them. To avoid difficulties once contracts have been signed, it is better to let researchers determine whether and how they can make requested changes [before accepting awards](#).

In general, funders should create and maintain open lines of communication with researchers to prevent unforeseen problems from arising or intensifying. To avoid them from the outset, it is preferable to identify any potential organizational interests or biases in preferred outcomes, and to make intentions explicit in the RFP. It is also important to establish clearly defined and communicated standards of data use and ownership.

VE researchers may believe that they are helping sponsors by reporting findings that their agencies are under-resourced, but the funders might view this as exposing them to liability for shortcomings. Researchers will not be aware of the political and bureaucratic considerations shaping decisions within funder organizations and between these organizations and their own sources of funding. Altering findings may be politically useful but counterproductive for policymaking if the desired conclusions do not match the reality of challenges and threats.

## Violent Extremism and Unpredictability

Studies of violent extremism and responses to it necessarily involve analysis of dynamic and complex human behaviors. Researchers develop theories and models that help to identify general patterns but do not tell us how specific individuals or groups will behave.<sup>8</sup> It is important that VE research designs are flexible enough to accommodate deviations in subject behavior. But they should also be resilient enough to accommodate modifications resulting from changes in sponsor expectations or access to resources. Funders should also be aware of the burden that unexpected modifications to already approved research proposals have on researchers and their affiliated organizations and work to clarify any restrictions, to the extent possible, in the RFP or prior to awarding a contract. While unavoidable obstacles may sometimes arise, open lines of communication between researchers and research funders are key to ensuring a smooth, accurate, and productive research process in the spirit of the scientific research method. They are essential to producing the information necessary to craft effective VE policy and practice.

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<sup>8</sup> John Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618 (2008): 80.

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# RESOLVE

NETWORK

## INSIGHT INTO VIOLENT EXTREMISM AROUND THE WORLD

The RESOLVE Network is a global consortium of researchers and research organizations committed to delivering fresh insight into violent extremism around the world. The Network provides access to open-source data, tools, and curated research to ensure policy responses to violent extremism are evidence based. Members of the Network work in parts of Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East to promote empirically driven, locally defined responses to conflict and to support grassroots research leadership on violent extremism.

Our partners operate in more than 25 countries where challenges with conflict are an everyday reality. We are passionate about amplifying credible local voices in the fight to mitigate the destabilizing risks of social polarization and political violence. The RESOLVE Network Secretariat is housed at the U.S. Institute of Peace, building upon the Institute's decades-long legacy of deep engagement in conflict-affected communities.

To learn more about the RESOLVE Network, our partners and how to get involved visit our website, [www.resolvenet.org](http://www.resolvenet.org), and follow us on Twitter: @resolvenet.





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