



Studying Evil: Ethnographic Methods and Problems of Identification

Keynote lecture by Günther Schlee¹

At least since Malinowski, ethnographic field research has come to imply deep immersion in another ‚culture‘, a second socialization of the researcher, aspiring at learning the ways of the host community as if one was one of them, i.e. the acquisition of cultural competence, and a great deal of identification.

If this did not occur, if there were no such positive resonances between the researcher and the field, the professional competence of the researcher could be put into question. Maybe he or she did not understand the culture properly. Maybe she rejects certain practices because she did not find out their hidden meanings or functions. Did she after all learn the language properly? Was she really open and receptive? In other words: In anthropology there is a premium on approving what one studies.

In colonial times there was the worry that anthropologists might ‚go native‘ and no longer fit into their society and social class of origin, but sympathy and empathy with the objects of their research was assumed and regarded as legitimate and the least of what was expected from them was that they had the interests of the people they had studied or were studying in their minds - something which was later made explicit in the agenda called ‚advocacy anthropology.‘ This positive relationship between the researcher and her or his ‚field‘ has also found its way into law. In a document of the European Union about ‚Research Ethics in Ethnography/Anthropology‘ (Iphofen n. d.) we read:

„The basic ethical principles to be maintained include doing good, not doing harm and protecting the autonomy, wellbeing, safety and dignity of all research participants.“

“Concern for the rights and wellbeing of research participants lies at the root of ethical research.”

The classical anthropological village study deals with friendly peasants who produce healthy food and live close to nature. There is no reason to assume that the anthropologist runs into moral problems when he defends this way of life and the dignity and wellbeing of those who live it.

But here we shall discuss some cases where these rules are not easy to apply. The main topic will be the study of terrorism. But it is generally true that in conflict situations and violent settings it is not easy to protect the ‚wellbeing‘ and ‚safety‘ ‚of all research participants‘ at the same time. One just needs to move into areas in which violence is not the monopoly of the state and into conflict situations in which the ‚research participants‘, the people one studies, are engaged in robbing and

¹ Held at the Workshop „How ‚Terrorists‘ Learn“ on 22 November 2019 at the Max Planck Institute for Social Research in Halle

Video: <https://www.eth.mpg.de/cms/en/media/keynote-schlee>



killing each other. What are the choices a researcher has and what are the ethical standards he or she can meet, if she has to rely on one conflict party for her own safety?

I will take my own experience from the northern Kenyan borderlands with Ethiopia and Somalia as an example.

Identification of the researcher with the field in violent settings

When I started my doctoral research among the Rendille, camel nomads of northern Kenya who are linguistically related to the Somali, I had no problems with identification. I was 23 years of age, liked where I was, and absorbed everything that was new. It never occurred to me that there could be a contradiction between their interests and my description of their way of life. Their major concern, as far as politics was concerned, was rights to pasture and water. For my whole professional life I have been writing against limitations to pastoral mobility, against taking district boundaries as borders of tribal grazing lands, against building fences and land grabbing. In all this I was and still am confident that my writings support their interest. So that part of my research meets the expectation that the researcher has a positive identification with the field and even engages in advocacy. It also meets the criteria of success in our academic discipline. Someone who reports that he did not get access to the community he or she studied and found what she was able to observe abhorrent, would be suspected of not being a skillful field researcher and not to be able to find the deeper meaning of the things she found abhorrent. That is a reward for stories about successful integration into the host community, acceptance and mutual identification, and discourages reports about difficulties in the field, which tend to remain underreported.

To this extent my research would have met the criteria set up by the EU much later, that the researcher should be “doing good, not doing harm and protecting the autonomy, wellbeing, safety and dignity of all research participants.” Soon after joining a Rendille settlement and a clan which gave me the status of a son and brother, however, I was reminded of the circumstance that I was living far outside effective government control in a setting of inter-group fighting. For my own protection I relied on my hosts, and they, of course, assumed that I would side with them.

One morning there was an alarm cry and within a moment my Landover was full of men armed with spears and I found myself driving towards where an enemy attack was said to have occurred. As a Max Planck director, employer and supervisor of doctoral students, in a later phase of my life, I would have been expected to tell my students to drive precisely in the opposite direction in such a situation. Fortunately the alarm turned out to be false.

As the clan histories of the Rendille point to neighbouring groups who speak Somali or Oromo, I soon extended my interest to these groups and collected oral histories there. These groups have changing alliances with each other and often hostile relationships. On one occasion, just after being welcomed in a new locality, there was a report that the herd of cattle of my host had been taken by enemies. There was no question of doing interviews in such a situation. So I took my host to the police



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headquarters in the district capital. The journey was long and arduous across a stony plain and up a steep road which was long disused and overgrown with thorns. We grew tired of changing tires and fixing punctures and arrived at the district capital with one tire stuffed with grass. The incident was reported, the police left immediately, and following another route they intercepted the raiders and killed two of them. The herd was retrieved and the next time I found my host again, in a faraway location, he slaughtered a young bull for me and my company.

Had I started my inquiry not with the group of my host but with that of the raiders, the raiders might have been my helpers and interview partners and the other group might have been the enemies. Similar events might have taken place with inversed roles.

In another period I was staying again with the Rendille mobile hamlet which I had originally joined. People had left and others had joined, but the core of my earlier contacts was there, so in a way it was my place among the Rendille. Footprints had been seen which were thought to belong to enemy scouts. One night I took my Landrover and went to the four corners of the immediate area, with full lights on, staying some time in different spots and turning around as if depositing patrols, pretending to be a police squad. The feared attack never occurred, and whether that was due to my deterrent measures or to other circumstances we shall never know.

In that period I also made it my habit to keep my shoes on while asleep and to wear a dark shirt at night to make me less conspicuous in case I had to abscond into the bush.

In the mid-eighties hostilities escalated into a full-scale war between two Somali clans among whom I had done research. On both sides I had key informants, former hosts, friends and protectors. The two clans, who had been living in mixed settlement clusters, started to kill one another.

One of my hosts was a man in his sixties, a very rich man who owned hundreds of camels. All of these were driven away by his former neighbours and new enemies, who -short of naming individuals- did not even conceal that it was them. I met my old friend years later and he asked me for money to hire a lawyer to get his camels back.

But for the Kenyan government this part of the country was in a state of war, and therefore the normal jurisdiction was suspended, although the government would never have admitted officially that it did not control its entire territory. Warlike acts are not dealt with by jurisdiction but by peace negotiations.

I was aware of that, but gave him some money nevertheless. Here the situation becomes complicated. What does advocacy mean here? Should I have determined who is guilty? And how? Should I have taken sides to deal with injustice? Should I have told my friend who took his camels, if he had not known that already and maybe even more precisely than me? Would I then not have betrayed the trust of my research partners? After all also the perpetrators were my research partners or closely related to them. They had not asked me to treat the information they gave me as



confidential. But that would not have made me feel entitled to give away information which might harm them.

The conflict between these two Somali clans was not free of Government interference. The most notorious incident of such interference is the Wagalla massacre of 1984. So it had connections which went beyond the region to the national level. Shortly, on the basis of findings by Markus Hoehne, we shall address a conflict between different Somali coalitions at the other end of the Horn of Africa which did have global connections. One of these fought the other in the name of the Global War on Terror and with American help. I think my stories about how easy it is to get involved in violent conflicts also show how easily a researcher in the perception of some, at least, can end up on the wrong side in the Global War on Terror.

Identification and empathy in the study of terrorism

The classical image of the anthropologist appears to be a person studying an indigenous group threatened by powerful economic interests in their resource base which the anthropologist wants to help them to defend. Indeed, while this description only fits a minority among us, I think most of us focus on groups and categories of people who are marginal or disadvantaged in one way or another and whose interests we want to get recognized and whose voices we want to get heard. Some anthropologists also study groups whose world view and political agenda they do not share, like right wing and racist milieus or economic and political elites who become the object of what is called 'studying up'. But that is a complicated relationship between researcher and field and correspondingly rare.

It is obvious that the study of terrorism cannot fit the model of a caring researcher who identifies with his or her research partners (in earlier times called 'informants') at all. In the unlikely event that an active terrorist group would allow you to do participant observation among them, you would have to betray their trust immediately, at the latest as soon as you witness preparation of a terrorist attack. Otherwise you would become a perpetrator yourself as member of a terrorist group and complicit in a murderous attack. Quite irrespective of this legal situation it would be hard to justify the decision NOT to report such preparations in the interest of continued field research, because life and limb of innocent civilians are at risk.

This makes classical field research among terrorists practically impossible, and I am not aware of any such research going on. That is why the forms of study of terrorism which do exist all deviate from this anthropological model in one or the other way, and they do so necessarily.

The same is true for the study of other illegal activities. As a researcher doing field research in some urban youth subculture you may risk to hear about some shop lifting and witness some roughing up between gang members without reporting to the police, but even then you would be on shaky legal ground. But then there is the category of things which (for good reasons) meet with absolute rejection of society and with zero tolerance by the law. Apart from terrorism this category includes,



for example, child abuse. This phenomenon is, of course, totally unrelated to terrorism in most aspects, but if you tried to do participant observation among people who engage in child pornography you would run into problems which are precisely parallel to those you would end up in among terrorists.

Therefore some of the problems related to the study of terrorism are not limited to terrorism. To describe this more general phenomenon, I have chosen the somewhat archaic term 'evil' for the title of this presentation ('Studying Evil'). It has religious connotations which I am not going to deal with. I have chosen it because of its absoluteness. With evil you cannot make compromises. You cannot even tolerate it for a while, just long enough to study it. No way.

'Evil' in this sense, is not an ahistorical, universal given. Terrorism is not an evil thing for everybody. One of the most widely quoted sayings about it is 'What are terrorists for some, are freedom fighters for others'. Also our notion of child abuse, as deep as its roots may be, has evolved and been modified to some extent over the recent decades. The year 1968 stands for changes in values and attitudes which led to the legalization of homosexuality and made many other laws related to sexuality obsolete. In the course of this 'sexual liberation' it was also discussed what is so bad about an erotic relationship between a tender, loving grown-up and a consenting child. Teachers who fantasized about the 'pedagogical eros' in ancient Greece (and committed crimes against their pupils) added to the confusion. After this, it took some time for the notion that a child is incapable of consent and that sexual activities with a child are always child abuse and a crime to take root and to be universally accepted in the West. (Countries with a strong gender segregation but a high level of tolerance for sex between men and 'boys' and settings in which sexual actions are part of initiation rituals are not subject of this paper but would present plenty of interesting problems of research ethics for anyone trying to do 'participant observation' there.)

After these relativistic notes we can specify that in this paper 'evil' stands for those things which are not only illegal but in our present socio-legal environment perceived as abhorrent and which are rejected in absolute terms. These absolute terms imply that there are no tradeoffs or compromises. We cannot tolerate just one or two acts of terrorism in order to see how it works, and to be able to fight it better in the future, and the teacher cannot make up for his child abuse by making his pupils feel good and teaching them lots of Latin.

Studying evil comes with some complications. In this presentation I shall discuss two kinds of complications. The first are those which result from rules and regulations like those laid down in the ethical standards of the bodies which have to approve your research application or the allocation of liability if something goes wrong. The second are those complications which result from the dilemma of empathy without sympathy, as Scott Atran would phrase it. You need empathy to understand the people you study and to explain their behaviour. That is the job of an anthropologist. This empathy even implies a degree of identification. You have to imagine yourself in their position and to model their perceptions in your mind. But in the case of terrorists and other 'evil' people in the sense just defined, you cannot sympathize with them, take over their political positions or do 'advocacy' for



them, as other anthropologists do, those other anthropologists - who study victims, not perpetrators. So, no matter how much sympathy creeps into your soul in the course of long conversations, and no matter how indebted you might feel to them for sharing their experiences and aspirations with you, there is always the imperative of ultimate betrayal lingering above you. Apart from the internal problems with sympathy the anthropologist might have, there are the suspicions of others that he or she might sympathize with evildoers. Empathy rarely comes with entirely negative emotions. It tends to come with a degree of sympathy. If this sympathy is morally indefensible, it is to be thought about, critically reflected, and contained. So the suspicion of others that someone who shows empathy with evildoers might also feel some measure of sympathy with them is not totally unfounded. The problems arising from such constellations will be the subject of the second part of my presentation. So I will first deal first deal with rules and regulations, then with the morals and the politics of our issue.

Rules and regulations

If I send a doctoral student to study terrorists and he or she gets killed, I get into deep trouble. Risk assessment and aversion to liability has become a growing concern among universities, research institutes and sponsoring bodies over the past decades and to be accused of negligence of safety issues is a grave matter.

That is one of the reasons why field research among active terrorists does not happen. The aversion of students to die is another such reason. Unlike soldiers and unlike suicide bombers, they have not been trained to die. As a consequence, much of the interviewing with terrorists is done when they have been caught and are in prison. There we no longer face problems of life and death but run into problems of research ethics.

Research participants need to give their free and informed consent. Are prisoners capable of free consent or is everything they say or do shaped by external force? Scott Atran and his team have done a lot of interviewing in prison, in spite of difficulties caused by the human subjects reviews of universities and the US defence department, which has funded some of their work. In one case he did not succeed. I quote: 'I got permission, before the [three] Bali bombers [who carried out a set of simultaneous attacks in 2002] were executed, to interview them. They were going to be shot because they blew up 200 people. I couldn't get human subjects approval because "you have to bring a lawyer, and besides we won't allow anyone to interview prisoners."' (Atran 2015)

This episode offers a lot to think about. Atran here complains about bureaucracy which has spoiled what he perceived as a singular chance. The committee which had to give the approval for research which involved human subjects had refused permission to interview prisoners. The prisoners in question were sentenced to death and awaiting their execution. One might find the idea to use this interval for some interview sessions a bit macabre. Are people in that situation really capable of giving free and informed consent? Was their entire situation not marked by constraint and being exposed to lethal power? I think the committee had a point.



On the other hand to kill 200 innocent people is much more macabre than interviewing the prisoners who had committed this act. If interviewing them helps in finding out how terrorists, or a certain type of terrorist, tick, and how to prevent such atrocities in the future, it would be a good deal in terms of trading macabre activities. You would do some interviews in a situation which looks a bit macabre to prevent something which is much more macabre. I think Scott Atran had a point.

Empathy and the suspicion of sympathy

Unlike the French saying “*Tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner,*” to understand everything does NOT mean to forgive everything. There are many situations in which we need to understand people without condoning their activities or sharing their views. Let us think of an undercover police agent as an example. It is not enough for such an agent to rationally comprehend the calculating mind of a criminal; he also needs empathy. In other words, he must be able to put himself in the criminal’s shoes. He has to “understand” him in the fullest sense of the word, and yet he still hands him over to his colleagues, the police. Likewise, a battered child would do well to model the inner world of the violent father in its mind in order to gauge his moods and alcohol level. This is a question of survival that has nothing to do with forgiveness. The list of examples is endless. *Tout comprendre, ce n’est pas tout pardonner.*

In the case of the police agent and the battered child it is clear that they need empathy in order to convict the criminal or to avoid being beaten, respectively, but that sympathy cannot be expected of them. In the case of research on terrorism, the situation is more complicated. There are social values which are obstacles to successful empathy, and those who overcome these obstacles, succeed in empathy and have good explanations of terrorist thoughts and acts risk being suspected of sympathy.

Understanding violence is easier said than done. In our media-saturated environment, which shapes most of us more strongly than science, and also shapes the views of our political decision makers, effects come to the fore that hinder an understanding of violence. One of them stems from the emotions associated with moral outrage. These often lead to a refusal to deal with a matter intellectually. The statement “I just can’t understand it!” does not express a desire for better comprehension or understanding, but rather implies that the speaker doesn’t want to understand. Another effect is pathologization. We classify a phenomenon as pathological, deviant or crazy. From a medical point of view, of course, this should pique our interest in understanding it, but few people share this medical perspective. In most cases, such statements are an expression of exclusion and a desire to distance oneself.

Take, for example, the so-called Islamic State, which a few years ago controlled large sections of Syria and Iraq and which in the present situation, with many of its fighters liberated by the Turkish intervention which forced the Kurdish guards to flee continues to be a terrorist threat. Its stereotype of the enemy is that of the shameless, promiscuous, profane and capitalistic West, which in turn brands the Islamic State as barbaric and a “terrorist militia.” In conflict situations, such mutual insults



often reflect the truth one hundred percent, but here we aren't concerned with the inherent truth of these statements. The question, rather, is what effect these verbal exclusory statements have on our cognitive ability to explain violent conflicts in which the Islamic State is involved. My assertion is: certainly no conducive effect.

"Terrorists" are people from whom the general public want to distance themselves as much as possible: barbarity was vanquished in Germany 70 years ago, albeit with foreign help, and we want nothing more to do with it. This attitude does not help us find out what makes the perpetrators of violence tick – in other words, model their thoughts and actions in our minds. This strong desire to distance ourselves also ignores the 12 million people who, in the period of the maximal expansion of the Islamic State, lived under it and often supported it or at least accepted it as the lesser evil (no surprise, considering the available alternatives). They must be quite normal people. Incidentally, ever since Auschwitz, we have known that also the perpetrators of violence are entirely normal people in other contexts. And it ought to be possible to explain the behavior of entirely normal people. Obviously, in many cases there is no serious desire to do so.

That perpetrators of barbaric violence can be quite normal people, of course, does not imply that they are harmless. It rather implies that normal people are not harmless. And it does not exclude the possibility that some of them might be mentally ill. Like teachers, nurses, policemen, cleaners and carpenters, also perpetrators of barbaric violence can be crazy. I do not argue against that. I just warn not to explain away all sorts of terrorism as pathological. And we do have a problem with attribution of causes. There is reason to suspect that right wing terrorism is underreported and underinvestigated because it is assumed that perpetrators are acting on their own and are mentally deranged, while a mentally deranged Muslim who is acting alone would be suspected to be a religiously motivated terrorist and part of a network.

Religious classifications are used in strange ways. Every wrong a Muslim does is attributed to Islam. Christianity is not subject to similar attributions. In 2004 Marc Dutroux and his accomplices were sentenced for murder and sex related crimes. I think they were all Catholics. But still they are part of public memory as 'the Belgian child abusers', not 'the Catholic child abusers'. Not that I would favour the latter. I just think that such collective classifications obscure reality in all cases where what a person has done has nothing to do with his or her religion or nationality.

Based on such considerations, our colleague Markus V. Hoehne examined the development of another "terrorist militia," al-Shabaab, in Somalia. Al-Shabaab grew out from the militias of the Islamic Courts in Mogadishu. In the absence of a functional state, the Islamic Courts had developed as a grass-roots initiative and enjoyed widespread acceptance within the population – not because Somalia was suddenly gripped by an atypical religious zeal and moral rigor, but because business people wanted a little security for their property and their transactions and were happy to fund the courts – one of the very rare cases in the history of mankind where business people were happy to pay taxes. The Islamic Courts were a lifeline in the violence-riven economy that had generally prevailed and in which the key players were major warlords who plundered the country and sold off



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communally owned assets (fishing rights, for example, and permission to dump toxic waste) to foreigners at bargain prices.

The court militias were perceived as threatening by their opponents – so much so that Ethiopia, with US support, launched a military campaign against them in 2007. The Islamic Court militias then simply disappeared. They were not set up to fight against regular military units equipped with heavy weapons, so they did not even engage the enemy. The Islamic Courts vanished with them. Only in this way could the internationally recognized government of Somalia be established in the capital of Mogadishu (internationally recognized because it was formed by a “peace process” coordinated by the “international community”). (Incidentally, I was involved in this “peace process” as a resource person in 2002 and 2003, but not in a position in which my rather skeptical views could have major political impact.)

The “peace process” was a compromise between the warlords. The internationally recognized government was therefore a government that emerged from organized crime. (Not the first and not the last in human history. Governments that emerge from organized crime are more common than business people who happily pay their taxes.) Now the warlords were in power again, and with the blessing of the international community. Since then, troops of the African Union (AU) have also been in the country. This development led to the radicalization of some of the former Court militias, giving rise to al-Shabaab. Soon they controlled such large swaths of the country that the “legitimate” government that had been formed through the “peace process” and established in the capital with foreign help no longer dared to venture far from the capital. So the “international community” had to step in again. Kenyan troops marched into Somalia in 2011, thus strengthening the alliance between Ethiopia, the forces of the African Union, the US, and the government they supported. Al-Shabaab then lost control of the cities and was increasingly restricted to conducting hit-and-run operations from the cover of the rugged terrain.

Al-Shabaab soon regained strength in the north of the country in a craggy, mountainous area on the coast bordering the Gulf of Aden, far from the foreign forces stationed in the south. Markus Hoehne has been following the development of the northern state-like formations, Somaliland and Puntland (both recent political creations that do not appear on older maps), for some years. In keeping with the standard of our discipline, he speaks the language of the country, has access to the important players and to the voice of the people who comment on their actions, undertakes careful risk assessments, organizes his security himself, and has repeatedly returned safely from regions that most people have never heard of or whose names conjure up feelings of dread. In this way, he has made a key contribution to the analysis of current conflict situations, all of which have not only global implications, but also significant local ramifications.

Zinc and coltan were discovered in this coastal area. There is a strong, rapidly growing and insatiable demand in Asian economies particularly for coltan. The mining rights were quickly sold to an Australian company. The seller was the government of Puntland, a semi-autonomous entity in the northeast of the country. However, the “peace process” had just catapulted the president of



Puntland to the presidency of the whole of Somalia. He then set out claims on behalf of the Somali federal government, whose rights had not yet been defined. Nor, for that matter, had the rights of the states, whose exact number and form were also unclear. Moreover, this government initially found itself unable to move into the capital, and when it did, it hardly dared to venture out again. Nevertheless, the parties soon settled on a fifty-fifty formula. Only they had forgotten one thing: to ask the local population and allow them to share in the new-found wealth in some way. The clan that settled these coastal mountains (the Warsangeli) was smaller than the clan that prevailed in the rest of Puntland (the Majerteen), but it is part of the same confederation of clans (the Harti). Moreover, the government of Puntland believed it could rely on the brotherhood of all Harti without having to consider the specific rights of the locally ruling genealogical sub-clan (the Warsangeli).

But enough of the clan names. What is important in the present context is this: The local group that would have claimed the resources of “its” land was relatively small compared with the competing clan groups. It launched a spirited armed uprising but soon ran into trouble. It is therefore not surprising that they welcomed help from outside. The local sheikh appealed to Islamic sentiments to mobilize his followers against the infidels. The lines of the alliance that stretched from Puntland to Mogadishu and from there to Ethiopia, Kenya and the US made it expedient to portray the opponents as Islamic apostates in collusion with Christian or even godless powers. After being driven out of the south of the country, al-Shabaab fighters found rhetorical and ideological points of contact here. At some point (Hoehne describes it in more detail than we can here), al-Shabaab then evidently gained the upper hand, and the local sheikh became subservient to it.

Shifting our focus from the local clans and their alliances to the larger, global picture, we see the following: The government, which had sold off the mining rights to natural resources (without being able to guarantee the buyers access to those resources) without consulting the local population, found itself in a global economic web. Other nodes in this web were an Australian mining company and customers in Asia. These relationships were supposed to be cemented by a political-military alliance under the motto “the War on Terror,” which included Ethiopia and Kenya in the immediate area and the USA further afield. Faced with this overwhelming configuration, the local population was forced to form alliances with fighters who likewise appealed to global causes: the struggle of “all Muslims” against the “decadent West.” The response to large alliances is large alliances or, if these cannot mature into formal institutions, at least appeals to global similarities with like-minded individuals.

Another thing we can learn from this story is how terrorists are made. There were terrorists before, too, but what we observe here is an expansion of this category. The business people of Mogadishu, who expected a little security from the Islamic Courts and supported them as the only available peacekeeping power; the inhabitants of the coastal region, who actually only wanted a share of the revenues from mining in their homeland; the simple Somalis, who felt that warlords are perhaps not the ideal officeholders for a government – they were all bundled into this category and branded opponents of the “West” in its “Global War on Terror.”



This case history also illustrates how tightly resource-based conflicts and processes of collective identity are intertwined. Appeals were made to narrow and broad clan relationships, depending on which group of players wanted narrow or broad population segments to share in the profit from the mining of natural resources. The category “terrorist” also evolved in this context, becoming significantly broader, as did other attributions of self and others.

In general, it can be said that there are no identity-based conflicts versus resource-based conflicts. This distinction, often encountered in English usage, is nonsense, even if some abstruse theories adhere to it, arguing, for example, that identity-based conflict can be implacable while resource-based conflicts are negotiable. Whether a person sees his neighbors as members of a broad clan alliance and shares resources with them, or whether that person sees his neighbors as apostates of Islam in collusion with Christians and atheists and forms alliances against them with Islamists from other parts of the country, it is a resource-based conflict waged through identities (self- descriptions and images of the enemy) or an identity-based conflict with implications for resource distribution – take your pick. The question of identity is a question of subjects – who with whom against whom? – while the question of resources is a question of objects: Who claims what? What is at issue? Every conflict analysis must answer both questions and clarify how the two perspectives are related.

Summary: Research ethics in violent settings

Let me now summarize some of our basic findings about research ethics in the context of studying evil, and terrorists in particular. These findings have to do with understanding, empathy, and shared humanity.

We have shown that it is possible to understand terrorists. In identifying the grievances and inequities of people targeted by the Global War On Terror, - grievances and inequities which are more immediately related to neglected material interests and political marginalization than to ideologies - we also have found cases where the category ‘terrorist’ has been overextended and wrongly applied. But, no matter how many people just find arrangements of convenience with al-Shabaab and form tactical alliances with them, there can be no doubt that al-Shabaab also comprises terrorists who fit the ideal type of a terrorist, who have a monomaniac ideology which denies those who do not adhere to it human rights like the freedom of religion and the safety of life and limb and does not refrain from killing unarmed civilians

In 2015 there was an attack, claimed by al-Shabaab and carried out by Kenyan Somalis from the major area, on the University of Garissa, which is located in a majority Muslim and Somali area in eastern Kenya. Among those killed were 142² students who had been identified as Christians, which implies that they mostly stemmed from other parts of Kenya. The Muslim students were released. If it is not clear from the name or the appearance who is a Christian, the test in such situations appears to be to tell the person to recite some verses from the Qur^can.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garissa_University_College_attack, accessed 20191116



This event shows that our analysis, following Hoehne, that the causes of terrorism are to be sought in discrimination and economic marginalization and that many followers and allies of terrorist organisation may only be on that side in a conflict situation only for lack of an alternative, should not lead us to play down terrorism or to explain ideologically based terrorism away as really being just about money or status or recognition. Even in cases where religion or ideology only come in as legitimation to do what the perpetrators would like to do anyhow for a host of other regions, they cause a dynamic of their own. A Christian student from another part of the country cannot directly be held responsible for the grievances of Somali against global capitalism, Western politics, or the discrimination of Somali in Kenya. Only after the global dichotomies just described have developed and after religion has been promoted as the key identifier of the parties in conflict and after an interpretation of religion which allows to kill non-believers has taken root, can a student from up-country Kenya who is a Christian thereby be equated with the West and imperialism and therefore an agent of oppression and of capitalism and of the devil, and therefore be found to be a legitimate target. This is many 'therefores' and a long chain of derivation. We have identified economic and political grievances which have favoured the emergence of terrorism. But there is no guarantee that terrorism and the binary logic it has brought about will disappear as soon as we start to deal with the causes of terrorism.

And, no matter how successful we have been in analysing terrorists, and how well we understand them, that does not affect our right of self-defense. I; for my part, would defend myself against a murder attempt even if the attacker has a perfectly plausible reason to kill me.

No doubt, the fear of terrorism in the general public is out of proportion with the fear of numerically more important causes of death. Many more people die in traffic accidents than in terrorist attacks, and still people are afraid of terrorists, not of cars. This, of course, is just what terrorists want to achieve: it is the terror felt by the terrorized. With relatively cheap means terrorism can achieve a huge psychological effect, and that comes with costs which are measurable. People take the car because they are afraid of terror attacks on aviation and thereby cause yet more road accidents, flows of tourism and investment are redirected to the detriment of vast regions, border regimes are changed at the expense of the freedom and ease to travel of all of us, and security is beefed up with our tax money. To observe one potential perpetrator all around the clock absorbs the labour of 25 officers³. So, terrorism is very harmful and expensive to fight, and there can be no doubt in a democracy that terrorism is the enemy. Scott Atran (2010) leaves no doubt about this by calling his book about terrorism 'Talking to the Enemy'.

There is no way to apply the research ethics postulated by EU document cited above in the context of field work with terrorists.

„The basic ethical principles to be maintained include doing good, not doing harm and protecting the autonomy, wellbeing, safety and dignity of all research participants.“

³ I learned that on some TV programme, I do not remember which.



“Concern for the rights and wellbeing of research participants lies at the root of ethical research.”

What do these rules mean when the ‘research participants’ are terrorists or turn out to be terrorists in the course of the research? Then there are no simple rules to be followed and the researcher is facing tough choices between legal goods. One of these legal goods, or to use the less formal and legalistic terminology, one of the moral values in question is the trust of the interlocutor who shares sensitive information with the researcher, and this moral value attaches itself to some practical requirements. If the researcher does not want to give up his or her research project or even to face retaliation, he or she should better not betray the trust of those who confide in her. The other legal good, of course is the life and health of third persons. If the researcher does not report plans of a terrorist attack, innocent third persons -and potentially great numbers of them- are in danger.

The problem looks like a classical dilemma, a choice between two evils. You cannot satisfy all moral imperatives at the same time. From a categorical perspective (or ‘an either/or perspective’) it looks like a choice between two bad options, from a gradualist perspective like a trade-off. The more you respect the trust of your interlocutor, the less you do to minimize the risk for third persons and vice versa.

One may face these dilemmas not only in the unlikely situation of field research among active terrorists. One can also think about research in a supportive environment which might be instrumental to terrorists or where one might witness radicalization, terrorists in jail who have the prospects of being released but reveal information which speaks against that, or, if you study deradicalization you may come across cases where deradicalization does not work and new dangers come up.

At first glance the choice between the protection of life and the trust of a perpetrator looks easy. The protection of life is a higher good and the trust of a perpetrator a lesser legal good, so the decision needs to be taken in favour of life. But what if the researcher is not quite sure? There may be no concrete plans on the table. The interlocutors just play with ideas. Or they speak in allusions or metaphors. Or the suspicion is just based on the frame of mind of the interlocutor, which, by the way, might be just what the researcher wants to study. What if the probability of an actual attack is just 30%. Would that be worth blowing up the research project, betraying the trust of the potential perpetrators and risking their revenge? What if it is 5%?

I am not going to give you easy answers to these questions, because there are no such answers. There is no hard and fast rules to deal with a 5% risk. There is not even a standard way to calculate the risk. So it is better to end with these questions. Also the books of rules of the ethics committees are of no help here and heavy moralizing, the moral club or moral cudgel, is misplaced. We are dealing with difficult questions and the only preparation for such questions is to think through hypothetical situations while there is time. When such tough decisions need to be taken, there might be little time left for thinking.



I thank you for your attention.

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