

Attuned Empathy, 'Battlefields of Social Belonging,' and Other Reflections on Studying Those Who Perpetrate Violence

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In exciting ways, the authors and editors in this special issue are advancing the frontiers of research on people who perpetrate violence. I am honored to offer comments on this stimulating collection of articles. Rather than summarize the arguments, as Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee have ably done in their introduction, I isolate three themes that intrigued me across this diverse set of essays.

First, in a normatively risky move, and one that even seems to surprise some contributors, the articles in this issue demonstrate empathy and open-mindedness in how researchers engage with those who perpetrate and aid the perpetration of violence. In their introduction, Anderson and Jessee insist on the term 'approaching perpetrators,' an act of engagement and openness, and indeed this framing perceptively encapsulates the collection of papers. The authors are indeed approaching perpetrators attentively and openly, rather than simply researching them with analytical distance.

The question of attentive empathy and openness is present in a fascinating way in Hollie Nyseth Nzitatira, Eric Ndushabandi, Mariah Warner and Wes Wislar's article on using 'person-first' language when speaking about those who perpetrated genocide. The insight derives from criminology and disability studies, where person-first language has generated traction. For those convicted of crimes, using person-first language is associated with less recidivism, more integration, and other normatively positive outcomes.

In a bold move, the authors apply that insight to Rwandans who participated in genocide, thereby eschewing commonly-used terms like 'perpetrator' and '*genocidaire*.' The authors note that those who are released from prison and are reintegrating into their pre-genocide communities, want to be viewed and see themselves as Rwandans and as those who committed crimes, but who are not defined by those crimes. Labeling matters, the authors argue, for thinking about prospects of healing, social repair, and individual growth.

In quite a different vein, Dixita Deka, after spending time listening to relatives of those who were killed, as well as human rights actors, de-

cided to interview police officers in Assam, northeast India. The police are the primary actor associated with the 'secret killings' that resulted in the murder of some three hundred people. Dekka notes that attending to and narrating the stories of survivors, victims, and their relatives are ways of rehumanizing them and of helping to restore dignity and agency to those who faced disappearance and murder. But what of those who perpetrate violence or who are associated with institutions that do? Dekka ultimately approaches some retired officers, and the resulting interviews lead the author to ask new questions and challenge some assumptions, such as 'when is violence legitimate?' She found that interviewing the police 'offer deep insights into people's perceptions of causing, justifying, or silencing violence' (p. 31), that these interviews were of keen interest to relatives of those killed, and that dialogue with the police held potential for reparation and rehabilitation.

Similar threads are found in the other papers, notably Chris Davey's piece on the Banyamulenge in eastern Congo. On the one hand, the Banyamulenge have, collectively, been targeted for violence, but, on the other, some Banyamulenge have engaged in violence or in armed action that caused great human suffering. Davey centers the complexity of their position with openness and empathy.

There is much to say here. The authors and editors bring out a central dilemma in research on violence: when approaching those who participated in one way or another in the commission of major human rights crimes, including genocide, researchers are likely to have an initial position of ethical distrust and judgment; after all, in these moments, researchers are face-to-face with those who engaged in or aided murder. Yet to understand perpetrator motivations and the conditions that gave rise to their participation in violence, which are central questions for scholarship, one must listen to those who commit violence with an open mind. One has to try to understand them, which almost inevitably leads to appreciation for the situations in which they find themselves.

That was my experience when I interviewed several hundred convicted persons who had committed genocide crimes in Rwanda.¹ I started with judgment toward those in prison, but after six months of interviews, I ended with empathy - as well as a recognition of responsibility. That is an awkward, uncomfortable position, a normatively risky one because, again, we are talking people who commit some of

1 Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

the worst human rights crimes. What is exciting about this collection of articles is that the authors carefully identify and navigate this dilemma. They do not shy away from it, and I appreciate their intellectual courage in doing so.

I refer here to a kind of empathic orientation, one that does not negate or dismiss the harm committed or minimize the specific damage inflicted on victims, but that is still open to hearing from and taking seriously those who committed the violence. Perhaps the right label is 'attuned empathy,' empathy and openness toward those who commit violence, while remaining cognizant of the harm committed and the need for those who harmed to take responsibility for their actions.

Noteworthy is that the articles demonstrate that attuned empathy is important not only for understanding the dynamics of violence, but also for questions of social repair and futures of non-violence. Listening to and approaching those who committed violence with empathy and openness are steps toward a possible future of cohesion. Again, this is a normatively risky position; one does not want to excuse violence, yet developing an appreciation for why individuals would commit the violence is likely to facilitate the diminution of fear of living with them and their communities.

The attuned empathy shown by the authors is, to me, aligned with research on the causes of participation in mass violence. Many - though not all - individuals participate in violence for situational reasons, for reasons not of their own choosing or intention. The authors' empathy both allows them to see those dynamics, and is, to me, an appropriate response to them.

Emilie Caspar's essay on Rwanda and Cambodia is a good example, and other research, outside of this issue on people who perpetrate violence demonstrates the same.² The overwhelming driver of participation across the two countries, Caspar finds, is obedience to authority. While one could quibble with what exactly 'obedience' means in this article and what the mechanisms driving obedience are (is legitimacy the mechanism, or is the mechanism vertical or horizontal fear, peer pressure, conformity or some mix?), Caspar finds that those who committed the crimes were responding to directives from superiors in the state. Indeed, mass violence was state policy in Cambodia and Rwanda. If that is true, that suggests that empathy is appropriate. The conditions

2 Lee Ann Fujii, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Omar McDoom, *The Path to Genocide in Rwanda: Security, Opportunity, and Authority in an Ethnocratic State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

were not ones that individuals chose; they were instructed to commit harm and reasonably faced the prospect of punishment or marginalization for their potential resistance (or desistance, in Caspar's terms). Even if researchers may normatively wish that human beings in general and these persons in particular would have found a way to resist or evade the pressure that led to violent perpetration, one must recognize the difficulty of that path under the circumstances.

The second theme that these articles palpably demonstrate is the politics of research on violence. Carola Lingaas' essay addresses this issue directly. As she shows, the ruling party and successive governments in Rwanda have staked a great deal of legitimacy on the representation of the past, and the state has invested heavily in policing how history is narrated. Lingaas shows how those politics shape and bias official archives on the genocide. She argues persuasively that the archive is not simply a neutral depository of facts, but rather a political construct that reflects how those with power want the past to be understood. She writes: 'The official narrative is selective with regard to historical facts... Arguably, the silencing of people's experiences for political reasons, leads to a distortion of history and reality, and prevents a meaningful and lasting reconciliation' (p. 62). 'The Archive and its records,' she states elsewhere, 'should be read in relation to the power structures that created and surround it' (p. 53) These are sage words!

Davey's essay similarly shows the politicized nature of research. His is a fascinating account of how language and labeling not only serve to simplify very complex accounts, but also serve as a political litmus test for where an author stands on a particular issue. What an author in turn writes can facilitate their access to certain communities or can close off access, as Davey shows. In other words, conceptualization and naming are not neutral scholarly acts, but ones that are immediately read into the politics of who is recognized as a victim and who is not, who is seen to have legitimacy and who is not. Davey at one point refers to the language of violence as a 'battlefield of social belonging' (p. 74), a fantastic phrase. Scholars are implicated in these dynamics whether they want to be or not, and scholars face a snarl of ethical questions about how to handle that situation. Many scholars of violence are familiar with these dynamics, but in my experience, they rarely discuss them openly. I appreciate how Davey handles the question with insight and candor.

The Democratic Republic of Congo, especially eastern Congo, is a compelling place to broach the issues that Davey centers. Not only is

the history very complex, with layers of local, national, regional, and international actors, and waves of violence and dispossession dating at least to the colonial era, but it is also a case with what Davey calls 'multidirectional violence.' This is an important concept for studying perpetrators and those who perpetrate violence. To me, the concept moves beyond the somewhat frequently asserted idea that the boundaries of perpetrator, victim, and bystander are not fixed. In that frame, sometimes perpetrators are victims, sometimes victims are perpetrators, and sometimes bystanders become victims or perpetrators. However, the specific history that Davey highlights is even more intense and layered; he is referencing how in certain periods, Congolese Tutsis, specifically Banyamulenge, have been victimized in major ways on the basis of their identity. They have been denied citizenship; they have been the subject of campaigns of violence, even genocidal violence. And yet many Banyamulenge have been active in campaigns of violence in eastern Congo, which led to massacres, wholesale collapse, and mass death. The history of violence is multidirectional, in the sense that categories of actors are implicated in being victimized and victimizing. Davey's article raises the question of whether the concepts of perpetrator, victim, and genocide are helpful to account for this history. He highlights how these concepts can simplify history and center one part of the history while eclipsing others. The piece thus questions the utility of what he calls the 'historically overburdened labels of perpetrator and victim' (p. 71). Lest one think that eastern Congo is an exception, the challenges of 'multidirectional violence' are evident in many, if not most, conflicts.

Lastly, these essays are noteworthy for their conceptual innovation. Sticking with Davey, not only does he focus attention on 'multidirectional violence,' but also 'pre-judicial atrocity.' Eastern Congo encapsulates a terrain of violence where authoritative accounts, in the form of official truth commissions or criminal trials, have been minimal (despite a few cases from the International Criminal Court). In other words, we have a terrain of contestation precisely because of the absence of international or even domestic consensus or focal points that official accountability can generate. This too feeds the 'battlefield of social belonging' and the politics of naming. Similarly, Lingaas' notion of 'archival opacity' is a nice conceptualization that captures how archives can hide as much as they reveal. Nyseth Nzitatira et al.'s notion of 'person-first' approaches to those who perpetrate genocide, as opposed to '*génocidaires*,' is also a welcome conceptual move.

To conclude, the editors and authors are to be commended for putting together a collection of exciting, innovative essays on violence and those who commit it. The articles reinforce the value of grounded research, notably fieldwork. Empathy often is integral to fieldwork. One engages with and hopefully listens with an open mind to individuals in particular places. Insight, discovery, innovation, and ideally benefits to those who are approached should result from such work. These essays, each of which is based on research in places where violence took place, show how the value of fieldwork extends to the field of perpetrator studies, despite the challenges, ethical dilemmas, and politics that such work engenders.

Works Cited

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