

## Response to Christian Gudehus

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**C**hristian Gudehus's reflections on the Editors' Introduction to the first issue of the *Journal of Perpetrator Research* (JPR) raise a host of profound and challenging critiques for this field. I sympathize with many of Gudehus' points, though in some instances they appear compatible with the general thrust of the research program set out by the JPR editors. These remarks, then, are meant as a friendly engagement with his own provocative points, but also an invitation to pursue a topic that is not extensively covered in either of those two contributions, namely how to theorize moral responsibility in light of the empirical advances of perpetrator research.

Gudehus is primarily concerned with the reification of analytical categories in perpetrator research. As he sees it, there is a risk of determining, a priori, the classes of actors as well as the scope of analysis. The danger is that the researcher will apply deductively developed categories of perpetrator, victim, bystander, resister, rescuer, and the like, to empirical cases by searching out instances that confirm these pre-existing categorizations. This may include, for example, treating all members of the state security forces as perpetrators, and then confirming such a claim by looking for and finding instances where they committed atrocities, while ignoring or downplaying confounding cases. Rather than assume stable actor categories and then populate them with specific examples, he advocates focusing on actions and behaviour first, and then inductively developing proper taxonomies from empirically observable behaviour.

A second risk according to Gudehus is the temptation to predetermine one's analytical scope by designating a case of violence as genocide, mass violence, settler violence, political violence, and so forth, before conducting sustained examinations of the various types and patterns of violence. Doing so may arbitrarily 'bracket out' dynamics of violence that do not fit, which in turn affects the general narrative and description of a case. For Gudehus, the methodologically appropriate alternative is to adopt the more capacious concept of 'collective violence', which is more inclusive and remains agnostic, in the first instance, about the motives and intentions of perpetrators. Specifically, he argues for analysing three broad dimensions of collective violence: events, actions, and relations, which in his estimation provide more accurate understandings of violence than relying on 'social categorizations of acting individuals'. In sum, 'the point of action-oriented approaches is that they focus on what has happened, on what individuals do, and not on the question to what category someone belongs'. Only further empirical analysis can determine the full spectrum of types of violence, and thus the relations between actors, in a given case.

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I am convinced about the importance of both of his concerns. On the first point, focusing on behaviour will require examining patterns of interactions between actors, which in turn means that any analysis of perpetrators will mean inquiring about victims, bystanders, rescuers and others. In other words, research on perpetrators cannot be conceptually divorced from other kinds of actors. The categories are dialectically shaped by one another.<sup>1</sup> I also agree with the second point that we should not prejudge the types of violence we will find, since often there are multiple kinds and analytical levels of violence. Rwanda in 1994, for instance, included genocide, politicide (the targeting of civilians because of political identity), and civil war, as well as less explicitly 'political' forms of opportunistic violence between neighbours. Furthermore, the basic markers of perpetrator and victim were interpreted in various ways in different parts of the country. The benefit of such an action-oriented approach is evident in the work of scholars like Aliza Luft, Hollie Nyseth-Brehm, and others, who have already made important contributions to understanding the complexity of perpetrator behaviour and violence dynamics.<sup>2</sup>

Here, I want to introduce an additional point that does not receive much attention in either the Editors' Introduction or Gudehus's comments.<sup>3</sup> It concerns the normative status of perpetrators, or how we understand moral responsibility. Specifically, I want to ask, how is the adoption of an action-oriented approach compatible with moral categories of responsibility?

The term perpetrator implies a certain stability – there are people who commit atrocious acts, they are responsible for these acts, and they should be held accountable in some way (whether they are or not is an empirical question, of course). There is a moral 'ought', in other words, implied in the use of the term perpetrator; what they did was wrong, and they ought to be punished in some form. Note that I am not making a point about *legal culpability*, which is constrained (and in fact constructed) by legal norms, rules and procedures, but rather my point is about *moral responsibility*, which is often even more contested and admittedly harder to pin down.

In some ways, the shift to an action-oriented approach can help identify some of these complexities of responsibility that are otherwise passed over in categorical approaches, but it is not at all clear how to link the sociological action-orientation with moral concerns. For instance, how to make sense of the moral status of someone

- 1 See, for instance, Alexander L Hinton, *Man or Monster? The Trial of a Khmer Rouge Torturer* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe 1846-1873* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016); Ernesto Verdeja, 'Moral Bystanders and Mass Violence' in *New Directions in Genocide Research*, ed. by Adam Jones (New York: Routledge, 2011).
- 2 Aliza Luft, 'Toward a Dynamic Theory of Action at the Micro Level of Genocide: Killing, Desistance, and Saving in 1994 Rwanda', *Sociological Theory*, 33.2 (2015), 148-172; Hollie Nyseth Brehm, 'Subnational Determinants of Killing in Rwanda', *Criminology*, 55.1 (2017), 5-31.
- 3 Kara Critchell, Susanne C. Knittel, Emiliano Perra, and Uğur Ümit Üngör, 'Editors' Introduction', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 1.1 (2017), 1-27.

who courageously resisted a violent occupying force (say, a Pole who fought the Nazis in his homeland) but also participated in killings against Jewish neighbours? Is he a national hero, a perpetrator and indirect collaborator in the aims of the Holocaust, or both? If he is labelled as both – resister and perpetrator – what does this mean for moral evaluation? And, does it risk generating a moral hierarchy of perpetrators?

Or, take resisters who commit widespread revenge killings against unarmed civilians who supported a genocidal regime. The resisters are perpetrators, no doubt, but they are also defined by their opposition to genocide. The point here is not to adjudicate between two possible categorizations – perpetrator or hero – each with its own moral valence, but to highlight that an action-oriented approach both invites and problematizes reflection on moral responsibility. The more we, as both researchers and moral beings, disaggregate and contextualize action and behaviour in collective violence, the more we are enjoined to pay special attention to the normative status of complex forms of perpetration without falling into the trap of dismissing moral concerns as part of an antiquated holdover of older, monadic theories of subjectivity.

It would be an exaggeration to claim that these challenges are insurmountable – I do think, for instance, that we can still talk about moral agency in light of the findings of social psychologists, who emphasize the centrality of context over disposition in explaining perpetration – but the field of perpetrator studies would do well to continue engaging with these broader normative issues, as well as how to develop theories of responsibility that take seriously what we have learned from empirical, social scientific research. The editors are certainly aware of these issues, as they note briefly while discussing questions of perpetrator representation, and I suspect that the *Journal of Perpetrator Research* can become an important venue to pursue this kind of work more extensively.

## Works Cited

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