



Between fatigue and silence: the challenges of conducting research on sexual violence in conflict

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**Between Fatigue and Silence: The Challenges of Conducting
Research on Sexual Violence in Conflict**

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3 **Between Fatigue and Silence: The Challenges of Conducting Research**
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5 **on Sexual Violence in Conflict**
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10 Abstract
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12 This paper discusses the meanings of research fatigue and silences in conflict-related
13 sexual violence research. Drawing on field experiences in Liberia, Tanzania, Bosnia
14 and Herzegovina, and Peru, we discuss some of the unintended consequences of
15 persistent focus on victim-survivors' narratives and argue for a reflexive feminist
16 perspective that allows us to question the need and context of interviewing survivors
17 and the associated insistence on disclosure.
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5 I am fed up with documentations of my grief –
6
7 journalists asking me to sing a lullaby for my
8
9 dead children, to broadcast during commemorations,
10
11 government officials using my story as propaganda
12
13 during elections, women activists forcing me to talk
14
15 about rape only to prove that women are oppressed,
16
17 researchers claiming to record history when
18
19 all they do is pick my wounds.
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24 This is my story, not yours. Long after you
25
26 turn off your recorder I stay indoors and weep.
27
28 Why don't people understand? I am neither hero,
29
30 nor God, cannot stand the talk of forgiveness.
31

32 For years I went to every wake. Wept at every man's
33
34 funeral. Kept asking: why? Realised I will never
35
36 understand. Now I just endure the days, by planting
37
38 cucumbers which you interrupted, by believing
39
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42
43 in another world where there is justice, by watching my
44
45 remaining children as the sleep. Spare me your despair
46
47 and understanding. You can't resurrect the dead, feed
48
49 my hungry children, bring me recognition and respect.
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51 Take history with you and go. Don't come here
52
53 again, I just don't want to know.
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3 'The Angry Survivor'

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5 Choman Hardi, 2015 From *Considering the Women*
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12 Kurdish scholar and poet Choman Hardi, in her reflections on research she carried
13
14 out with women survivors of the Anfal genocide in Iraqi Kurdistan, concluded that
15
16 her interviewees often felt exploited by those who came to ask questions but gave
17
18 nothing in return. Interviewers –scholars and journalists in particular- can benefit
19
20 professionally from women's accounts of violence while those very women's lives
21
22 may continue as they were, and worse yet, with no improvement (Ybarra 2014).
23
24 What are the challenges (to researchers and researched) in interviewing survivors of
25
26 atrocities, particularly victims of sexual violence, for the purpose of academic
27
28 research? For survivors, talking (for the sake of talking) might not be beneficial
29
30 enough, as Hardi's poem suggests; talking to researchers where this leads to mental
31
32 health and/or economic support, symbolic and economic reparation, and/or
33
34 recognition of harm done may be just some of the expectations that are deemed
35
36 meaningful, but are not always attainable through the research encounter (Hardi
37
38 2011, 200). In this paper we ask what research fatigue means in a context of conflict
39
40 related sexual violence, and how this relates to what is often seen as a pervasive
41
42 silence around the topic.
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51 To a great extent, the overall theme and the collection of articles in this issue are a
52
53 call for more attention to the challenges, dilemmas and benefits of in-depth
54
55 qualitative research and analysis in understanding sexual violence in, and during,
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3 conflict. This focus is in direct response to an emphasis in policy circles and an
4
5 enduring desire for a certain form of 'evidence', which tends to reflect *patterns* of
6
7 prevalence in different conflicts as discussed elsewhere (Boesten 2017, Engle Merry
8
9 2016, Koos 2017, Skelsbæk this volume). This is particularly problematic, we argued
10
11 in the introduction, because quantified evidence or rates of prevalence divorced
12
13 from, and used in isolation from, the broader socio-political contexts within which
14
15 sexual violence occurs, can contribute to a distraction from, and depoliticisation of,
16
17 particular foundations and the subsequent harms facing women and men in conflict
18
19 settings. This suggests that contextualized qualitative research is a necessary
20
21 complement in order for numbers to be meaningful and useful in policy terms (see
22
23 also Hoover Green 2012, 2013). And we argue that qualitative research is particularly
24
25 necessary and beneficial because it focuses on and highlights perspectives directly
26
27 from the source: survivors who have experienced varied forms of violence within
28
29 their everyday lives and within the context of diverse communities. However,
30
31 seeking those first-hand accounts is not unproblematic.
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37 This paper examines some of the challenges of doing qualitative research
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39 with victim-survivors of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). We argue that while
40
41 listening to the affected population is essential to developing an adequate
42
43 understanding of survivors' lives and needs and for ethically-sensitive and
44
45 practically-appropriate responses (Burgess-Proctor 2015, Easton and Matthews
46
47 2016, Taylor, Sollange and Rwigema 2015, Skjelsbæk, this issue), there are also risks
48
49 attached to a singular focus on one particular conflict phenomenon (sexual violence
50
51 *per se*), and on specific populations. Using our own field experiences in Tanzania,
52
53 Peru, Liberia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) as starting points, we argue that
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3 research fatigue and (re)traumatization are research problems that not only affect
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5 participants, but also shape the research findings and the nature of possible
6
7 interventions (Houge and Lohne 2017).¹ First, we discuss the idea of over-research
8
9 and research fatigue amongst populations, and specifically among survivors of
10
11 conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), followed by a discussion of silence among
12
13 respondents. We discuss silence, because we suggest that it is intimately bound up
14
15 with feminism and feminist methodologies as key to this normative project; and
16
17 because it may drive us in directions that either contradict or justify research
18
19 decisions about which populations and which places to do research with and in. In
20
21 addition, we will demonstrate that the nature of sexual violence itself is particularly
22
23 prone to silence, as social stigma related to sexuality prevents many victim-survivors
24
25 from speaking out. Disclosure of experiences with sexual violence can have
26
27 devastating effects in the everyday lives of survivors, in spaces where researchers
28
29 may not enter, or after they have left. It is this ambiguity between the potential
30
31 benefits and risks of disclosure that makes research among survivors of sexual
32
33 violence particularly challenging.
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40 Some of our own fieldwork experiences allow us to discuss these ambiguities,
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42 even if they relate to very different cases: in Tanzania, the research focused on
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44 people living with HIV/AIDS, and not on sexual violence per se. However, HIV shows
45
46 similar elements of social stigma on the one hand, as well as similar levels of 'hype' -
47
48 the idea that a particular social problem attracts sudden and massive interests from
49
50 a range of interest groups who all make a claim on victim-survivors, as we will
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54
55 ¹ Research fatigue and re-traumatisation are not only problems that occur in relation to qualitative research---
56 however, they are often discovered during the course of interviewing or speaking at length with survivors and as
57 such are more likely present where qualitative methods are employed.
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3 explain below- on the other. The research was carried out by Boesten between 2005
4
5 and 2007. The case of Liberia involves investigating the connections between
6
7 wartime and peacetime incidents of sexual violence. In particular the research
8
9 aimed to draw on theories of the continuum and political economy in order to
10
11 understand the complexity of barriers and underpinning structural inequalities
12
13 preventing survivors from attaining wellbeing. While in the case of BiH, part of the
14
15 same study as Liberia, victim-survivors faced similar institutional and foundational
16
17 barriers but over a longer period of time (BiH has been postconflict for 23 years).
18
19 However, because of this time, there has been both a hype and an abandonment of
20
21 BiH as a site to study sexual violence. Both these cases were researched by Henry in
22
23 2016. The Peru case refers to victim-survivors of sexual violence perpetrated by the
24
25 Peruvian military against local populations in its counter-insurgency campaign
26
27 against Shining Path between 1980 and 1992. The research was carried out by
28
29 Boesten between 2004 and 2011. The experience of collecting data in these four
30
31 contexts allow us to reflect on the methodological challenges in researching sexual
32
33 violence.
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40 Finally, in our conclusion we suggest a series of reflexive exercises that could
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42 help researchers decide if, how and when to interview victim-survivors, and when
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44 not to do so. In particular, through a concentration on the intensity (fatigue/over-
45
46 research) and the erasure (silences) of some research topics and sites, we argue for a
47
48 specific and stronger form of reflexivity when it comes to researching sexual and
49
50 gender-based violence in postconflict contexts, in order to ethically orient ourselves
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52 as researchers to victim-survivors and to the academic field of study.
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Over-research and research fatigue

The literature on over-research and research fatigue in qualitative methodologies covers a range of topics, disciplines, and areas of research (see Clark 2008, 955 for an overview) and is not limited to researchers studying violence, women, or 'developing' contexts. However, we outline some of the main issues with overresearch and research fatigue and draw on our own research experiences in order to reveal some of the challenges that arise in the context of research on CRSV. Academic scholars have recently suggested that 'over-research' is an *effect* of continual and repetitive research of particular communities or populations, while geographers have tended to discuss over-research as an effect generated from research which has 'spatial bias' (Neal et al. 2016, Sukarieh and Tannok 2012, 496).

In contrast, 'research fatigue' –or a reluctance to participate in, or a disengagement from, research because of previous experiences with research – occurs in contexts that require participants to engage over a long period of time (i.e., some health research), or among research groups that are relatively rare or hard to reach (Clark 2008, 956). In this way, research fatigue is a concept which centres the research participant's experiences in and beyond the field--it is not related, directly, to the fatigue, if there is any, of the researcher or 'fieldwork site saturation' with an emphasis on the emotional depletedness of the researchers engaged in long studies with a similar population (Mandel 2003, Wray, Markovic and Manderson 2007). However, it can relate to fatigue caused and generated by a series of researchers continuously entering a specified research field and is therefore connected with the concept of 'over-research'. Previous studies with Indigenous communities around the world reveal the extent of the 'resident anthropologist phenomenon' –the idea

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2
3 that an indigenous community comes into being by having anthropologists in its
4
5 midst (Sukarieh and Tannock 2012, 496). Sukarieh and Tannock (2012) conclude that
6
7 while over-research can indeed happen in a range of disciplines and participants
8
9 groups, as Clark (2008) sustains, it is most prevalent in communities that

11 are poor, low-income, indigenous, minority or otherwise marginalized;
12
13 experienced some form of crisis (war, natural disaster etc.) and/or have
14
15 engaged in active resistance to the conditions of their poverty or
16
17 marginalization; and communities that are accessible to outside researchers
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19 (Sukarieh and Tannock 2012, 496).
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23 Clearly, there is a connection amongst research fatigue, over-research and
24
25 vulnerable populations, and this may be why certain populations and places gain
26
27 prominence or are continually ignored. This is certainly true for research with
28
29 survivors of sexual violence in a number of conflict sites, and we will return to this
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31 point below.
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35 Clark's study of research fatigue (2008) discusses the experiences of
36
37 researchers studying a range of issues concerned with children and families between
38
39 2000 and 2005 in the UK. The results show that participants become disillusioned
40
41 about their participation in research if they feel that the work does not lead to any
42
43 tangible change –no improved services, or increased voice or otherwise promised
44
45 social change. Participants may also report that they lose interest in the focus of the
46
47 research, the questions asked might not feel relevant to participants. Sukarieh and
48
49 Tannock (2012), looking at research fatigue in Shatila, a Palestinian refugee camp in
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51 Lebanon, found that community members were disappointed about the unmet
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3 promises of social change as well as with researcher practices, agendas, and
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5 identities, in addition to the focus of research and the questions asked.
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7 The consequences of over-research are various: first, as Clark (2008)
8
9 emphasizes in their research, we need to understand the phenomenon in order to
10
11 deal with it if the academic community wants to continue to do qualitative research
12
13 with populations that are traditionally marginalized (957). But secondly and perhaps
14
15 more importantly, the problem might be less about how researchers can maintain
16
17 engagement with participants, but about identifying and preventing the negative
18
19 effects felt by over-researched communities. Research often has unintended, and
20
21 unmitigated, effects upon social relationships and identities in fieldsites, which can
22
23 generate discontent amongst participants. Individual research participants then, are
24
25 not lone individuals embedded in the research---but part of a network of community
26
27 that is impacted upon by decisions and practices of researchers. In a similar vein,
28
29 the research carried out by Boesten in a Tanzanian town with a community of people
30
31 living with HIV/AIDS showed how long-term research relations created rivalries and
32
33 fragmentation between different groups of people living with HIV, as well as among
34
35 community members more broadly (Boesten 2011). Even supposedly less-extractive
36
37 research methods such as action research or participatory research do little to avoid
38
39 generating such negative dynamics. Instead, the power dynamics continue to be
40
41 unequal because participation is always limited to some members of a community
42
43 and not all (for perhaps logical reasons), and expectations of social change from
44
45 participants tend to be higher than any research project can realistically meet
46
47 (Boesten 2008). All of these factors contribute to ongoing inequality within the
48
49 research relations at the meso and macro levels (see also McCorkel and Myers 2003,
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3 Pascucci 2017). Arguably, these inequalities are exacerbated by the social and
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5 emotional sensitivities of traumatic experiences (i.e. HIV/AIDS, violence, and
6
7 extreme poverty), and the risks of participation in research –(i.e. disclosure), - might
8
9 be high. Residents of Shatila also felt they were often misrepresented, obliging to
10
11 the agendas of researchers rather than the needs, or lived reality, of inhabitants.
12
13 Poverty and abuse might be narratively and strategically ‘exaggerated’ and political
14
15 positions insinuated, rather than corroborated, for purposes of fundraising, or book
16
17 writing and publicity. This suggests that academic careers might stand in the way of
18
19 both research objectivity and prioritizing participant engagement over a ‘good story’
20
21 (Sukarieh and Tannock 2012, 502; Lal 1996).
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26 For Henry, Bosnian organizations providing support to victims and survivors
27
28 of conflict-related sexual violence twenty-two years after the end of the war,
29
30 collectively argued that the issue of sexual violence had been over-researched, and
31
32 that survivors had been asked to give testimonies too many times. With a formal
33
34 tribunal set up in The Hague, the total number of sites where victims were asked to
35
36 speak about their experiences had reached an unsustainable height (Skjelsbæk, this
37
38 issue). Throughout the postwar period, the issue of sexual violence and the
39
40 survivors associated with it became a highly politicized field (Weitsman 2008). In
41
42 particular, civil society organizations received a great deal of funding and support
43
44 from various donors, yet there seemed to be little trickle-down effect on survivors
45
46 themselves, many of whom faced a number of barriers including the ongoing
47
48 bureaucratic problems of the Bosnian (and Federation) state (Clark 2017a, 2017b).
49
50 Again, these are all also relevant to conflict-related sexual violence research, more
51
52 generally (Mertens and Pardy 2016, Hilhorst and Douma 2017). In addition, as we
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3 discuss below, (re)traumatization is an additional risk related to over-exposure in
4
5 research to conflict related sexual violence.
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7 Research with refugee camp-populations, sexual violence-survivors, and
8
9 people living with HIV, have in common that they attract not only academic
10
11 researchers and students, but journalists, aid agencies, and national and
12
13 international political actors who all contribute to what Hilhorst and Douma (2017)
14
15 call 'hypes'. Hilhorst and Douma refer to reinforcing 'loops' of media, general public,
16
17 aid agencies, and political actors that escalate attention for particular crises, bringing
18
19 about simplistic understandings, disproportionate and badly managed resources,
20
21 and a disregard for complexity and nuance and related problems and needs. Laura
22
23 Heaton (2015, 625) speaks of 'one story and one type of victim', such as 'amputees
24
25 in Sierra Leone, victims of kidnapping in Colombia, victims of chemical weapons in
26
27 Syria', or one particular injustice such as 'landmines, female genital mutilation, child
28
29 soldiers'. These are small hypes according to Hilhorst and Douma; sexual violence as
30
31 a weapon of war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a big hype, having all
32
33 but defined the violence in the DRC and the aid directed to it (Hilhorst and Douma
34
35 2017). This hype is, of course, also defining global policy in relation to violence
36
37 against women, and sexual violence in particular, throughout the world. Academic
38
39 researchers feed off, and into, these hypes (Meger 2016).
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46 Often, researchers are already present, or they may become attracted by the
47
48 hype. Academic funding bodies also play into humanitarian hypes by prioritizing
49
50 certain themes and regions of the world that are often in line with broader
51
52 attention. Kirby (2013) and Baaz and Stern (2013) have suggested this is also the
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54 case for many academic studies of conflict-related sexual violence, where the
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3 narratives, repertoires and registers tend to be more simplifying and obscuring,
4
5 rather than allowing for complexities. Either way, researchers will inevitably become
6
7 part of the hype whether they want to or not, and of the effects this has on
8
9 communities. For example, while working with HIV positive activists in Tanzania
10
11 looking at local political activism and patterns of stigmatisation, Boesten became
12
13 part of the problem of the fragmentation of aid money which poured in (2011).
14
15 Around 2005, the global AIDS industry had turned their gaze to grass roots
16
17 organizations of people living with HIV, hoping that such organizations could support
18
19 or even provide community-based services, including encouraging behavior change.
20
21 But the funding was unreliable and never enough, as funding bodies tended to
22
23 change their gaze from target group to target group. Necessity taught the participant
24
25 activists how to 'play the game', navigating expectations and fashions in the aid
26
27 industry (Boesten 2011, see also Baaz and Gray this issue; Mertens and Pardy 2016).
28
29 As a researcher studying these trends, it is inevitable to reinforce or disturb the
30
31 political strategy designed by studied populations merely by identifying and
32
33 therefore exposing them (Boesten 2008). Clearly, the problem goes beyond 'over-
34
35 researching' certain communities, or research fatigue, among participants, but is
36
37 deeply embedded in political geographies of power and inequality between
38
39 researcher and researched, between those studied and those who temporarily focus
40
41 their gaze.
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49 In BiH, certain organizations gained publicity in the media as being the
50
51 primary ones to address the needs of survivors. For example Medica Zenica became
52
53 the primary organisation supported by celebrity humanitarians, in some cases
54
55 gaining not only the largest share of researchers, but also charitable donations (see
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1
2
3 also similar in relation to other conflict sites (Mertens and Pardy 2016). Tensions
4
5 between and amongst survivor organizations are often exacerbated by researchers
6
7 continually entering the community and perhaps enforcing the inequality of
8
9 attention by focusing on a larger organization that already has longterm funding and
10
11 international recognition. In this way, over-research coincided with a form of
12
13 territorialisation over victims' and survivors' accounts, control over access to
14
15 resources and redress and importantly as gatekeepers or interlocutors for
16
17 researchers (Cohen and Hoover Green 2012).
18
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20
21 Hilhorst and Douma (2017) use the term humanitarian 'hypes' specifically to
22
23 analyse the excessive attention given to conflict related sexual violence in the DRC,
24
25 particularly between 2010 and 2012. While the authors recognize the benefits of
26
27 such attention as resources poured in, they are particularly concerned with the
28
29 many negative effects the hype has had on local communities. All other issues that
30
31 needed attention, including non-violence related health problems but also intimate
32
33 partner violence, were ignored in favor of sexual violence perpetrated by armed
34
35 groups. A competition among aid agencies over beneficiaries emerged which
36
37 generated tension among community members, and facilitated the rise of 'fake'
38
39 victims. Sometimes, fake victims (see Hoover Green 2013) emerged at the
40
41 encouragement of community leaders or by individual women and their families to
42
43 avoid stigmatization. For some communities, if the whole village was raped then no
44
45 single woman would be stigmatized or ostracized. Or victims were given access to
46
47 much needed aid, which might encourage victim-status independent of actual
48
49 experiences (Heaton 2014). Health care facilities also inflated numbers of women
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51 they treated for rape-related injuries, particularly fistula, in order to secure
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3 continued funding (Hilhorst and Douma 2017). Similar to the experience of
4
5 Tanzanian organizations of people living with HIV (Boesten 2011, see also: Beckman
6
7 and Bujra 2011), these are strategies of local leaders and service providers with little
8
9 to no access to funding other than from aid agencies, and hence, they have to play
10
11 to the fashion tunes of the public in Western countries, who feed into media
12
13 attention, funding bodies and aid agencies.
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16
17 In contrast to the cases above, it seemed that while there was an initial hype
18
19 in the context of postwar Liberia (Hoover Green 2013), this hype has not had the
20
21 same spread or depth as in other settings. For example, one survivor organisation
22
23 that Henry consulted outside of Monrovia had established a 'good' mechanism for
24
25 bringing perpetrators of sexual violence crimes to justice. Their techniques, which
26
27 focussed on perpetrators acknowledging their crimes and the effects of their actions,
28
29 were lauded by UN agencies and donor governments. The organisation was the
30
31 subject of several media campaigns celebrating the work of governance institutions.
32
33 Yet, the head of the organisation, stated that the organisation had not secured any
34
35 long-term funding or commitments from those same agents. Importantly, she also
36
37 claimed that researchers continued to visit the organization to ask survivors
38
39 questions but that survivors no longer believed that this would benefit them in any
40
41 way as years had passed with many visits and promises, and little returns. The
42
43 organizational headquarters still remained quite simply equipped---with no central
44
45 computing facilities for keeping in correspondence with donors, or recording data or
46
47 activities completed. In addition, when other activities were proposed, where sexual
48
49 violence was not the main focus, funders and researchers appeared to lose interest.
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51 Unlike in BiH, but more similar to funding structures for people living with HIV in
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3 Tanzania, Henry understood that the mass-scale funding and therapeutic services---
4 the sexual violence industry—was excessively diffused across Liberia, despite a
5 continual interest in victims and survivors of wartime sexual violence.
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10 Why and how, and with what consequences, the hype around wartime sexual
11 violence has emerged, in the DRC as well as globally, has been widely discussed
12 (Engle 2014, Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013, Heaton 2014, Hilhorst and Douma 2017,
13 Meger 2016, Mertens and Pardy 2016, Skjelsbæk 2010). What is important is how, as
14 researchers, we approach research on conflict-related sexual violence and take
15 seriously the problems of over-exposure of some affected communities. Sukarieh
16 and Tannock (2012) have some very clear-cut recommendations which we concur
17 with. First, they feel that the issue of over research needs to be at the ‘forefront of
18 [...] the politics and ethics of social science research’ (507). Second, simply looking
19 for less researched communities cannot be the solution: rather, they suggest, the
20 likelihood of over-research should always be taken into account, and hence,
21 considered, discussed and mitigated beforehand. This would mean discounting some
22 research sites at the earlier, design stage. Third, alternative research methodologies
23 may not have a mitigating effect. That is, no matter how sensitive the design, it may
24 be that the population is locked into a state of vulnerability that will take some years
25 to remedy. In these situations a type of moratorium on researching these
26 communities might be necessary. Perhaps the response should be, in specific cases,
27 that no new research should be carried out, and instead, other activities should be
28 developed in order to support specific communities. Fourth, they argue, over-
29 research cannot be approached simply as a methodological or ethical issue, but
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3 rather, as a reflection of the inherently skewed power relations between researchers
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5 and research populations:
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7 For, at its heart, the problem of over-research pertains to the question of the
8
9 relationship of social scientific research and researchers to the wider society
10 and economy as a whole. Only by paying direct and critically reflective
11 attention to the positioning of researchers, research projects, research
12 practices and research institutions within local, regional, national and global
13 structures and processes of power, identity, inequality, interest and control
14 can the problems of over-research and over-researched communities begin
15 to be understood and addressed (507).
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26 This is a question not only of the politics of knowledge production, but about the
27
28 'industry' that is generated from widespread attention to certain research sites and
29
30 communities and feeds into a larger question about the politics of methodology,
31
32 epistemology and research on the subject of sexual violence more specifically.
33
34 Because researching issues of violence, harm and trauma may necessitate a retelling
35
36 of the initial traumatic experience and experiences from wartime, questions of
37
38 methodology and epistemology cannot be considered too late. Importantly, it is
39
40 necessary to reflect on the politics of doing research predominantly in spaces where
41
42 geopolitics and global inequalities intersect. Why is it, for example, that researchers
43
44 continue to return to contexts such as Bosnia, DRC, or Liberia? What are the
45
46 research questions that are to be answered, and what methodologies are seen as
47
48 most effective, and why? These questions are important to consider early on, as they
49
50 affect the design and process of research projects and therefore have incredible
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3 significance for the types of findings that in turn influence academic and policy-
4 making fields.
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10 *Research fatigue and sexual violence*

11
12 There is something unique about interviewing victim-survivors of sexual violence and
13 their experience of overexposure to researchers. Research on stigma demonstrates
14 that there are a number of complex social and community responses to disclosure of
15 sexual violence (Theidon 2013, 2015, Lee 2017) and as researchers we know that
16 protecting survivors is important and as such disclosure must be managed well. The
17 issue of 'fake victims' discussed above reminds us of the social particularities of
18 disclosure of conflict-related sexual violence, and the need to work sensitively,
19 ethically and carefully. After all, stigma is often foisted upon survivors precisely
20 because the effects of sexual violence move well beyond the body (Annan et al.,
21 2015). That is, various cultural and religious views on the meaning of sexual violence
22 illustrate that victims may be subject to suspicion, derision, shame and deprived of
23 the possibility of marriage or inheritance. They may be exiled from the community
24 in quite visible ways (Coulter 2009, 134, 227). In many contexts conflict-related
25 sexual violence has been continually and intentionally kept hidden, by victim-
26 survivors as well as by witnesses. There are often very good reasons for not talking
27 about such experiences; the social consequences of speaking out can be very
28 negative for victim-survivors (Coulter 2009, 132). Part of the current academic and
29 policy attention to sexual violence in wartime (and sometimes in peacetime), is to
30 explicitly and collectively break the silence in order to counter stigma, and thereby,
31 reduce the negative social consequences of rape. However, willing ourselves to
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3 'break the silence' or 'combat stigma' is not always the preferred strategy of those
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5 who were subjected to the violence, nor is it clear whether they prefer the silence to
6
7 be broken for them (Porter 2016).
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9
10 In recent exploratory research on Liberia, stigma was an absent presence.
11
12 Henry found that survivor organizations did not focus on war-related trauma as this
13
14 did not offer much 'purchase' in the contemporary aid culture and context. Instead,
15
16 they focussed on pushing such narratives to the margins, in favour of recounting
17
18 widespread adult, adolescent and child sexual violence in the contemporary moment
19
20 (Thornhill 2017). Since there was little interest amongst local and international aid
21
22 actors, organizations had collectively vowed to 'move on' and to accept that
23
24 survivors would 'keep silent' (and stoic) about rape during wartime. In most cases,
25
26 survivors talked about the effects of stigma more generally, in terms of isolation and
27
28 dependence on informal economic networks, without attribution to whether the
29
30 violence occurred in wartime or peacetime. While the contours of stigma in an
31
32 everyday sense were made explicit, victim-survivors shared that they feared the
33
34 'potential stigma' associated with disclosing 'old' experiences of CRSV. Vastapuu's
35
36 (forthcoming 2018) work with female combatants in Liberia revealed that
37
38 community stigma sometimes resulted in the complete physical isolation for many of
39
40 the former combatants and survivors, as well as a new found dependence on illicit
41
42 drugs, and on researchers coming to seek out their testimonies. In this way,
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44 survivors had become dependent upon a number of insecure sources of income and
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46 aid and as such their accounts were shaped by the epistemic 'market'.
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53 Similarly in Liberia, second families (with new formations), stepfathers and
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55 other new kin, did not like the presence of children born as a result of sexual
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3 violence. These children were stigmatized on an individual basis as well through the
4
5 mothers who bore them. In order to remove stigma, mothers were encouraged to
6
7 reject these children and many were subsequently neglected within the community.
8
9 Aid and development workers often conducted informal 'checks' on these
10
11 sometimes abandoned or homeless children who became increasingly at risk of
12
13 sexual and gender-based violence themselves, if they were not already victims.
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15 Paradoxically, the silence was visible, palpable and present. Sexual violence was the
16
17 public secret that no one wanted to talk about, but hung heavily in the air (see also
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19 Coulter 2009). It was precisely because it failed to be a topic that could be
20
21 communally agreed upon as sufficiently important that it became so toxic for the
22
23 survivors and those working with survivors. Stigma could be attached to individuals
24
25 without their having publically disclosed any incident of rape. In such circumstances,
26
27 while stigma is clearly harmful to the women and children involved, researchers are
28
29 not necessarily best placed to contribute to breaking silences and combatting stigma
30
31 in conflict-affected communities. Locally-led initiatives may be in contrast to a
32
33 researcher's aims and objectives and this is where a range of ethical issues are raised
34
35 about any homogenous or universal ideology of 'breaking the silence' that is
36
37 imposed on survivors, or the repeated questions from researchers –academics,
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39 journalists, NGO personnel or government agents- to expose silence. Importantly,
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41 exposing survivors may have harmful effects.
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51 *Respect for selective silence*

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53 In their edited collections *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process* (2010),
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55 Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff argue that the research process must include not
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3 only what is said, but the myriad ways in which participants (and researchers)
4
5 convey information, data and experience through both non-verbal modes (much of it
6
7 embodied)---sometimes importantly by not saying anything at all. Silence, we know
8
9 from feminist research, can be an important signifier of the future of a research
10
11 project. In Kamala Visweswaran's *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (1994), one
12
13 whole chapter is devoted to the issue of silence as an act of counterethnography. In
14
15 her ethnographic account, Visweswaran learns that she can still generate ideas and
16
17 knowledge from a participant who 'refused' to participate. Famously, in the book *I*
18
19 *Rigoberta Menchu*, Menchu reveals that she must keep her community's knowledge
20
21 secret and that she cannot share or else betray her community as well as her
22
23 ancestors (1984). Likewise, Kimberly Theidon, in her research on Peru, also
24
25 emphasizes the need to respect as well as read the silence of those affected by
26
27 extreme violence (2013).
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32
33 The experience of doing research in the Peruvian context is somewhat
34
35 different from carrying out research in over-researched contexts such as Bosnia,
36
37 Rwanda, or DRC. In Peru there is no international hype around sexual violence, or
38
39 indeed anything else in terms of public or international humanitarian concern. If
40
41 anything, international aid agencies have withdrawn since the economy started
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43 growing fast in the mid-2000s. While a Truth and Reconciliation Committee in 2003
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45 concluded that sexual violence had been widespread during the conflict between
46
47 Shining Path and the military between 1980 and 2000, and was in majority and
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49 systematically perpetrated by the military and police, this fact has led to little
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51 international outrage or attention. Peru's economic stability and rapid poverty
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53 reduction post-2000, and its political resolution (despite, arguably, democratic and
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3 institutional deficits) may have contributed to the relative lack of international
4
5 media attention of its transition to democracy, and hence, weak visibility of the
6
7 atrocities of conflict and the battles for post-conflict justice. Hence, while local
8
9 social, political and economic dynamics need to be taken into account when doing
10
11 research on sexual violence in Peru, international interventions feature very little.
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13
14 Over-researching was thus not necessarily an issue in Peru between 2005-2011, but
15
16 the local dynamics around exposure were at least as urgent as discussed above. As
17
18 Sukarieh and Tannock indicated (2012, 507), simply moving to a less researched
19
20 community, such as Peru, does not necessarily resolve some of the ethical dilemmas
21
22 raised above.
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26 After hundreds of victim-survivors of sexual violence had given testimony to
27
28 the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Committee (2001-2003), Lima-based NGOs
29
30 started working with women to provide social-psychological support and to develop
31
32 judicial cases against perpetrators. They identified and traced victim-survivors using
33
34 testimony provided to the TRC, with their approval. However, for private reasons
35
36 few women were willing to talk beyond the TRC. While educated middle classes
37
38 working for NGOs in the capital were keen to break silences and seek redress, victim-
39
40 survivors had not yet found sufficient family and community support to take that
41
42 route.
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46 For example, one day in 2006, Boesten joined a psychologist employed by an
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48 NGO to visit a victim-survivor at her home. The woman, Sra Alicia², pushed the
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50 researcher and psychologist out of the doorway and onto the street indicating
51
52 clearly that she refused to talk there and then. The psychologist and the researcher
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57 ² Not her real name.
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3 went their ways, and Boesten went to talk to a human rights lawyer in the
4
5 neighbourhood. Half an hour in the conversation with this lawyer, Sra Alicia stepped
6
7 into the building indicating she was ready to talk. The lawyer left the building, the
8
9 psychologist was not present. There, in that space far away from the gaze of family
10
11 or community, lawyers and psychologists, she talked for two hours about her
12
13 intimate experiences with violence during and after the conflict. She asked for
14
15 nothing but a listening ear when she was sure she could not be identified as the
16
17 speaker by any one in the community.
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21 When Boesten asked the NGO to travel with them to remote areas of Peru
22
23 where they set up meetings with victim-survivors this request was rejected. The
24
25 NGO was aware of the precautions women took to participate –they often told their
26
27 families they were going to a meeting of a women’s organization, or were going to a
28
29 particular market far away- to justify their absence without disclosing the actual
30
31 reason. According to the testimonies given to the TRC, many victim-survivors were
32
33 harassed and abused at home, called ‘soldier’s whore’ by their partners and were
34
35 barely tolerated by their communities (Boesten 2014). Human rights organizations
36
37 keen to seek justice for crimes committed by the state, or simply keen to support
38
39 women and help them ‘break the stigma’ for the common good, had a hard time
40
41 convincing victim-survivors that such a strategy would be to their advantage. By
42
43 2016, the case of a group of women who worked for more than ten years with such
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45 NGOs, went to trial. The trial itself is testimony of how disclosure tends to re-
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47 victimise rather than break any stigma, as the Peruvian judiciary does not provide
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49 the women with psychological or material support for the duration of the trial, nor
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51 does it take into account the complainants desire for transparency. The judges
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3 reproduce harmful stereotypes, and favour the requests from the accused over
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5 those of the victims. The trial is already in its second year, and no end seems in sight,
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7 less so of a positive outcome.³
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10 The NGOs' decision not to allow a foreign researcher to join their efforts
11
12 might have been well judged, and helped to avoid resentment from participants. The
13
14 rejection also raised serious questions about the validity of the researcher's
15
16 methodological decision to interview victim-survivors: what answers would women
17
18 be able to give that the researcher could not find elsewhere? Were the questions in
19
20 need of answering about individual suffering, and if so, would their suffering
21
22 rightfully generate public knowledge? Or might there be other ways to highlight
23
24 suffering, and instead, study and analyze the social structures at the source of that
25
26 suffering? Sukarieh and Tannock (2012, 501) ask 'why study the Palestinians to
27
28 understand their lack of rights? Why not study the international community and the
29
30 Lebanese government who are responsible for this lack of rights?' In order to
31
32 understand the social dynamics, processes, and structures of widespread sexual
33
34 violence in conflict, using secondary sources, already recorded testimonies (via the
35
36 TRC for example), and interviews with those who work with or for victim-survivors
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38 goes a long way (Boesten 2014).
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44 So do first-hand accounts add anything to research? In the Peruvian contexts
45
46 there are still many questions to be answered, such as how women perceive their
47
48 own experience, how they survive day-by-day, how they have (or have not)
49
50 established intimate relations with life partners and children, either born of rape or
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55 ³ 'Justicia para las mujeres de Manta y Vilca: Carta abierta a la Corte Suprema de Justicia'
56 <http://www.demus.org.pe/noticias/justicia-para-las-mujeres-de-manta-y-vilca-carta-abierta-a-la-corte-suprema-de-justicia-2/>
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3 not, how the experiences of wartime sexual violence have influenced their
4 opportunities (but see: Escribens 2008, 2011, Theidon 2013). In Liberia, first hand
5 accounts need to be carefully parsed out, over long periods of time, where the 'past'
6 can be unfolded in fuller ways---and not in the shadow of funding scarcities or hype
7 loops. Qualitative research is one such method for 'breaking the silence' ethically
8 and carefully, by connecting past experiences with contemporary everyday lives. But
9 there are specific contextual elements that make the desire for silence also
10 understandable. As Karen Engle has argued, too much emphasis on wartime rape as
11 exceptional violence may actually reinforce the shame of rape, rather than
12 undermine it (Engle 2014, 25). The passing of time might help, not only in terms of
13 survivors' own distance to a traumatic past, but to how a society changes under the
14 influence of a traumatic past and how recognition may or may not emerge at
15 national and community levels. The ongoing trial against Peruvian ex-military for
16 sexual violence could, for example, be a watershed moment that may allow others
17 to come forward and speak -if the trial is decided in favour of the victim-survivors.
18 However, as the case of BiH shows, such societal change might not happen in one or
19 two generations.

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 *Discussion*

45
46 There have been numerous fields of study concerned with exposing some of the
47 specific pains and pleasures of doing qualitative research. In particular, feminists
48 writing about research with women, or on gender topics, have made clear that
49 partiality is a necessary feature of the research process, but something that needs to
50 be tracked, reflected upon and acknowledged (England 1994, Gluck and Patai 1991,
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3 Haraway 1988, Simic 2016, Srigley, Zembrzycki and Iacovetta 2018). Considered as
4
5 'reflexivity', feminist qualitative researchers have suggested that paying attention to
6
7 the qualitative process is the mechanism for holding qualitative researchers
8
9 accountable both to the academic communities they belong to, and the research
10
11 participants they have worked with (England 1994, Gluck and Patai 1991, De Langis
12
13 2018, Rose 1997). After all, the way to demonstrate systematic and focussed
14
15 research is to show how methodological and epistemological thinking along the way
16
17 has influenced and shaped the research outcomes. In this way, reflections on
18
19 qualitative methodology have enabled researchers to make connections between
20
21 decisions and experiences of conducting the research and the way in which findings
22
23 have emerged as contingent on the research process, rather than through an
24
25 objective set procedure (McCorkel and Myers 2003).
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30 In this article, we have reviewed the idea of over-research, research fatigue
31
32 and the silences in research on conflict-related sexual violence. We are particularly
33
34 concerned with the potential harmful effects that non-reflective methodologies and
35
36 universal beliefs in the benevolence of disclosure can have on victim-survivors' lives,
37
38 the unsettling consequences on community structures and dynamics of too much
39
40 attention for conflict-related sexual violence as a singular issue, particularly in
41
42 resource poor settings, and the way in which such considerations skew the data and
43
44 influence the research outcomes. In many cases, such as in contemporary Bosnia or
45
46 the DRC, seeking out victim-survivors of rape for research and/or international
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48 support and visibility has little to no benefits at all to survivors, and arguably, does
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50 more harm than good if it continually misaddresses the needs of survivors. This does
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52 not mean, of course, that the issues at hand are not worthy of attention and that as
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3 researchers we should divert our gaze (the violence of looking away may create new
4 ethical challenges); on the contrary. It does mean, however, that researchers need
5 to consider their research choices carefully before embarking on the search for
6 vulnerable interviewees or survivors of sexual violence.
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11 Building on the above discussion, we propose some possible strategies that
12 researchers could use before embarking on qualitative research on sexual violence in
13 conflict. We also suggest alternative methods of data collection. Our suggested
14 strategies are organized around five main questions: what is the [research]
15 question? What data is [already] available? What will the research do for the
16 subjects of the study? What are the geopolitical contexts that shape disclosure and
17 the field more generally? And lastly, what are the geopolitical contexts that shape
18 our research?
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30 First, researchers need to be encouraged to think carefully about research
31 questions, and what the varied answers might contribute to a field of understanding.
32 This is an obvious first lesson in any research degree, but one sees that the same
33 research questions are asked over and over again by different people seeking to
34 understand particular phenomena, not to increase overall understanding of that
35 phenomena, but rather as a shortcut to increasing individual knowledge on a subject
36 (Henry 2013). In BiH, survivors and survivor organizations complained that the same
37 questions had been asked but they could not understand why the analysis of the
38 data had not been widely shared (as in the case of publications). They were critical of
39 the academic publishing industry, which they argue, contributes to this repetition. As
40 Daphne Patai asserts (2018, 48), each new generation of researchers tends to ignore
41 older research, and often wants to reinvent the wheel. In cases where populations
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3 are vulnerable (for whatever reasons) it is particularly important for each new
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5 researcher in a field to determine if the research questions have already been
6
7 framed and 'launched' previously. For example, can questions be answered by doing
8
9 a rigorous literature review? If yes, this would mean that further interviewing of
10
11 vulnerable populations is unnecessary. So, what is worth knowing and what data do
12
13 we need to produce new knowledge? Is this question still relevant, or has it been
14
15 answered elsewhere/already/ by others? In what ways does our question need the
16
17 primary input of survivors, how necessary is that, or might there be other, existing
18
19 sources that could be used, such as Truth Commission testimonies and interviews
20
21 done by other researchers?
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26 Second and intimately related, what data is already available and what is
27
28 missing? If a population is already over-researched, as the residents of Shatila, or
29
30 women survivors in parts of the DRC and Bosnia, then there must be a wealth of
31
32 information that could be used to ask new questions. This is what Kirsten Campbell
33
34 did for her research in Bosnia (this volume), and what others have done in different
35
36 contexts, as Boesten in the Peruvian case (Boesten 2014). A thorough review of a
37
38 variety of literatures is crucial and this means going beyond the superficial searches
39
40 of studies in any one academic discipline. A rigorous investigation includes studies
41
42 conducted with different methodologies, such as those employing different types of
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44 qualitative approaches, and a review of older work and what kind of dilemmas,
45
46 questions and answers these might have raised. In the case of Henry's research,
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48 carefully examining the quantitative data on sexual violence in both Liberia and
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50 Bosnia, might enable a delay in engaging, or a more nuanced approach to,
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52 previously researched communities.
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3 Third, what do participants gain from research? In what concrete ways does
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5 research contribute to their wellbeing (if at all)? In some cases, if the researcher has
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7 something to offer, such as psychological support, then interviewing survivors might
8
9 indeed help. However, as Sukarieh and Tannock (2012) so convincingly argue,
10
11 sometimes research is not the priority for the interviewees. Instead, the main aims
12
13 of research could be help and support for victim-survivors. But this is not so
14
15 straightforward either; just as happened during the height of HIV interventions in
16
17 parts of Sub-Saharan Africa (Boesten 2011). By focusing attention on one particular
18
19 issue all the other issues that need urgent attention were overlooked. Honing in on
20
21 one particular problem in communities –in this case, sexual violence in conflict- also
22
23 isolates the problem from the wider issues that allow it to be named a problem in
24
25 the first place. As scholars of the DRC have shown, the ‘hype’ around sexual violence
26
27 has had perverse effects on disclosure, on victim numbers and on the interventions
28
29 designed to help victim-survivors. Hypes, for example, do not afford a respect for
30
31 silence, instead, keeping silent is shown to jeopardise access to all kinds of benefits
32
33 that are available if the victim-survivor admits to having been raped. This creates a
34
35 dilemma for individuals meeting their basic needs, by feeling compelled to report a
36
37 rape in order to gain access to resources. Of course this not only skews the research
38
39 outcomes, but unsettles the fragile forms of social cohesion that communities might
40
41 have after conflict (Boesten 2011). Finally, it removes survivors’ agency and puts
42
43 them in the vortex of a global single-issue hype.
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51 Fourth, what are the cultural and geopolitical coordinates that shape
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53 disclosure in any given context? As we saw above in 2005 Peru it was inappropriate,
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55 potentially harmful, and ultimately undesirable to forge disclosure or reveal the
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3 identities of the majority of victim-survivors of sexual violence in a context in which
4
5 family and community closely policed women's behavior. But now, in 2018, things
6
7 have changed, with a high profile human rights trial against nine ex-military in
8
9 process, with profound pressure upon civil society at large to disclose 'peacetime'
10
11 gender-based violence, and on the state and the judiciary to act on such disclosures
12
13 and accusations. These are different times for survivors and researchers. Perhaps it
14
15 will become possible or desirable for survivors to speak up now. Hence, stigma and
16
17 silence are not permanent features of societies' approaches to sexual violence; as
18
19 we are currently witnessing throughout the world, with the use of social media, it
20
21 has become much more acceptable to disclose, be that in Peru or in the US.
22
23 Nevertheless, it is not up to the researcher to start processes of disclosure, especially
24
25 other people's pain if that has not clearly been agreed upon with the victim-
26
27 survivors. Hence, researching and learning to understand the cultural and
28
29 geopolitical coordinates that shape disclosure in any given context is essential before
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31 approaching survivors for interviews.
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37 We have highlighted above that the actions and methodologies of
38
39 researchers cannot be judged on their own, removed from the geopolitics that drive
40
41 the questions in the first place. So lastly, it seems important to reflect on what
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43 factors (funding priorities, policy fashions, academic careers, political trends and
44
45 discourses) shape the questions we ask, the populations we seek out, and the social
46
47 changes this may engender. While researchers may adhere to the central principle of
48
49 'do no harm', they do not operate in isolation, and one researcher's perceived
50
51 generosity may cause harm in unexpected ways. In sum, following Kirsten Campbell
52
53 (this volume) and Doris Buss (2014: 15) we 'should refocus our attention on what we
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3 know, how we know, who knows, and what we still need to know about women,
4
5 conflict and sexual violence'. Perhaps, keeping a respectful distance until we are sure
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7 that we have done our homework and are invited in is the best way to avoid the
8
9 survivor becoming just a means to an end. As Choman Hardi so aptly writes, we must
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11 not allow our research to pick the wounds of survivors (*The Angry Survivor* 2015).
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