Standard Article

Violent re-presentations: Reflections on the ethics of re-presentation in violence research

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Abstract

How comfortable a read can research that has violence at its core become, before the distance created by language becomes an ethical—and analytical—challenge in its own right? In this article, I explore and reflect on ethical dilemmas of re-presenting violent experiences, following the traction of my m research. The article addresses a challenge that scholars are faced with as we conduct, write up, and communicate research on issues to do with violence in general and atrocity crimes in particular. It seeks to stir interdisciplinary scholarly self-reflection, and feed a discussion on researchers' responsibilities for the stories we ask for, hear, read, analyze, and re-tell by addressing the ethics of re-presenting stories and the people they involve in our teaching and publications, particularly concerning mass violence and war crimes.

Keywords

Conflict-related sexual violence, self-reflexivity, academic voyeurism, sensationalizing violence, ethics of what we publish, ethics of scholarly re-presentations, violence, atrocity research, research ethics, trauma research

Prologue: Studying war crimes

Three years into my PhD project on how conflict-related sexual violence is talked into being before and for the purpose of criminal courts, I had familiarized myself with critical

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socio-legal and criminological research that questioned both the universality of international criminal justice (ICJ) and the legitimacy of proponents' claims about its contribution to justice and reconciliation. I was immersed in court transcripts and court actors' re-presentations of victims as broken and defendants as deviant, sadist opportunists (Houge, 2016). I had growing concerns over the cementing of subjectivities that criminal justice processes produced on the one hand, and the concurrent paradoxical and lofty claims of its advocates, holding its existence and delivery to be a premise for healing, reconciliation, prevention, and peace, on the other. The two sizes—one categorically static and deterministic, the other transformative at its core—were strikingly at odds. Alas, the problematic consequences of the former were ever more visible (e.g., Clark, 2014) than the promised positive effects of the latter (Nettelfield, 2013).

Welcoming of growing academic voyeurism critique (Jacobs, 2004) pertaining to much conflict-related sexual violence research, I hesitated to do fieldwork at post-conflict sites for my project. From Bosnia and Rwanda, and later the DRC and Syria—that is, the "hotspots" of international attention to conflict-related sexual violence from the 1990s onward—researchers, journalists, and humanitarians had proven that variations over the infamous quote in the title of Behr's 1978 memoir, *Anyone here been raped and speaks English?*, still had legs (Behr, 1978) see also Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018; D'Errico et al., 2013). While most actors within these sectors engage sensitive, respectful, indeed, humane approaches, it is difficult to avoid any stain of sensationalism or academic instrumentalization of suffering, if you engage in a field that receives international attention for its spectacular violence (Boesten and Henry, 2018). As transcripts from court archives—primarily from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY)—and reports from the UN and NGOs were my primary source of data, I could access "my" data from Oslo.

Yet, as time passed, I grew uncomfortable with my research as a desk top exercise (see also Knott, 2019). It was at odds with the critique of research and advocacy epitomized by the slogan "nothing about us without us." Thus, when I was invited to join a small research team on a short fieldtrip to Bosnia and Hercegovina 20 years after the end of the conflict, I seized the opportunity to see how well my analyses resonated with stakeholders. In Bosnia and Hercegovina we invited lawyers, advocacy organizations, politicians, and victims' interest groups to join in conversations and interviews on the meaning of justice and post-conflict criminal justice, political maneuverability, and social and economic challenges and opportunities in post-conflict society following a war that is notoriously remembered for its sexual violence (Houge and Skjelsbaek, 2018). All but a few of the research participants had been interviewed by researchers on prior occasions, some more times than they could quantify on the spot.

The main interview method employed was semi-structured topical interviews in which I asked open-ended questions, and followed up some themes more in depth as they took on importance or provided interesting insight. While I did not ask participants about their war experiences, to a varying degree all 20+ interviewees shared their recollections of the war with us, as part of their reflections on their current engagement and the meaning and importance of post-conflict reconciliation efforts. Several of the men and women I talked with shared that they had personally survived torture and sexual violence, many of whom

commented with surprise after the interviews that I had not asked them to describe the violence they had suffered. They explicitly thanked me for not doing so and expressed fatigue and frustration with researchers who they felt reduced them to the violence they had suffered, and who only had an interest in them to the extent that they described this particular violent rupture in their lives. The honest recollection of what this feedback stirred in me involves frustration that colleagues seemingly sensationalize violence in meetings with survivors more than 20 years after the crimes. I was impressed that the participants still showed up for interviews. Embarrassingly, I was also flattered. I felt competent for the job and qualified to ask for the participants' stories and perspectives. This complacency of sorts got a blow, however, during an interview which years later still fills me with shame.

The interview took place a few hours drive outside of Sarajevo and was facilitated by experienced staff at a local NGO working with reconciliation efforts. The interviewee had been involved in gender- and post-conflict justice measures after she was one of more than 20 000 women who were held captive and raped during the war. An hour before the interview, I sat down with the interpreter and research assistant, talked through the interview questions, and about how our emphasis would be on forms and possibilities of justice, and the current and future political, social, and economic situation for people in the area. We were well prepared. When the interviewee arrived, I thanked her for taking part and finding time for us, spoke a bit about the background for the interview, and said I expected the interview to last less than 2hours, breaks included. I emphasized that she did not have to answer questions she did not want to, that she could withdraw at any time, and asked if this was all alright with her, emphasizing the importance of informed consent. She confirmed along with an impatient wave with the hand, and from there, started telling her war story: Chronologically, from the beginning of the war, through detailed descriptions of the violence she had experienced, who had done what to her, why, how many times, including also the stories of other women. She paused only a few times to let the interpreter translate, and her face showed no emotions, no mimicry, her tone was monotonous, in stark contrast to the violent experiences she shared. As if scripted, she told a coherent, chronological, and detailed account with explicit terminology void of the metaphors that tend to denote sexual violence in everyday language. It came as no surprise when she said she had testified in numerous trials and in different fora to give voice to her own and others' experiences, and that she had been interviewed by researchers and journalists on multiple occasions.

Throughout, she smoked non-stop, the air was heavy, and the room unventilated. I tried to pose a few questions, and as we came close to an hour I tried to explain that we needed a short break, but she seemed not to take notice and I found no way to interrupt in a respectful manner, saving my questions for later. And then—abruptly, it seemed to me—she put out her last cigarette in the now full ashtray while she got out of the chair, and put her jacket on as she left the office. The interpreter was still translating, and I interrupted her to ask if the interviewee was leaving for a break or what, upon which the interpreter simply stated "no, she is done." Confused, I got up, ran out, and caught eye of the interviewee around the corner of the building, shouted her name. She stopped, turned around, and I ran up to her, said thank you very much for your time, haltered the same in

Bosnian, gesticulated thanks and attempted, clumsily, also to communicate awe. When I was done both talking and signaling, she perhaps gave a slight nod in my direction (my memory and field notes do not tell), and then she just turned around and quickly walked away.

Introduction: A world un-narratable

According to Benjamin (2006 [1936]), World War I made storytelling obsolete because the reality of war is beyond storytelling—the war left a world un-narratable. In the wake of World War II, Agamben (1999: 22) similarly rejected the possibility of understanding and explaining the Holocaust. He stated that "[w]e can enumerate and describe each of these events, but they remain singularly opaque when we truly seek to understand them." In Hoffman's (2004: 7) words,

> [t]o make a sequential narrative of what happened would have been to make indecently rational what had been obscenely irrational. It would have been to normalize through familiar form an utterly aberrant content. One was not to make a nice story out of loathsome cruelty and piercing, causeless hurt.

Fast forward to 2004, the prosecutor in one of the infamous Abu Ghraib Courts-Martial, stated in the sentencing argument: "I wish that I had the power to capture in words the events that happened" (*Frederick*, US Court-Martial, 21 October 2004, T. 601).[1] Spanning from World War I to contemporary conflicts, these reflections on the limitations of language, of narrative, as conveyor of war experiences provide apt commentary also on the limitations of storytelling and the ethics of re-presentation in research pertaining to such violent experiences. As such, the quotes illustrate a challenge scholars are faced with when we conduct, write up, and communicate research on issues to do with violence in general and atrocity crimes in particular:

Can our re-presentations of violence contribute to an increased understanding of the phenomenon in question (its causes, its offenders, its victims, its consequences, and its responses), or is understanding best served by not engaging descriptions of what are, per definition, violent profusions?

People living with comparable war experiences story themselves and their experiences in radically different ways. For some, the violence needs to be accounted for—named, described—others chose not to put violence and suffering into insufficient words, refusing the straightjacketing of experience that language produces (paraphrasing Felman, 2002). Across disciplines theorizing mass violence, there is a consensus cautioning against sensationalism in scholarly re-presentations of violence, causes, victims, and offenders (Baaz and Stern, 2013(Houge and Lohne, 2017), victims and sufferings (Engle, 2020; Henry, 2011), seeing detailed descriptions of violence as academic sensationalism, if not voyeurism (Jacobs, 2004). Yet, at what point do descriptions of violence and its consequences turn into academic sensationalism rather than necessary re-presentations of violent experiences? How comfortable a read can research that has mass violence at its core become, before the distance created by language becomes an ethical—and analytical—

challenge in its own right? The task of this article is not to provide answers to these questions. Rather, it is to raise them, and to explore and reflect on these ethical dilemmas of scholarly re-presentation, following the traction of my own research. I hold, with Krystalli (2021: 127), that "research methods and ethics are inseparable from each other" and that the re-presentation work of our end texts (Mantzoukas, 2004) is important part of both.

In retrospect, many and critical things can be said about the interview presented in the prologue, and about my lack of control as it unfolded. Perhaps had I not been clear enough with the facilitator about its purpose. I should probably have found a way to interfere, to open up space for it to become more of an exchange, focusing on the issues we were there to explore. But the interview felt not like an interview, or as "a collaborative relationship between participant and researcher" (Kostovicova and Knott, 2020: 3). I did not interrupt, to not be disrespectful to the interviewee who had agreed to participate and who had prepared this detailed, personal, and brutal account of their trauma. What struck me at the time, accompanied with a strong sense of shame and in contrast to the relational ethics of care (Ellis, 2017: 438–9) I aspired to practice, was that the interviewee told us an excruciating story that I did not ask for, and that I did not want to hear. My attempts at steering the interview were futile then and appear inattentive now. I took her style to be indicative of a learned prejudice against researchers, and perhaps of fatigue with an exploitative academic industry. I felt guilty for representing that to her. Yet, as pointed out by Krystalli (2021: 132), research participants are never just passive conveyors of scripts or labels. It could also be that she was deliberately distanced, detached from the story she told, not because of prejudice or contempt—but for her to be able to tell (and re-tell) it, as to her, this story still needed telling—or something else entirely. The experience constituted what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) would denote as an "ethically important moment." It raised frustration with the ways in which violence constrains our interest—and interviewees' lives—to violent experiences, and how this in turn confines researchers' access to lived realities. But it was also a reminder of how war is never undone. It illuminated my naivety as it demonstrated how I, trained in academic voyeurism critique and with growing confidence from participants' feedback in recent interviews, had entered with the expectation that we—*I*—could bracket the interviewee's war experiences in order to talk about their impact in the present (Keyel, 2020). It was an ethically important experience that stirred the reflections that I seek to engage readers in here, years later.

The purpose of this article is to encourage active engagement with research ethics that goes beyond "procedural ethics" (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004), to address what Baaz and Stern (2013: 32) labels our "impoverished framework for seeing, hearing, making sense of, writing about and empathizing with subjects of sexual violence" in this field. That is, to expand and feed the discussion on researchers' responsibilities for the stories we ask for, hear, read, analyze, and re-tell by addressing the ethics of re-presenting stories and the people they involve in our teaching and publications on mass violence and war crimes (see Boesten and Henry, 2018). Calls for reflexivity in trauma and violence research are not new, nor settled (see, e.g., Jacobs et al., 2021), yet as Pickering and Kara (2017: 299) point out on research methodologies generally, "[the] ethics of research representation are rarely discussed." By exposing my continuous ambivalences pertaining to my own re-

presentation practice, the article is an invitation for a commitment to open and conscious reflection on the re-presentation work and choices that is inherent to our writing of violence.

While my reflections build on research that centers on conflict-related sexual violence and ICJ responses (see, e.g., Houge, 2016; Houge and Skjelsbaek, 2018)(Houge and Lohne, 2017), the texts that are cited herein and inspire my thinking span disciplines, methodologies, and categories of violence and trauma. The reflexive exercise that this article is should, thus, be relevant across disciplines and for researchers that engage in fields that involve and re-present people's violent experiences and trauma more broadly.

The article proceeds in three sections: First, I define re-presentation as used herein. Second, I provide a brief overview of re-presentation practices in ICJ institutions following mass violence. This part draws up necessary context, as the research project that stirs my reflections primarily concerned ICJ. From the outset of problematic victim framings in criminal justice after atrocities, the third section caters to uncomfortable re-presentation dilemmas in my own research. While stories addressing a courtroom are explicitly scripted for the purpose of proving guilt or provide grounds for acquittal, researchers too, in more subtle ways, frame stories, and through that structure and align readers' thoughts in desired directions. That is part of the research process: making sense of the world under study—whatever it might be. Yet in that process, we need to engage a self-reflexive attitude toward not only the questions we ask and the arguments we develop but also the words and re-presentations of people that we engage, and the "ethics of what we publish" (Knott, 2019: 145). I conclude with an argument not only for practicing an ethics of re-presentation in research but also for greater openness about the ethical considerations that underlie our re-presentations in atrocity research.

On the concept of Re-presentation

Representation refers, in its simplest form, to the speech act of "making present in some sense . . . something which is nevertheless not present literally or in fact" (Pitkin, 1972: 8–9). It is in this literal (and not political) sense, re-presentation is used here. Both the hyphen in re-presentation, as used in this article, and Pitkin's caveat of "in some sense" are important. As Howarth (2004: 358) explains,

> it highlights the ongoing, the relational and fundamentally the contested nature of re-presentation. It reminds us of the argumentative character of dialogue and practice . . . and so presents us with the possibility of agency, resistance and social change. Hence . . . re-presentation is intimately tied to the operation and contestation of power.

A re-presentation is always a perspective from somewhere and someone, and it emphasizes certain aspects over others or alters the portrait altogether in more or less extensive ways. Memories and narratives of past events are full of re-presentations, which may be true in the sense that they are intended to portray someone or something as accurately as possible—but they are not, and cannot be, the person, act, or event itself. To

paraphrase Ericsson (2011), life as lived and life as told are different lives altogether, these sizes are not interchangeable.

It follows that all writing about social phenomena, people, and contexts is reductionist—or filtered—by the writer. As researchers, our acts of re-presentation are necessarily incomplete (Kuntz, 2010: 425). While the relationship between the reality portrayed and the portrait is dynamic, symbiotic even—for scholars and the field of their study, it is often the academic that ultimately "defines the core characteristics of his or her chosen field" (Atkinson, 1995: 21). This too, is re-presentation, and re-presentation of the kind that I seek to address in this article. The necessary choices on the part of scholars of confines, of boundaries, emphases, and characteristics, articulate and convey selected parts of "reality" (whatever that might be). They open for insights, perspectives, and nuances that foster understanding. Yet, re-presentation is also selective at its core—deeming issues, perspectives, individuals, and experiences as ir/relevant, in or out of scope, or too difficult to capture, and choosing particular framings, descriptions, emphases, and notions to think, construct, and convey meaning with, over others. These observations are naïve in the sense that they refer to basic premises of most research methodologies. But they are also explicitly endeavors to do with ethics, from field demarcation to terminology in data gathering, research publications, and presentations. While we tend to be transparent about the quantifiable aspects of our research process (the duration of projects, fieldworks, interviews, the number of interviews, and their respective affiliation etc., see; Jacobs et al., 2021), openness about the less straightforward aspects of the research process, including what Mantzoukas (2004: 995) calls the "analytical consideration on representational issues" are few and far between "in the end texts of research" (see also Krystalli, 2021). Researchers' re-presentation choices are, indeed, ethical choices that form part of our research practice and processes—and should be part, too, of the debates on openness and reflexivity in research (see Kapiszewski and Wood, 2021).

The premises and influences that form our re-presentations constitute a reflection (and re-presentation) also of the power and structures of academic knowledge production. The subject field of my own research on conflict-related sexual violence is, indeed, a pertinent case in point. As illustrated by its prevalence in conflict, by the suffering caused, and certainly by its place in criminal justice advocacy and processes, policy responses, and security debates, conflict-related sexual violence has merit as a phenomenon worth investigating. Its position as a "hot topic," prioritized by funding agents, media, policy-makers, prosecutors, and researchers makes conflict-related sexual violence a particularly attractive thematic to invest in, accessible to those so positioned. It also promotes certain framings—a certain language that feeds this overall interest. For conflict-related sexual violence, the combined framing of this violence as "a weapon of war" and of victims as helpless and broken gave the research topic political currency, media interest, and funding attention, and thus overshadowed alternate approaches and understandings for years (see, e.g., Gray et al., 2018; but also Skilbrei, 2020 on the conditions for such prioritization processes in a separate field). In the words of Ní Aoláin (2012: 626, referencing Enloe 2004), "making rape visible is deceptively easy in the context of atrocity [and there are] real dangers to this strategy." The explicit focus on sexual violence among all gendered

war experiences as well as the concomitant focus on women's victimization contributes to a problematic hierarchy of crimes and to the construction of ideal victims, whom Buss (2014: 14) labels the "iconic Raped Woman, who signifies extreme atrocity." Some scholars now hold that this focus on conflict-related sexual violence confines the women, peace and security agenda, and the research field of feminism, gender, and war to narrow categories of war experiences (as sexual violence), of women (as victims), of victims (as broken), and of possible responses to gendered violence in conflict (as criminal justice) (see, e.g., Engle, 2020). Influenced in subtle ways by the politics of funding opportunities, "hot" or taken-for-granted advocacy framings, career prospects, and more, academic re-presentation practices at individual and collective levels risk producing "scholarship that sustains hegemonies," rather than the diversity of untidy experiences (paraphrasing Tamas' troubling of the autoethnographic voice, 2009: 3). Re-presentation, thus, not only emphasizes particular and selected experiences and phenomena but also constructs particular identities—or subjectivities—of those involved (Spivak, 1988) through the notions and language we use and foster in our research. For (conflict-related) sexual violence research, criminal courts often constitute a primary—if not preferred—empirical source of information, with its institutionalized, particular scripts and re-presentations of victims and offenders.

Context: Legal Re-presentations of mass violence

The research on conflict-related sexual violence that the reflections herein derive from focuses on the legal, social, and political narratives about complex problems that ICJ produces and contributes to. In particular, its focus is on juridified re-presentations of violence and suffering and the individuals that surface these narratives as victims and offenders (Houge, 2016, 2019). While the introductory quote from a US Courts-martial points to the inherent limitations of language's capacity to articulate war crimes and experiences, the actors of criminal justice—including the epistemic community of advocates, journalists, and scholars that surrounds them—do their part in shaping both legal and societal imageries of the violence, its agents, causes, victims, and consequences. More than a third of those convicted at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) were convicted for crimes that included sexual violence (ICTY, n.a.). Thus, particularly for conflict-related sexual violence, ICJ mechanisms have become an important source of information about these forms of violence (Houge, 2019; Skjelsbæk, 2015).

Court records provide researchers with a wealth of data on the crimes they address, their causes, consequences, and actors (Campbell, 2013). The transcripts of cases before international criminal tribunals and courts-martial that deal with charges of sexual violence involve countless testimonies that describe in clarifying and obtrusive detail the sexual violence charged. Here, the offenses have to be spelled out, void of the metaphors and euphemisms that such offenses are oftentimes denoted by in everyday language (Chynoweth et al., 2021). This particular style of telling was reflected in the interview accounted for in the prologue. As Henry (2011) points out, the ICTY forced into words offenses that were previously referred to as "unspeakable acts." Speaking of criminal justice proceedings generally, Felman (2002: 159) pointedly remarks, "The function of

the trial thus becomes precisely to articulate the impossibility of telling through the legal process and to convert this narrative impossibility into legal meaning" (see also Buss, 2014). In this capacity, international criminal tribunals have been instrumental and unprecedented not only in its prosecution of such crimes but also in producing stories and evidence of the explicit expressions such violence may take on.

Arguably, these court records provide an opportunity for a less intrusive data collection process and methodology in light of the topic's sensitive nature (see also Boesten and Henry, 2018). This was part of the rationale for focusing on ICJ-files in my PhD project in the first place. The value and transferability of these data, however, need to be assessed in terms of the legal framework within which they are produced. In court, victims of sexual violence matter because of the criminal offense they have been subjected to and which is charged against the defendant. In terms of victim witnesses' agency, they can choose whether or not to testify, but once they are on the stand, the repertoire of narratives available is limited. As Henry (2016: 47) puts it, "legal procedures do not allow witnesses to tell their stories in their own ways or words. Instead, the criminal trial is inherently limited by its focus on the prosecution of the accused, not the 'truth-telling' of victims."

The transcripts from the ICTY and the co-temporary International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) provide numerous examples also of how victims are both spoken about and for. For instance, the defense in the notorious Foča-case (*Kunarac* et al., Defence Closing brief 10 November 2000, 167-8, 274-5, 287, 308)[2] suggested that a witness who testified could not have been raped because she did not appear sufficiently traumatized. In another case before the ICTY, the defense argued that because the victim suffered from PTSD she could not be trusted (*Furundžija,* 8 June 1998, 81–82). This narrow performative space for victims evokes Christie's (1986: 21) concept of ideal victims: Ideal victims are victims who display a "minimum of strength" as that is "a precondition to being listened to," yet they "must at the very same time be weak enough not to become a threat to other important interests." Translated to the court setting, the victim witnesses must be strong enough to present a more or less coherent narrative of suffering according to the trial format, yet weak enough to appear as suffering victims, not to threaten the prosecution case. They must be vocal about their vulnerabilities and their pain, counter the taboo that surrounds their experiences, and subject "themselves to attacks on their credibility and to trivialization of their very real suffering," as stated by an ICTY prosecutor (*Kunarac* et al., 20 November 2000, 6274). The more suffering the offense has brought on the victim, the better for the prosecution case—but it must be conveyed in correct chronological order and with precise language to make a proper legal story.

In the ICTY cases mentioned above, the court reiterated the victims' vulnerability and lack of agency, stating, for instance, in the *Kunarac* case judgment that the victims were "the most vulnerable of persons in any conflict, namely, women and girls" (*Kunarac* et al., TC Judgment 22 February 2001, para. 858) and that they had been "robbed of their last vestiges of human dignity" (Presiding Judge delivering judgment, *Kunarac* et al., 22 February 2001, 6559–60) through the offenses committed against them. At the ICTR, the prosecutor in the infamous *Akayesu*-case likened sexual violence to a fate worse than death: "presumably the pain stops at the time of death. But with acts of sexual violence, the pain just begins" (*Akayesu*, 19 March 1998, 16). Intended to acknowledge the gravity of the crimes,

these statements also cement victimhood as an identity rather than an experience: Victimhood is not contained in the past as a rupture in a life narrative (see, e.g., Pemberton et al., 2019). Rather, it is re-presented as a static characteristic, as transforming the identity of the victim at the stand. The victim is who she has become, for which dignity is not part. The offences suffered become an experience that ruined lives. Pointing this out is not to say that lives are not devastated by crimes of sexual violence and torture; but it is intended to show how lives *have* to be broken within this setting. The violent actions which in another setting could amount to violent ruptures in victims' life narratives, are made the starting point from which all of their lives are narrated, what everything is told in relation to, and from (see also Baines, 2017). Legally, this narrative script makes sense.

The interview accounted for in the prologue in some ways reflected this script—the terminology, the description of violence and its impact, and the detailed chronology of event "fit" the courts' demands for a relevant and useful victim story. At the time, I recognized the content, but not the distanced expression it was shared with. The dominating position of criminal justice in political, advocacy, and research circles engaged in this field impacts on re-presentation also in research that has the same or similar violence as its point of departure. How much had the interviewee's experiences with criminal proceedings shaped her story? And how many times and in what ways had researchers before me asked her to share it? The prologue interview was not the only one during that field trip where interviewees took the initiative to share and detail the violent aspects of their war experiences. This emphasis, and insistence, prompted me to ask to what extent descriptions of violence and emphasis on sufferings in research are, actually, necessary rather than expressions of academic sensationalism. Once we engage in research on or pertaining to atrocity, what stories do we look and ask for, hear, and (re-)tell—and why?

Reflections on the ethics of scholarly Re-presentations

In Bosnia in 2015, I asked participants in a focus group consisting of member representatives of a victims' interest organization what justice meant to them, today. An interviewee described in detail and by physically demonstrating the torture he had been subjected to during the war. Worried that my question had been lost in translation, I said that he did not have to describe these experiences and repeated the question. He assured me that he had, indeed, understood the question and that in order to provide an answer, he first needed us to see and know how humiliating the violence he was subjected to was for him and his co-captives, to show us what he sought justice for. The interviewee ended his response by stating that for what he had suffered, there could be no justice, but the only measure that would come close was criminal prosecution. In contrast to the interview recounted in the prologue, his reflections did not appear planned or repeated, and they were not "clean" or void of metaphors. He had never spoken with researchers before, and he was not yet trained in legal lingo. But as was the case in the interview in the prologue, the violence itself—its spelling out and visualization—was the crux of his story.

Another victims' advocate in Sarajevo lamented that the media in Bosnia did not describe in sufficient detail the content of the sexual crime charges when the defendants of these cases were convicted. She pointed out how the generic descriptions in short

newspaper notes failed to do justice to the victims and to the suffering the defendants had caused. She deemed it to be the media's post-conflict obligation to force the public to learn exactly what the convicted had done, to broadcast the evil acts as described by victims and accounted for in judgments—to make both war crimes and criminal justice visible for all and not euphemistically rewritten for the public. Only then could society as such legitimately move on. To these interviewees, a credible re-presentation of offenders and victims, of causes and consequences, of justice and life after war, appeared to be constituted by explicit descriptions of the violence that produces and connects them *as* victims.

This argument resonates with my earliest writings on conflict-related sexual violence, where I included detailed descriptions of sexual offenses as provided by victim' witnesses at international criminal courts (Houge, 2008). Far more experienced than I was, a senior scholar cautioned against the use of such descriptions in my master's thesis. She pointed out the challenge involved in writing and communicating about a phenomenon that many people prefer not to read about, the alienation that the descriptions may cause, and the dehumanization of the victims the descriptions entailed. At the time, conflict-related sexual violence was not as common a theme or focus in research to do with war experiences. Accordingly, I was more focused on the whats and the hows of violence, of making rape visible, establishing it as a legitimate, distinguishable empirical field of interest. With my background in the humanitarian sector and as a human rights activist, I am not blind to the potential impact on me of what Dawes (2013: 8–9) refers to as the "core of the catechism of the human rights movement." That is, the obligation to bear witness, which relies on an assumption, or hope, that "knowing about suffering induces action" (Houge and Lohne, 2017; see also Dauphinée, 2007). I modified my texts to some degree, but also argued that the examples remind us that the phenomenon under study cannot be reduced to a theoretical discussion about notions, categories, and abstract ideas, that we must not lose its materiality, or manifestations, out of sight (Houge, 2009). I held that if we, as scholars or policy makers, do not grasp or consider the offenses' actual expressions, their violent profusion, we will not be able to analyze them properly. It is, after all, the expression of these offences and the suffering the violence results in, that motivate researchers, activists, and politicians alike to do research and contribute to its prevention. As researchers, to know and understand more about a violent phenomenon, we also need to recognize what the phenomenon *is*. Vetlesen (2014: 127–128) similarly argues that there is a concerning gap between generalized, dry, theoretical explanations of participation in atrocity crimes and the particular, and often, excessive act of evil that they refer to. I worried that in the distance between the actual offenses and theoretical abstractions, there was a danger of drawing simplistic conclusions: The further away we are from a phenomenon, the easier it becomes to make theories, models, or maps quite ignorant to the realities of the people and territory it is supposed to describe and explain.

In somewhat contrast, several of the interlocutors I met with in Bosnia in 2015 explicitly commended us for not asking them to describe the violence and losses they had experienced during the war. One pointed out that they needed no more re-presentations in that form, and that such a focus did more harm than good. Some remarked how their experiences had already been established by the courts and in extensive documentation of sexual violence already described in academic, legal, media, and NGO reports. They held

that the dominating, sustained attention to sensational violence concealed the socio-economic, legal, political, and educational everyday barriers in post-conflict society that continued to exert harm on war victims, making reconciliation a distant dream at best. One interviewee stated with surprise as we concluded, that "finally, someone from outside of Bosnia is interested in *us*, and not the violence we were subjected to," and thanked us for not defining what was his story, but rather asked him what his story was.

These recollections of interviews in post-conflict Bosnia exemplify how for some war survivors the violence experienced is a brutal rupture in the past that they strive to move beyond regardless of the degrees of justice they have achieved. For others the violence is a continuous presence that needs to be articulated in order to make sense of the present, an experience that defines their identity and what gives meaning. Who do we, as researchers, have access to? And who do we choose to re-present, and how, in our publications? The witnesses who made an active choice to testify and describe for the world, through criminal proceedings or in interviews, the violence they were subjected to, the victims who want or need their particular descriptions of violence to be heard, that tries to put into words atrocities that resist representation (paraphrasing Dawes, 2013: 8)? Or do we re-present the victims and victims' representatives who argue against the re-presentation of victims and offenders that descriptions of violence produce, and who caution against the essentializing and reductionist function of such re-presentations? Sometimes it is not the statements of the many, but the reflection of a few that stirs scholars' attention and thought. Do we re-present all, or weigh them according to numbers, or the substance of their argument?

Within the confines of our publications, we possess "monopoly of interpretation" (Kvale, 2006: 484). We deem some interviews and re-presentations more fit than others, order perspectives, "the researched world[s]" (Mantzoukas, 2004: 1001). We make "[c]lean and reasonable scholarship about messy, unreasonable experiences" (Tamas, 2009: 5) based on the questions we ask and our analysis and ordering of (selected parts) of (selected) answers. We tidy and tailor experiences and lives into storytelling, our writing, in order to make sense of findings and develop arguments about realities and phenomena that have messy and violent profusion at their core.

In my more recent writings, focusing on offenders, I referred to the violence they committed by the use of generalized terms (e.g., forced masturbation, genital beatings, forced fellatio, vaginal, anal, and oral rapes) (Houge, 2015, 2016). This attempt to write undramatically and unsensational about what at least in several instances amount to extreme instances of violence was not intended to downplay the gravity of the offenses. It had to do with the overall purpose of the papers, focusing on individuals rather than offences. This way, I sought to avoid othering both offenders and victims through detailed descriptions of the offenses they are connected by. I remain ambivalent with this re-presentation. The research is founded on a reality of suffering and violent offenses that I do not readily provide the reader with access to. Rather than sensationalizing experience, I am at risk of trivializing it. Arguably, though, victims are reduced to the offense they have been subjected to, translated into discourse, put in motion as and reduced to "conceptual categories" (Schaanning, 2001) whether or not the violence as such is described in detail.

There is, of course, a difference between research that simply references violence and/or war as a contextual factor, and research that has this violence at its core—as it addresses the individuals and societies involved, proper responses, causes, and/or consequences. Here, there is a continuum of re-presentation possibilities from what Kalyvas (2009: 33) reference as "[r]epetitive descriptions of violence stressing its most grotesque aspects," a practice that he holds to "substitute emotion for coherent political analysis," to mentioning atrocities only in passing, as if items on a shopping list. In the latter instance, are we not making "a nice story out of loathsome cruelty and piercing, causeless hurt," as Hoffman (2004: 7) warns? After more than a decade working in this field, I am still not sure about the ethics of re-presentation practice in this field, or where on the continuum of possible re-presentations the ethical balancing point sits.

Closing remarks

"What are the ethics of storytelling?" asks James Dawes, (2013: xiii) in his book *Evil Men*, where he seeks to increase our understanding of evil based on interviews with aging Japanese war criminals. In the above, I have addressed how sensational mass violence and war crimes are brought into research as an ethical and analytical matter. Criminal justice after war, and—I argue—much research on war crimes and atrocities, hinges on individuals' willingness and/or ability to share very intimate, invasive experiences that define and categorize them for the world, as "survivors," "broken," "victims," "other." In the early days of ICJ prosecutions of conflict-related sexual violence, their willingness to testify was followed by a seemingly unsatiable thirst for their descriptions of violence, trauma, and humiliation. Approaching 30 years after the war in the former Yugoslavia, researchers are still asking for more. While some survivors grow weary and will not feed this thirst, others repeat their story again and again and again. Yet others are just getting ready to tell their story for the first time, after decades of silence.

The question of how to re-present violent acts and suffering in the end texts of research poses an ethical dilemma that pulls in opposite directionswhere toward one end of the continuum the violence is described in detail, reminding us of the violent profusion, of what people have had the ability and imagination to do to others, and in the other end, the violence is not described, but lumped in broad conceptual categories, seeking not to sensationalize the people involved, or alienate readers from them and the text. Following the understanding of re-presentation used herein, any telling—whether it puts violence into graphical detail or in conceptual categories—necessarily reduces lives and experiences (Baines, 2017). Arguably, this reduction through re-presentation is both part and consequence of the violence itself. It requires of us to be conscious of the re-presentation work we do in our writing of violence, and the reflections and choices that underlie it (see also Krystalli, 2021).

A re-presentation ethics requires our attentive facing up to the implications of our research—in the field, in our writings, and in our teaching. Our re-presentations always involve a more or less careful selection of perspectives, framings, categories, and words to describe, understand, and explain both violence, its causes, and impact on individuals and societies. The terminology we engage steers and limits the realities we get access to, are

able to see, and further construct for our audiences. In this spirit, this article is best read as a self-reflexive exercise that reflects my unease with re-presentations of conflict-related sexual violence, a source of continuous and necessary ethical ambivalence. It does not provide a blueprint, but hopefully, it can nourish scholarly introspection about the ethics of re-presentations and the imageries of victims and offenders, causes and consequences that we construct and feed through our research focus and writing on and beyond atrocities and violence. Thus, I conclude here with a call to practice a continuous ethics of re-presentation in research, and also for greater openness on the ethical considerations that underlie our re-presentation choices and practices in atrocity and violence-related research.

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Notes

1. Redacted court transcripts from US courts-martial are available upon request from the United States Army Court of Criminal Appeals.
2. ICTY redacted transcripts, briefs, hearing notes, and judgments are available at the ICTY Court Records Database, upon registration at http://icr.icty.org. ICTR files are available at the Judicial Records and Archives at https://jrad.irmct.org/.

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