

Researching Perpetrators, Revisited

Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee

This special issue responds to and expands on the critical conversation on methods and ethics in perpetrator research initiated in our edited volume *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*.¹ That project began under another name – *Approaching Perpetrators* – borrowing its title from a 2014 workshop on qualitative research with perpetrators of ‘political violence’ – a broad term that encapsulates a spectrum of violence, from ‘subtle’ peace-time crimes that disproportionately disadvantage vulnerable minority communities, for example, to more overt physical atrocities committed amid war² – co-organized by Erin Jessee and feminist anthropologist Tal Nitsán at the University of British Columbia in Canada.³ The subsequent workshop conversations convinced us of the pressing need to initiate a similar discussion within genocide studies too. At that moment, it seemed to us that few genocide scholars were reflecting in a meaningful way on the ethical and methodological decision-making that informed their scholarship, as well as the challenges they faced in research, despite the significance these had for the rigor of their resulting findings. And yet in casual conversations surrounding conferences and workshops in genocide studies, it seemed clear that many of us were struggling due to a general lack of adequate research methods training at our institutions, and support in navigating the particular political challenges posed by the contexts in which we worked, which

- 1 *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020).
- 2 This term was coined by a cohort of anthropologists who, in the 1990s, established an ‘ethnography of political violence’ subfield. See, for example, Carolyn Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992); and *Violence in War and Peace: An Anthology*, ed. by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 2003). The subfield was later adapted by political scientists, who focus more so on physical atrocities. See, for example, Stathis Kalyvas and Scott Straus, ‘Stathis Kalyvas on 20 Years of Studying Political Violence’, *Violence*, 1.2 (2020), 389–407.
- 3 This workshop was generously funded by a Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Connection Grant and a Wenner-Gren Workshop Grant. The resulting papers were published in a 2015 special section of *Conflict and Society* <<https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/conflict-and-society/1/1/conflict-and-society.1.issue-1.xml>> [accessed 14 June 2024].

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included heightened risks and dangers that often were invisible to us until we were deeply embedded in our research.⁴

For this reason, soon after the workshop we began working on an edited volume on this topic. One early piece of feedback from the editors at the University of Wisconsin Press's Critical Human Rights series was that the notion of *approaching* perpetrators might be off-putting to prospective readers. It implied a physical closeness, an intimacy even, with people responsible for committing horrific atrocities. Did we really want to help people approach perpetrators? Or were we more accurately trying to provide scholars with support in creating appropriate ethics frameworks and research designs for their research with perpetrators?

We ultimately opted for the title *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*: it seemed more accurate given the objectives of the edited volume, key among which were: to demystify the ethical and methodological challenges that are inherent in close-contact qualitative research with perpetrators of genocide and related mass atrocities, with an emphasis on oral historical and ethnographic methods; and to provide newcomers to this field with guidance for how they too might work with perpetrators in different contexts in a more ethical and rigorous manner. *Researching Perpetrators* also seemed to better fit given the strengths of the volume's chapters, which bring into conversation the expertise of scholars from history, criminology, anthropology, political science, and law, and present insights on current and historic case studies, including well-researched examples of genocide like Rwanda, Cambodia, Bosnia, and the Holocaust, and less-commonly researched contexts such as Argentina and Syria. The conclusion, in particular, offers guidelines that have since been recognized as 'most helpful for graduate students looking to engage in perpetration-aligned research.' The reviewer, peace and conflict studies scholar Christopher Davey, further noted that 'this set of reflective tools would have been immensely helpful several years ago' when he first started his fieldwork amid the ongoing conflict in the western Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).⁵

But a few years later – having been invited to take this conversation further with the *Journal of Perpetrator Research* – we still see the

4 Important exceptions to this statement include the works of political scientist Lee Ann Fujii, to whom *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide* is dedicated.

5 Christopher Davey, 'Davey on Anderson and Jessee, "Researching Perpetrators of Genocide"', *H-Africa*, June 2022 <<https://networks.h-net.org/node/28765/reviews/10340091/davey-anderson-and-jessee-researching-perpetrators-genocide>> [accessed 18 July 2024].

value of returning to the original notion of approach. Perpetrators and perpetration cannot be understood without approach: a term that goes beyond the practical tools suggested by a focus on ethics and methods to invite important theoretical contributions as well. Most notably, centering 'approach' pushes researchers to consider how they approach – personally and perhaps also physically – people who have come to be labelled perpetrators: what biases and baggage do we potentially bring to the research, long before the actual research even begins? How do we mitigate the potential negative impacts that our biases and baggage can have on our research and the people we intend to work with, whether living participants or historical actors whose crimes are long past? And how do we work with people defined as perpetrators in ways that allow space for the challenges and suffering that they have endured, even as they have committed horrible atrocities and inflicted incredible physical and emotional pain on others?

Indeed, in responding to a call to build upon the conversation initiated by *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, the contributors to this special issue have picked up on many associated dilemmas involved in approaching perpetrators, including the long-standing problem of framing and labelling research subjects as perpetrators, and our varying responsibilities as researchers in constituting, navigating, and reproducing stories of atrocity by centering the people who incited and committed atrocities. Many of the quandaries involved in doing perpetrator research will be familiar to qualitative researchers who work among other political violence-affected cohorts, yet the perpetrators of atrocities can evoke particular aversion, stigmatization, and polarization. Such negative sentiments are especially likely where researchers work in close proximity to perpetrators: the focus of *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*.

However, in this special issue, authors push the conversation further to critically explore a more methodologically diverse array of perpetrator research that includes neuroscientific and archival approaches, among others, that do not necessarily require the same degree of close physical contact with perpetrators. The articles also feature a wider range of potential case studies of atrocities, allowing us to expand the discussion beyond well-researched perpetrators of genocide in Rwanda and the Holocaust to comparatively understudied mass atrocities, like police-perpetrated 'secret killings' of alleged political subversives in Assam, India, or Banyamulenge combatants in the DRC, who – as with other combatants groups in the west – claim to have survived

genocide and related mass atrocities, even as they inflict violence on others. These chapters offer fine-grained analyses of methodological considerations, but the authors also grappled with issues of representation, not only in terms of individual participants, but of violence and historical narratives more broadly. Researchers hope that others will read our work, yet what are we saying and what might the impacts of this work be on different audiences? Whether or not we are historians, we may be seen to contribute to the historical record, and likewise regardless of our intentions, our work may be perceived as inherently political. We are storytellers who are dealing with individuals' experiences, but also, at times, collective narratives that claim to tell the story of entire conflicts. What are the silences, blind spots, and limitations of the stories that we tell, and what ethical responsibilities do we carry for telling nuanced and complete stories in the face of research that is inherently limited and yet often highly politicized?

The articles in this special issue respond to these questions in different ways and using different examples of political violence. Peace and conflict studies scholar Dixita Deka introduces readers to the Indian police's efforts in the 1990s to employ 'secret killings' to quash an insurgency in Assam. She explores the challenges of ethnographic research across conflict lines, including interviews with surviving family members and police officers who were responsible for assassinating and disappearing alleged supporters of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). The responsible parties have not been prosecuted for these atrocities, creating an atmosphere of impunity in which victims and their surviving loved ones are struggling for recognition, and the perpetrators are likely to diminish or justify their crimes. Deka's article reveals how researchers who investigate these counter-insurgency operations constantly navigate challenges regarding how best to access the experiences and memories of people from different sides of a conflict in a safe and ethical manner. How can researchers work on and with security forces involved in such serious human rights violations, while also working with the people they harmed?

Deka also asks critical questions about how we represent alleged perpetrators in our research: for example, should we also name them when they are identified by third parties? 'Naming and shaming' is often at the heart of human rights non-governmental (NGO) and community-based (CBO) organizations' advocacy work in the aftermath of mass human rights violations, but academics must consider whether

naming perpetrators violates the basic principle of ‘first, do no harm,’⁶ where it could expose them to heightened social stigma or prosecution, for example. This brings academic work into tension with advocacy: a dilemma confronting Deka personally, as one of her intermediaries helped her recruit a police officer for an interview by promising him that Deka ‘would do research and not politics’ (p. 29). But are researchers acting as bystanders or becoming complicit in ongoing injustices where we fail to name human rights violations and the people responsible for them in deference to maintaining access and neutrality? And yet taking an ‘activist position’ also poses the risk that the responsible parties might view the researcher as inherently adversarial to their interests, prompting them to refuse to participate and thus preventing access to important insights on the conflict.

Legal scholar Carola Lingaas also approaches issues of transparency and access, but through an examination of the ‘archival opacity’ that surrounds the Genocide Archive of Rwanda’s efforts to promote public understanding of ‘the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi’.⁷ Using the lens of opacity, Lingaas interrogates what stories are included or excluded in the archive and why, with a focus on the comparative underrepresentation of the genocide’s Hutu perpetrators, the few interviews with whom – unlike those of genocide survivors – have not been translated from Kinyarwanda to English, limiting their accessibility for international audiences. This is likely not accidental: it speaks to the preference in post-genocide Rwanda – as in many other post-genocide contexts – to foreground victims’ and survivors’ experiences. Solidarity with victims and survivors is crucially important yet, given the Archive’s goal of supporting post-genocide reconciliation, Lingaas argues its decision to largely exclude perpetrators’ testimonies simultaneously obscures more complex understandings of the genocide and its aftermath: a critique that undoubtedly applies to conflict archives beyond Rwanda too. Yet her analysis also raises questions regarding a

6 See, for example, UK Department of Health, Education and Welfare, ‘The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research’, The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 18 April 1979, <<https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/belmont-report/read-the-belmont-report/index.html>> [accessed 25 June 2024].

7 The ‘1994 genocide against the Tutsi’ is the preferred label of the Rwandan government and affiliated survivor organizations. This label is controversial, however, for solely recognizing Tutsi victims of the genocide, and prioritizing Tutsi suffering during the genocide over the broader political violence in the 1990s that negatively impacted all Rwandans’ lives. Scott Straus, ‘The Limits of a Genocide Lens: Violence Against Rwandans in the 1990s’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 21.4 (2019), 504–524.

post-conflict archive's ability to facilitate reconciliation if it does not allow space for a more complex accounting of what happened during the genocide. Indeed, the impulse to silence perpetrators may directly conflict with the humanization required to reconcile relationships, creating further obstacles to long-term peace and political stability. Lingaas's article builds on a rich interdisciplinary literature that challenges the misconception that archives are neutral repositories of information, especially in conflict-affected contexts wherein archiving practices are often themselves politicized and constitutive of state-approved human rights narratives.

Peace and conflict studies scholar Christopher Davey also explores the challenges of researchers' efforts to engage with complex narratives of atrocity crimes in contexts where participants seek to promote a more simplistic version of events, grounded in what he characterizes as ongoing 'multidirectional violence' by combatant groups in the eastern DRC. Davey's fieldwork focuses on Banyamulenge combatants, a cohort associated with a South Kivu-based Tutsi minority community, who claim that Hutu Power extremists who fled Rwanda in 1994 as their efforts to commit genocide were thwarted, are subjecting their people to a new genocide. Yet these same Banyamulenge combatants have also been implicated in war crimes and crimes against humanity against other communities amid the last thirty years of war and political instability in the DRC. The Banyamulenge are one of several combatant groups in the DRC whose members are attempting to claim victim status, while also being accused of perpetrating atrocities, and many of these claims are relatively untested and 'not yet narrativized internationally' (p. 74), meaning the historical record is especially incomplete and contested. Davey's article asks readers to consider the following question: as groups seek to 'own' the genocide label to shore up their political legitimacy, what is the researcher's role? Caution in reinforcing their claims is merited, given courts and related transitional justice institutions have yet to weigh in on the atrocities and systematically assess accused perpetrators' criminal responsibility. Yet we must also acknowledge that courts themselves represent certain types of truth, and perpetrator research cannot be tied to judicial determinations of culpability, considering their inherent limitations: most notably, the lack of judicial processes for most perpetrators of mass atrocities in different contexts internationally. Indeed, Davey writes of 'pre-judicial atrocity' in the DRC, yet, in this and many other cases, the atrocities may never be subjected to judicial processes.

Neuroscientist Emilie Caspar's article brings qualitative interviews into conversation with psychology and neuroscience techniques that can be useful for revealing people's motivations to participate in genocidal atrocities in Cambodia and Rwanda, as well as their reasons for desistance. Neuroscience is, at present, particularly underrepresented in perpetrator studies, while many associated researchers' use of psychology is grounded in social psychology experiments of the 1960s, making this article a timely contribution to the field. Caspar argues that using neuroscience tools can help to address the limitations commonly associated with qualitative interviews such as social desirability bias whereby research participants seek to narrate their experiences in ways that present themselves in a favourable light. She points readers to such tools as functional Magnetic Resonance Imagery (fMRI) and electroencephalography (EEG), which in various contexts are helping neuroscientists to examine cognitive processes and brain regions associated with 'certain states-of-mind' or situations. Initial findings are largely supportive of qualitative studies: for example, demonstrating that where people participate in atrocities because they were following orders, they experience less empathy for their victims and feel less responsible for their crimes. These newer methods do not displace qualitative methods like interviews and ethnography, but can produce complementary information that has the added benefit of being replicable and therefore perceived as more scientifically rigorous, resulting in a convincing call for more multidisciplinary research collaborations.

The final article by criminologist Hollie Nyseth Nzitatira, peace and conflict studies scholar Eric Ndushabandi, and sociologists Mariah Warner and Wes Wislar calls for researchers to consider shifting away from normative labels such as 'perpetrator' in favor of person-first language, such as 'person who committed genocide.' Their argument builds on growing research in criminology that shows lower rates of recidivism and enhanced reintegration into communities where person-first language is used. However, it also corresponds with a recent shift in perpetrator studies from actors to action – from a focus on perpetrators to perpetration – out of recognition that people are more than the crimes that they commit during periods of exceptional political violence. Drawing on interviews with Rwandans who were convicted of crimes associated with the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, Nzitatira and co-authors further demonstrate that Rwandans in this context rarely identify themselves as perpetrators, even when they acknowledge they committed atrocities. Perhaps the perpetrator label

is too essentializing, too confining, too bereft of nuance and fluidity to encapsulate the complexity of individual agency and personhood. Yet this article raises important questions regarding how a potential shift away from ‘perpetrator’ might be seen among victim and survivor communities in Rwanda and other mass atrocity-affected contexts, as well as how it might affect our research design and methods in the field of perpetrator studies. We might posit that the person-first language shift is already underway in the more nuanced and complex accounts scholars have produced about perpetrators in recent years. Our work as researchers will always contain normative assumptions, but awareness of those assumptions can help us to go beyond the ‘perpetrator imaginary’⁸ – which in many contexts reduces people who participate in mass atrocities to monsters and sociopaths, among other overly simplistic tropes – to consider perpetrators as ‘whole people’.⁹

Finally, political scientist Scott Straus completes the special issue with his afterword, in which he highlights three key themes that the articles speak to in particularly useful ways, including: what Straus terms ‘attuned empathy’ in reference to the authors’ ‘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’ (p. 179); the importance of acknowledging the politics surrounding research with perpetrators, in which researchers are enmeshed whether they want to be or not and yet rarely discuss openly as part of their findings; and finally the conceptual innovations advanced, from Davey’s ‘multidirectional violence’ to Lingaas’ ‘archival opacity’ and more. And of course, Straus aptly notes that as a whole, the special issue reinforces the value of grounded research in political violence-affected contexts, despite its many challenges and frustrations.

But as with *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, which we concluded by listing several theoretical, ethical, and methodological challenges on which we felt further discussion was needed, we are still left with the impression that there is much more work to be done to enhance the transparency of research in the field of perpetrator studies. Priorities for future researchers who work on the perpetration of political vio-

8 Kjell Anderson, ‘The Perpetrator Imaginary,’ in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 23–48.

9 Indeed, a similar shift is underway in oral history studies of victims and survivors of mass atrocities. See, for example, Anna Sheftel, ‘Talking and Not Talking about Violence: Challenges in Interviewing Survivors of Atrocity as Whole People,’ *Oral History Review*, 45.2 (2018), 278–293; and *Beyond Testimony and Trauma: Oral History in the Aftermath of Violence*, ed. by Steven High (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2015).

lence include how we work with different kinds of interlocutors and other research stakeholders in safe and ethical ways, and how we translate what often amount to highly personal and context-specific narratives and other data for varied international audiences, among other as-of-yet rarely explored challenges. We sincerely hope that readers of this special issue will be inspired to take these and other topics further, to facilitate greater transparency in perpetrator studies.

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