

Evidence and Expert Authority via Symbolic Violence: A Critique of Current Knowledge Production on Perpetrators

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Field research can be dangerous. Talking to individuals who have participated in armed formations and who have been in a position to perpetrate violence, be it as soldiers, heads of repressive cooperatives, interrogators in prisons, or members of militias, poses problems that are uncommon in other fields of ethnographic research and qualitative interviewing. Increasingly, literature in the fields of peace and conflict studies deals with methodological problems such as danger during field stays;¹ ethical challenges;² research fatigue;³ power relations and their representation;⁴ the partiality, power, and positionality of the researcher;⁵ and the phenomenon of over-researched communities.⁶

The problem is that instead of incorporating this current methodological awareness and discussions into the study of perpetrators, many analysis continue to derive evidence and expert authority from interviews with purportedly 'dangerous' and 'hard-to-reach' people and/or conduct fieldwork in allegedly perilous 'danger zones'. At the same time, they often ignore basic demands of qualitative and ethnographic field-

- 1 Adam Baird, 'Dancing with Danger: Ethnographic Safety, Male Bravado and Gang Research in Colombia', *Qualitative Research*, 18 (2017), 342-60.
- 2 Elisabeth Jean Wood, 'The Ethical Challenges of Field Research in Conflict Zones', *Qualitative Sociology*, 29 (2006), 373-86.
- 3 Jelke Boesten and Marsha Henry, 'Between Fatigue and Silence: The Challenges of Conducting Research on Sexual Violence in Conflict', *Social Politics*, 25 (2018), 568-88.
- 4 Kate Cronin-Furman and Milli Lake, 'Ethics Abroad: Fieldwork in Fragile and Violent Contexts', *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 51 (2018), 607-14; Audra Mitchell, 'Escaping the "Field Trap": Exploitation and the Global Politics of Educational Fieldwork in "Conflict Zones"', *Third World Quarterly*, 34 (2013), 1247-64.
- 5 Nadjie Ali-Ali and Nicola Pratt, 'Positionalities, Intersectionalities, and Transnational Feminism in Researching Women in Post-Invasion Iraq', in *Researching War: Feminist Methods, Ethics and Politics*, ed. by Annick T. Wibben (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 76-91. Dipali Mukhopadhyay, and Romain Malejacq, 'The "Tribal Politics" of Field Research: A Reflection on Power and Partiality in 21st-Century Warzones', *American Political Science Association*, 14 (2016), 1011-28.
- 6 Tom Clark, "We're over-Researched Here!" Exploring Accounts of Research Fatigue within Qualitative Research Engagements', *Sociology*, 42 (2008), 953-70. Maysoun Sukarieh, and Stuart Tannock, 'On the Problem of over-Researched Communities: The Case of the Shatila Palestinian Refugee Camp in Lebanon', *Sociology*, 47 (2013), 1-15.

Journal of Perpetrator Research 3.1 (2020), 207-213
doi: 10.21039/jpr.3.1.36 © 2020 by the Author



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work, where the researcher's positionality matters, and where access to the field and its impact on the sample and collected data form an essential pillar of analysis. There are basic questions to consider, such as (1) Will someone introduced and approached as a perpetrator discuss his or her ideological commitment with, for instance, a white Western male? (2) Can I conclude from the silence on ideological issues – often years after the fact – that these are not relevant to him or her? (3) How does gender affect silence or, conversely, immensely proud descriptions of bravery and strength in fights? (4) How do I deal with the fact that many respondents have already been interviewed multiple times, sometimes over decades?

Too many qualitative studies, especially those examining genocide perpetrators where researchers regularly encounter over-researched communities and self- and academically aware respondents, remain silent on issues of positionality and field access, thereby, although possibly unwittingly, evoking an image of fieldwork conducted in dangerous places with hard-to-reach and, at times, even dangerous respondents. This is especially, but not only, true of comparative projects, where a lack of time and resources often creates 'parachuting researchers'. The problem is that, purposefully or not, silence on field access and positionality risks inappropriately claiming expert authority and evidence if the claims are not accompanied by sound qualitative analysis.

Berit Bliesemann de Guevara and Roland Kostic have highlighted the emergence of a 'fieldwork industry' in conflict studies 'in which "informants" and "interview partners" handle a constant influx of researchers of all colours and in which access to the field and to informants and data is commodified (through paying professional travel agencies, fixers, informants, etc.)'.⁷ To that list, one should add research assistants co-constituting not only the field that researchers study, but – to differing degrees of course – also the data.⁸ This problem is relevant to research in all conflict and post-conflict settings, but especially to research on genocide perpetrators, which is characterized by strong path dependencies – not due to ongoing conflict and actual dangers in warzones, but due to an established and deeply rooted peacetime industry catering to incoming researchers. Here as well, fieldwork industries often make it remarkably easy to meet multitudinous respondents. This is

7 Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, and Roland Kostic, 'Knowledge Production in/About Conflict and Intervention: Finding "Facts", Telling "Truth"', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 11 (2017), 1–20 (p. 10).

8 Maria Eriksson Baaz and Mats Utas, 'Exploring the Backstage: Methodological and Ethical Issues Surrounding the Role of Research Brokers in Insecure Zones', *Civil Wars*, 21 (2019), 157–178.

not a sign of successful field research, let alone evidence for sound arguments and analyses. The real work starts afterwards: interviewing and analysing interviews with academia- and journalism-experienced respondents; or working to reduce potential bias in the sample created by institutionalized and pre-structured pathways.

A striking example for institutionalized pathways in perpetrator research can be found in Cambodia, specifically, in studies on the Khmer Rouge. Access to information about the Khmer Rouge is usually granted with the help of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), which is mainly tasked with documenting the Khmer Rouge regime. The center disseminates documents to researchers and the public and conducts its own studies on the regime, its history, and its structure. Everyone who studies the Khmer Rouge depends on the center's collaboration, and the center's support is required in order to interview former Khmer Rouge, especially for researchers working on comparative projects who lack deeper knowledge of Cambodia. This creates a neat bottleneck through which almost all researchers must pass to access data on former Khmer Rouge perpetrators. Moreover, all researchers going through DC-Cam receive the same list with the same potential interviewees. An interview with a former victim of the Khmer Rouge central prison Tuol Sleng (S-21) illustrates this phenomenon: 'My living [condition] is bad. Today, I have nothing to depend on but Chhang Youk [the head of DC-Cam], who continuously sends journalists to interview me. Each of them gives me 20 USD or 30 USD.'⁹

Certainly, the problem is not simply the existence of a fieldwork industry, but the lack of awareness and discussion of its existence and its impact on data collection in numerous qualitative studies. Furthermore, it is not only victims of the Khmer Rouge who participate in the fieldwork industry, but also perpetrators. These perpetrators have been professionalized over the years, not only in monetary terms but also in terms of how to talk to researchers and journalists, who have certain expectations and research needs, in order to personify a certain version of a perpetrator. They know how to avoid harming their prestige (e.g., by not delving too deeply into anti-Vietnamese ideologies and conspiracies and not appearing radical in any regard) and how to avoid implicating themselves and their colleagues in criminal activities. If they have an extensive interview history, they may even

9 Chum Mei, 'Interview with Chum Mei Survivor of Tuol Sleng Prison', interviewed by Sim Sorya (Phnom Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2006), p. 22. The translation has been slightly corrected by the author.

be aware of many discourses about perpetrators and know how to appear in a socially and juridically beneficial light.

The fieldwork industry not only comprises people endeavoring to positively depict themselves; it also confronts researchers with the complexities of trauma, which are often intertwined with current politics in a post-conflict country. In the case of Cambodia, for instance, many former perpetrators still hold high-level positions and are even serving in the current government (not the least of whom is Prime Minister Hun Sen, a former deputy regiment commander). Thus, traumatized respondents are in complex politico-psychological states, as exemplified by the interview with the above-cited Tuol Sleng victim:

Sorya: Do you sleep well?

Chum Mei: It takes me [a] long time before I can sleep because I think too much about my children who are unemployed, about not [having] enough [to live], and about the fact that we don't know how long we will live.

Sorya: Why?

Chum Mei: I am sad every day because if I get shot, that would be the end.

Sorya: Who would shoot you?

Chum Mei: We cannot foresee it.

Sorya: Why do they want to shoot you?

Chum Mei: I do not know if they want to shoot me. It is my feeling.

Sorya: Why?

Chum Mei: I feel afraid because I am a witness of Tuol Sleng and give interviews to journalists every day.

Sorya: Oh.

Chum Mei: Every day they speak on the outside [presumably meaning outside the prison where the interview took place], and they must have something in their mind.

Sorya: You refer [to] 'they' as the former Khmer Rouge, right?¹⁰

In cases where researchers omit information about field access, thereby suggesting a certain level of authority through having 'been there' and having talked to hard-to-reach and somehow special people, even in highly routinized and institutionalized research settings, the nature of the fieldwork industry raises many questions about the evidence being produced. Research data in these studies is often validated by the characteristics of the interview subject rather than by the chosen

¹⁰ Chum Mei, 'Interview with Chum Mei Survivor of Tuol Sleng Prison', interviewed by Sim Sorya (Phnom Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2006), p. 23. Translation slightly corrected by the author.

methodology, which would include discussions over positionality and access as well as an awareness of authenticity as a socially constructed category. This resembles Bliesemann de Guevara's description of politicians' field visits to conflict zones as an 'epistemic practice' that produces claims over untainted and authentic 'facts' and an 'expert authority' after 'having been there'.¹¹ Similarly, academic studies run the risk of staging a form of epistemic theatre by claiming to have obtained untainted and direct knowledge from talking to 'dangerous' but 'authentic' people in 'dangerous places' if 1) access to the field and the positionality of the researcher are excluded from the analysis and 2) if the people being interviewed – in an act of symbolic violence – are depicted as a special type of people.¹²

The fieldwork industry phenomenon and the eclipse of access and positionality in many studies illustrate why it is questionable to focus on the category of 'perpetrator' as vanguard for understanding a conflict or violence more generally. Perpetration is always bigger than the perpetrator; it is not merely an individual action, emotion, thought, or motive writ large. By isolating perpetrators and suggesting that they hold the truth of a conflict, essential factors of perpetration are overlooked and are replaced instead with the perpetrator's personal perspectives and characteristics. Violent *collective* action is not – at least not just – the product of an individual. The individual is always already part of a social field with various interdependent structural positions and relationships, as well as an ideological and historical formation. Factors that might matter to certain positions or individuals in the field might not matter to others, but this does not mean that they are irrelevant to, or absent from, all actors in similar positions. Ideology, for instance, might matter greatly to some and little to others in the field. However, it might also be dependent on the situation, on emerging dynamics, on power relations in general, and within certain situations, on the positions of actors in the overall structure of the social field and on its historical stage.

11 Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, 'Intervention Theatre: Performance, Authenticity and Expert Knowledge in Politicians' Travel to Post-/Conflict Spaces', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 11 (2017), 58–80.

12 Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992); Daniel Bultmann, 'The Normality of Going to War: Aspects of Symbolic Violence in Participation and Perpetration in Civil War', in *Perpetrators. Dynamics, Motivations and Concepts for Participating in Mass Violence*, ed. by Susanne Buckley-Zistel and Timothy Williams (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 99–116.

A focus on seemingly isolated, hard-to-reach, dangerous perpetrators obscures the overall structure of the field; internal structures and relationships; the complexities of ideology, history, and positionality; and the interdependent positions of commanders, mid-ranking operators, politicians, bureaucrats, guards, interrogators, soldiers, community leaders, drivers, medics, workers, cooks, educators, and so forth within violent organizations. Thereby, researchers claim expert authority, symbolic capital, and evidence by discovering the truth of the conflict within the reasoning and actions of a 'hands-on perpetrator'. Research on perpetrators should, therefore, stay away from mere sample sizes and include a critical awareness of symbolic violence and access to the field in order not to turn symbolic violence into symbolic capital for the researcher. Obviously, researchers will not access untainted and absolute truths waiting to be picked up by anyone brave enough to enter danger zones and speak to hard-to-reach 'hands-on perpetrators'. As mentioned above, the real problem can be dealing with too many research-experienced respondents as well as institutionally pre-structured samples. Many classic cases in perpetrator research involve over-researched communities. This, of course, does not mean that there is nothing left to be researched, but that we should start a discussion about methodology, positionality, symbolic violence, and bottlenecks in the field in order not to create 'facts' based on biases.

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