**What can we/do we want to know?: reflections from researching SGBV in military settings**

**Abstract**

This article explores methodological challenges that arose in two perpetrator-centered research projects on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in two different armed forces contexts: the British Army, and the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo. We examine how the interplay between research subjects’, in this case perpetrators’ performances and our own desires and investments as researchers shape the knowledge we produce. Ultimately, we seek to encourage continuing (self-) critical discussions on how various discursive framings and ethico-political desires shape the stories we hear as well as those that we tell.

**Introduction**

I (Harriet Gray) meet with a support worker in the busy, open-plan office used by staff at the domestic violence charity at which he works. We are in a small British town which, thanks to its location near to several bases, has a large military and ex-military population, and because of this the organization offers support to relatively large numbers of military personnel and their families as well as to civilians. The support worker explains that the work they do with (military and civilian) perpetrators of domestic violence focuses on their use of coercive, controlling behavior against their partners, which, he suggests, is both serious in itself and inseparable from the perpetration of physical and sexual abuses. While there are many similarities across military and civilian clients, the support worker tells me, one important issue with the military perpetrators is their tendency to “hide behind” narratives of combat stress; to draw on assumptions about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), in particular, as an “excuse” for their violent and controlling behavior. He explains that while the idea that PTSD might cause domestic violence sometimes comes up in work with military perpetrators, when he and his colleagues closely scrutinize a client’s experience, they tend to find that the abuse was not caused by experiences of combat or of trauma; indeed, in many cases the domestic violence predates combat deployment. His narrative makes good sense to me. In rejecting the story in which PTSD causes military domestic abuse, it resists the tendency towards abstracting such abuse both from domestic violence in the UK more broadly and from its wider context of gendered inequity—a tendency that I find troubling. I find his explanations to be both helpful and convincing, and appreciate them coming from someone with so much relevant experience.

We (Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern) sit on weathered plastic chairs in a courtyard in an army base, surrounded by long, low whitewashed buildings that house both a school and a church, sipping our cokes and talking with the army chaplain in charge. We are in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and are interviewing the chaplain for our research project on sexual violence in the DRC. He explains to us that many of the soldiers who rape and otherwise violently harm civilians suffer from PTSD, but laments that none of the foreign donors are willing to fund counseling work. The soldiers themselves and their families are also not aware of the workings of PTSD; he is one of the very few in the DRC who is trained in counseling soldiers who suffer from it. We welcome his analysis and firmly agree: we are pleased to hear his thoughts on how experiences of violence and trauma breed violence. In so doing he humanizes the soldiers, unsettles familiar and harmful colonial tropes, blurs the binary ‘perpetrator-victim’, as well as disrupts the ‘Rape as a Weapon of War’ (RWOW) narrative that focuses on the strategic use of sexual violence (SV). His account resonates with the stories of suffering and the spirals of violence that the government soldiers (FARDC) (many of whom—we surmise from their personalized testimonies— have raped) spoke to us about.

We begin this article with these two vignettes, which are recollected from our field notes, because both their similarities and their contrast help us to ask questions about what we can know about conflict-related sexual and gender-based Violence (SGBV) perpetrated by members of the armed forces. How can we make sense of our very different readings and reactions to the narratives of perpetrator victimhood (in particular PTSD)? More specifically, by reflecting upon our experiences conducting perpetrator-centered research in military contexts in the UK and the DRC, we interrogate how the discursive frames and attending theoretical and political desires that we bear with us as researchers filter *what* we hear and render what is heard intelligible. We also explore how the accounts that our respondents relay to us reflect the discursive framings available to them. Ultimately, we argue that critical reflexivity and contextual familiarity would/should/could include attention to the discursive frames and conditions of possibility available to—as well the attending desires of—both the ‘researcher-subject’ (Higate 2015) and the research subject (e.g. s/he whom we study): in other words to their (intersubjective) performances in the research encounter, which also includes the interpretation and drafting of research ‘results’.

Why is this focus important? As researchers within the field of conflict-related SGBV, we tend to be deeply politically and ethically invested in our research, and to harbor a desire to produce certain kinds of useful knowledge that may improve women’s situations and enhance gender equality. By reflecting upon how different desires may have shaped our research, we seek to encourage the growing body of (self-) critical discussions about how we do research on SGBV, and to better recognize the ways in which our various positions and desires shape how we make sense of such violence. Moreover, reconsidering the different repertoires of victimhood that we encountered, we highlight the ways in which research subjects’ narratives are informed by the discourses available to them and how such discourses may overlap with dominant discourses in the scholarly community on SGBV, thus increasing the risk of reproducing what we already (want to) know as researchers. As such, we point to the importance of being attentive to the “meta-data” (Fujii, 2010) that accompany, and are integral to, perpetrator testimonies, as well as our interpretations of them.

Our intervention is clearly not novel in relation to the social sciences more generally; many before us have noted the need to pay serious attention to how discursive framings and desires shape the knowledge we produce also as ‘critical scholars’ (e.g. Afray and Anderson 2005; Spivak 1988; Hansson and Hellberg forthcoming; Kapoor 2005). However, these insights have not yet figured prominently in methodological reflections within the field of SGBV, either conflict-related (however narrowly or widely understood) or in relation to military staff as perpetrators.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we provide a brief overview of literature on perpetrator centered research, reflecting on our contribution. Next, we explain the basic outline of the two studies and clarify how we conceptualize perpetrator performances and researcher desires. We then move to our analysis, which is divided into two main sections. The first attends to the dominant performances (as we read them) in the two research projects, probing into how our own positionalities shaped the ways in which we read and understood such performances. The second discusses how participants’ performances not only shift, but are also often shaped by the same discourses that inform scholarly explanations of SGBV. The article ends with concluding reflections on our understanding of and, ultimately, efforts to redress, SGBV.

**Perpetrator-centered research and conflict-related SGBV: A brief note on the state of the art**

By attending to the discursive contexts and desires animated both in researcher’s queries and interpretations and in research subject’s responses, this article draws attention to methodological challenges that have been largely overlooked in the SGBV literature. Feminist literature on methodology and SGBV in general offer few clues for those undertaking perpetrator-centered research. While the inevitable co-production of knowledge has received substantial attention in this literature (see Ackerly, Stern and True 2006 for an overview), the imagined research subject in such discussions is seldom that of the perpetrator of violence, but rather its survivors (as well as others involved in the various support systems around survivors) (cf. Hearn 1998, 76-87).

Yet, scholars interested in SGBV have increasingly argued that we must pay attention not only to the voices of its survivors, or to aggregated quantitative data, but also to the voices of its perpetrators. Some studies analyze the representations of perpetrators of conflict-related SGBV that emerge from the transcripts of various international criminal courts (Hogue 2016; Skjelsbæk 2015; Smeulers 2008). Others have looked specifically at the representation of female perpetrators (Smeulers 2015: 227-231; Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007; Sjoberg 2016). In addition, a relatively small number of studies, including those upon which we reflect in this article, have drawn on interview-based research to analyze how perpetrators themselves narrate their acts of violence (e.g. Boesten 2014; Cohen 2016; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2009).

Moreover, a few studies have specifically discussed methodological issues in relation to conducting research with perpetrators of SGBV in both military and civilian spaces. Such studies have emphasized the many challenges attached to conducting such research, not least issues surrounding the politics of gaining access. They highlight the problems attached to identifying potential participants (except through the criminal justice system, which comes with its own puzzles and sample biases) and the difficulties in motivating people to talk about socially sanctioned behavior (Harne 2005; Scully 1990, 13-19). Some scholars have also raised concerns about the potential risks that women face when researching the lives of violent men (Harne 2005; Scully 1990, 11-13), as well as the emotional difficulties of conducting this type of work (Hudson 2005, 7-10). Compounding these difficulties, perpetrator-centered research has also surely been discouraged by the complicated ethical and political dilemmas it entails. Conducting such research clearly elicits concerns about the implications of re-centering perpetrators’ interpretations of events (see for instance, Cowburn 2010; Dauphinée 2007; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013; Wood 2006). While the research projects accounted for in this article bear witness to the dilemmas and challenges highlighted above, the focus of this article lies elsewhere, namely: perpetrator performances of victimhood, discursive contexts and researcher desires.

In the following sections we provide a brief overview of the contexts of the research projects and further elucidate how the article draws upon – but still differs from – other methodological interventions in perpetrator centered research.

**Setting the stage: a brief outline of context and approach**

As noted above, this article considers our research experiences among military perpetrator groups in the UK and the DRC. The research project in the DRC (2005-2011), which was conducted by Eriksson Baaz and Stern, aimed to explore the ways in which soldiers of the armed forces made sense of sexual violence committed by military staff against civilians. It did so through interviews with soldiers and officers, but also (later) by ‘hanging out’ with military staff in various settings. In conducting these interviews, we did not attempt to discern who was a perpetrator and who was not, partly because of the inherent methodological challenges, but also because we aimed to query generalized discourses around gender and sexual violence within the armed forces (which at that time, was responsible for most of the violence committed). The research in the UK (2011-2016), conducted by Gray, was a qualitative exploration of domestic violence in the British military community. The project was anchored in in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with men who had perpetrated domestic violence against their civilian wives while serving in the British Army, as well as with civilian women who had experienced domestic violence in marriages to men serving in the British military, and support workers in both military and civilian services. The perpetrator research subjects interviewed for the study were all recruited via a domestic violence perpetrator program and, as such, all explicitly presented themselves as ‘perpetrators’ both prior to and during the interview itself.

In many ways we had similar experiences; in both (UK and DRC) cases we encountered narratives that located the reasons for conflict-related SGBV in various aspects of victimhood. While the UK case was marked by a reiteration of a narrative that positioned combat-related PTSD as a cause of violence, the narrative of victimhood in the DRC instead centered on poverty and neglect, mainly presenting bad leadership as the cause of violence. Yet, as reflected in the stories introducing the article, our readings of the performances of victimhood were markedly different. Eriksson Baaz and Stern were largely relieved by - and embraced - the narratives of victimhood in the DRC, and even emphasized the narrative of PTSD which was rather marginal in that setting. By contrast, Gray at the onset found the narratives of victimhood and PTSD deeply frustrating and sought to challenge them. In short, while firmly grounded in feminist theorizing, we reacted to and treated the performances of victimhood we encountered in different manners. (In order to make these distinctions clear, we indicate in the subsequent analysis whose experience (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, or Gray) we are addressing.)

Clearly, the forms of conflict-related SGVB committed by military staff in focus in the two projects differ. Tellingly—yet not surprisingly—our respective focus mirrors the dominant storylines about SGBV in the respective contexts, in turn further underscoring the highly political nature of narratives about conflict-related SGBV. In the DRC, the sexual violence committed by armed actors against civilian women has received immense international attention, overshadowing all other forms of conflict-related SGBV, including domestic violence against military spouses. In contrast, while the UK itself is not a conflict zone, its military has in recent decades been involved in numerous difficult and costly deployments, some of which still persist. Yet, in the UK, sexual violence committed against civilians on deployment has received less media, policy and academic focus than (supposedly) PTSD-related violence committed at home (including against spouses, although the attention paid to domestic violence has also been fairly limited.) Yet, the aim here is not to analyze why the attention has differed, nor to conduct a comparative analysis of the two projects, but rather to interrogate what we might learn from considering our different interpretations of soldiers’ performances together.

Some caveats are required. First, while focusing on military perpetrators, we do not wish to imply that SGBV in military or conflict spaces is somehow necessarily drastically different from that which takes place in civilian settings. Indeed, following the work of numerous feminist scholars, we understand multiple iterations of SGBV as interrelated along a ‘continuum of violence’, which connects gender-based violences across ‘war’ and ‘peace,’ ‘public’ and ‘private,’ and ‘intimate’ and ‘geopolitical’ (see, for example, Cockburn, 2004; Kelly 2010; Swaine 2015). Given this blurring and overlap, any firm distinctions between categories such as ‘conflict-related SGBV,’ ‘military SGBV,’ and ‘civilian SGBV’ can be neither neatly nor finally pinned down but, rather, remain fluid, contingent and highly politically charged (see Gray, forthcoming). Hence, we should not be surprised that many of our observations here could also apply to research with perpetrators in ‘civilian’ spaces.

Second, our focus on SGVB committed by military perpetrators does not imply a suggestion that the logics of SGBV are fundamentally different from other forms of violence, or that perpetrator performances in conflict-related settings are fundamentally different than those in diverse circumstances. There exists a wealth of excellent literature on genocide, terrorism and other instances of mass-violence that addresses the performances of perpetrators as research subjects in (and outside) conflict settings (Collins 2008; Fujii 2010; Hoffman 2011; Robben 2012; Utas 2004; Verweijen 2015). Our rather limited engagement with this literature here does not mean that we suggest that military perpetrators of SGBV perform in a fundamentally different way compared to perpetrators of “other violence” – quite the opposite (see below). Rather it stems from our focus on the research desires and discursive registers that surround conflict-related SGBV. While perpetrator performances certainly converge across violences and background (e.g. civilian/military), the discursive registers available to military perpetrators of SGBV – as well as the (feminist) desires harbored by scholars of conflict-related SGBV - clearly also have their own specificities.

Finally, predominance of performances of victimhood in the cases explored here also warrants a word of caution. Clearly, many other forms of performances could and should be expected in perpetrator-centered research. For instance, other research has taught us to be vigilant in relation to narratives of spectacular violence and brutality (Hoffman 2011; Pottier 2007). Such performances can reflect efforts to intimidate or demonize enemies (Pottier 2007), as well as combatants’ search for visibility in the wake of the increasing role of the media in these conflict settings. The DRC has also offered plenty of similar examples in which clearly unrealistic and staged accounts by combatants detail incredible atrocities and violence (including cannibalism, see Pottier 2007), which are often taken at face value both in media and research (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2013b). Yet, while such performances are clearly shaped by racialized and colonial imaginaries, similar performances may arguably also be expected in other (Northern) contexts, such as those that reflect particular assumptions about the violences inherent to militarized masculinities (e.g. Whitworth 2004). In short, many other kinds of performances other than iterations of victimhood should be expected in perpetrator centered research.

**Performances and Desire: Some Conceptual Clarifications**

Learning from post-structural theorists such as Butler (1993) and Hall (1996), we conceive of performances (of the self) not as masking something ‘real’ or authentic - the true experience; the authentic self - but as constitutive of the self, and produced by and through discourses, as well as productive of these. Furthermore, there are many competing discourses at play in any discursive field. When referring to perpetrator performances, we therefore refer to research subjects’ (inevitable) tendencies to emphasize some performances over others in different contexts. In pronouncing one constellation of performances, others are concealed. When, for instance, a research subject articulates one performance in response to an interview question (e.g. that of a sufferer of PTSD), other ones (e.g. that of a male soldier driven by seemingly uncontrollable heterosexual urges) are obscured. In listening to one set of performances—ones that resonate with the frequencies that dominant discourses enable the researcher subject to hear—s/he may disregard other performances that may help produce vitally nuanced knowledge in our efforts to make sense of and work to abate SGBV.

This means that our approach differs from research that emphasizes the ways in which perpetrators obscure the truth in the context of research interviews through manipulation, denials, justifications, or outright lies that can easily be identified (e.g. Scully 1990, 26-28; Hudson 2005, 59-64, 108-113). While we by no means wish to deny that there is a truth to violence—it happens; it is real— we start from the assumption that narratives of violence (like any narratives) are contextual; and that accounts of violence and the subjects that enact it are often multiple. As such, the differing performances of victimhood we encountered cannot be discarded simply as ‘fake’ manipulations.

What, then, do we mean by ‘researcher desire’ and ‘desirable truths’? Drawing upon Hansson and Hellberg’s (forthcoming) exploration of the desire of the critical scholar, we build on a Lacanian (1998) understanding of desire as driven by the wish to be recognized by the Other (see also Kapoor 2005). This relational understanding of desire and subjectification means that the desire of the self is always the desire of the other (i.e. something becomes desirable as one imagines it is desired by the Other). As scholars of conflict-related SBGV, we might seek recognition from many others (e.g. our research subjects, the policy community, the generalized successful well-cited academic Other, journal editorial boards, and so on). In the context of this article, for instance, we aim to be recognized by other feminist scholars and activists within the field of SGBV, and the Women Peace and Security research and policy community more generally. While certainly diverse in terms of remit and approach to knowledge, the desires of the scholarly and the policy community largely converge (e.g. Hoover Green 2014). A general, and hardly controversial, ethico-political desire embedded in the feminist scholarly field of SGBV is that of producing knowledge that renders women/girls’ suffering in conflict visible, and that can redress such suffering and enhance gender equality more generally. This desire manifests in what could be termed ‘desirable truths’ – that is, scholarly evidence that we believe will support the change envisioned.

The workings of such desires have, for instance, been evident in the long time reluctance and resistance to recognize men as victims of conflict-related SGBV (see Dolan 2014). The idea that sexual violence in war is to be understood as a rational, avoidable weapon or strategy of war, and not an unfortunate, but inevitable consequence of war, located in male sexuality, provides another example (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013; Wood 2009). Additionally, the impetus to demonstrate an intimate connection between conflict-related SGBV and (peacetime) gender inequality between men and women more generally informs much research (see Dolan 2014; Davies and True 2015). This desire is partly reflected in the UK study discussed in this paper, and is visible through a conceptualization of military perpetration of domestic violence as rooted in gender inequalities and an attendant reluctance to embrace the PTSD narrative.

Yet, while some generalized desirable truths within the field can be discerned, the scholarly community is certainly diverse and offers divergent suggestions on what constitutes valuable knowledge that can improve the lives of women. For instance, much critical feminist research highlights the dangers attached to simplistic gendered divisions between victims and perpetrators in war. As reflected in Eriksson Baaz and Stern’s research encounters in the DRC, such theoretical positions tend to harbor desires to hear ‘unfamiliar stories’: stories that problematize monolithic notions of militarized masculinities as well as the close associations of women with victimhood and peace/non-violence and men with the perpetration of violence (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013).

Importantly, we do not seek here to engage in a tidy division of approaches and their attendant desires. Doing that would be not only be futile – as we as scholars seek recognition from and harbor desires (both wittingly and unwittingly) in relation to various others depending on context – but also counterproductive to our aim. Rather than engaging in a polemic discussion that holds that the seductions attached to one position are more harmful than another, we hope to encourage continuing (self)critical discussions on the ways in which our various positions and desires shape the stories we tell.

**Embracing performances of victimhood in the DRC—Eriksson Baaz and Stern[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Upon embarking on our research project in the DRC, we expected to find performances of familiar militarized masculinities: celebrations of violent achievement and strength. These expectations were shaped by many different ‘grids of intelligibility’, not least dominant feminist narratives about militarized masculinity (Dillon 2004). Such expectations were also evoked through reading various Human Rights reports on the violence committed by the Congolese army that described the military perpetrators as inherently violent (see Verweijen 2015) as well as previous, more brief, encounters we had with military staff both in the DRC and elsewhere.

However, when actually interviewing the then present-day soldiers for our research project, we rarely encountered stories that fit snugly in such frames of understanding. Instead, we encountered different, unexpected performances of victimhood and vulnerability. In short, lower ranking soldiers, in particular, described themselves as victims who endured enormous suffering due to abysmal service conditions and minimal wages (they were often not paid at all, or were paid with delays). They explained that they and their families consequently lived with daily hunger and other forms of hardship. Stories of children not being able to go to school, sick children whom they could not afford to take to the hospital, and children who had died were abundant. The soldiers firmly placed the blame for these conditions on the military leadership at various levels. Indeed, their accounts featured deep-seated feelings of neglect and frustration with superiors. They repeated statements such as: “we are suffering”; “we are living like animals”; “I am a failed man because I cannot provide for my family”; “my wife does not love me anymore because I can’t support our children”; “our superiors are bad, it is their fault; they get rich while our kids die”; “no-one respects us; civilians despise us because we are poor;” and so on. Such accounts also played a central role in explaining the violence committed, including sexual violence (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2009, see also Lwambo 2013). In these narratives, the reasons for violence were largely attributed to the poor living and service conditions in two main ways. One the one hand, the soldiers described these conditions as fostering frustration, anger and stress that were then channeled into sexual (and other) violence towards civilians. On the other hand, they explained that such conditions ‘forced’ them to rape, as they had no access to ‘normal sexual encounters’ (being far from their wives/girlfriends and having no money to pay for sexual services). Moreover, male soldiers (in contrast to female soldiers) repeated accounts of forced recruitment. Those who did not claim that they had been recruited by force emphasized that their entry into the army was not an active choice that reflected their wishes, but that they had joined because of poverty and the absence of other opportunities.

In short, the initial narratives seemed to reflect efforts to self-stage as victims, or what Utas (2005) termed ‘victimcy’. Drawing upon his experience of research with child or very young soldiers and women attached to armed groups in Sierra Leone and Liberia, Utas (2005: 409) underscores how we should not be at all surprised that research subjects present themselves as victims: “If a stranger came up to you and asked you if you have killed and committed atrocities would you answer “Yes, and I did it willingly?”” Utas introduces the concept of “victimcy”to refer to *“*the agency of self-staging as victim of war”, “a form of self-representation by which *agency* may be effectively exercised under trying, uncertain, and disempowering circumstances” (2005: 408), enabling people to establish themselves as legitimate recipients of humanitarian aid and other support. As such, he suggests that adopting a victim position serves “to rid the person of social blame in a particular moral landscape and creates a platform for both social (re)acceptance and socio-economic possibilities (ibid).”

Surprisingly (in retrospect), we did not question such narratives of victimcy much initially— not even the fairly numerous accounts of forced recruitment. While we clearly acknowledged in our texts that “the soldiers appeared to view the interview occasion as a long-awaited opportunity to talk about their problems to somebody (…) who was perceived as having contacts with influential people (i.e. the international community and international donors)” (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2009), we did not until later engage in critical self-reflections about the ways in which the interview performances provided a somewhat one-sided perspective. This occurred when we combined interviews with more straightforward ethnography in the form of ‘hanging out’ (Geertz 1998) with soldiers and their families in and outside of army camps in order to get a fuller picture of army life, and to make better sense of the absence of accounts of rape as ordered or encouraged. Not surprisingly, the material collected through “hanging out” gave a nuanced picture of the soldiers’ research subject selves, beyond the simple victimhood they had initially portrayed. We witnessed instances of soldiers verbally abusing civilians as well as of physical abuse (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2013a), as well as accounts of accomplishment and confidence (as fathers, husbands and soldiers). In particular, their explanations of how and why they entered into the armed forces also sometimes changed from an initial claim of forced recruitment to stories of more voluntary recruitment (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2015).

We do not propose that the initial performances relayed through interviews were masking something more ‘real’ or authentic (this cannot be underscored enough). Nevertheless, in later considering our initial lack of reflection on the wider context that included our theoretical desires (particularly through the discussions leading to this article), we suggest that part of the answer to this relative lack lies in the ways in which the soldiers’ stories fit exceptionally well with our theoretical, ethical and political desires. While we were discomforted by the dissonance between their accounts and what we had expected as feminist IR scholars (we had expected them to reflect familiar notions of military masculinities as well as RWOW), we also felt simultaneous satisfaction that their stories resonated with our suspicions that totalizing narratives obscured a much more complex picture, as well as with our post-colonial theory-inspired sensibilities and desires. Hence, despite our initial floundering for a framework that would help us make sense of what we were hearing, we (as critical feminist scholars) also harbored a desire to hear ‘unfamiliar stories’, e.g. stories that problematize monolithic notions of militarized masculinities as well as the close associations of women with victimhood and peace/non-violence and men with the perpetration of violence. In addition to the risk of overemphasizing what one wants to see (i.e. ‘unfamiliar stories’), such theoretical and ethico-political desires risk compelling the researcher-self (in this case Eriksson Baaz and Stern) to be less critical towards men’s stories of victimhood. (Conversely then, other feminist readings risk engendering not only a reluctance to attend to perpetrator narratives in the first place, but also risk reading male narratives of victimhood simply as dangerous masquerading while women’s narratives of victimhood are taken at face value).

In particular, the appeal of listening to that which was unfamiliar was, in this case, clearly compounded by our post-colonial impulse towards challenging the extreme dehumanization of soldiers in the DRC warscape. As with other armed conflicts in Africa, media and policy reporting on the DRC and its soldiers repeated familiar colonial images of the barbaric African (masculine) Other, who is unleashed by the conditions of war to act according to his ‘true’ nature (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013; Verweijen 2015). Deeply troubled by the racism embedded in such accounts, we (poised for understanding with the tools of our post-colonial framework) were reassured by the soldiers’ performances of victimcy. These shared the interview stage with their ethical reflections on the violence they committed, as well as a relative absence of a celebration of violence. Highlighting such accounts therefore seemed to form an integral part of our responsibilities as post-colonial critics (see also Verweijen 2015). It also, we suggest, compelled us to search for frames of understanding that were, in contrast to the UK case, largely absent in the narratives we collected. This impetus to look beyond familiar frames rendered the few accounts that connected the violence committed by soldiers to PTSD appear as particularly informed and relevant, as we hoped to relay in our opening vignette about our conversation with the army chaplain.

**Skepticism towards performances of victimhood in the UK—Gray**

In the UK, the image of the service person as ‘victim’ is one that has been gaining ground in recent years. While a ‘hero’ imagery has been historically dominant and remains influential in contemporary public perceptions of soldiers - with 90 percent of people in a 2008 British Army poll saying that they thought of soldiers as heroes - McCartney charts the growing centrality of the ‘victim’ trope in representations of military personnel. Throughout recent conflicts, there has been growing public awareness of the physical and mental injuries sustained by service personnel. Public concern has been exacerbated by criticism of the equipment provided to those deployed (McCartney 2011, 46-47) and by claims to victimhood by personnel themselves (BBC 2002; McGeorge *et al*. 2006). There has in recent years been a particular increase in public concern around the psychological harms that combat deployment may inflict upon service personnel, in particular around PTSD (Gray 2015, 2016a). In McCartney’s words, “There is now an expectation that soldiers will be psychologically damaged by war” (2011, 46).

The idea that PTSD was a causal factor in military domestic violence was one that emerged at multiple junctures during the research. It frequently arose in conversations that took place around the project itself, as many people assumed that it was a central feature when I told them about my research topic. It appeared as a stumbling block with the military gatekeepers through whom I negotiated access, who were concerned about the possibility that my project might generate negative press by associating PTSD with domestic violence (Gray 2016b); and it also emerged strongly from many of my interviews, in particular those carried out with victim-survivors and with support workers (Gray 2016a).

While a few perpetrators suggested that they experienced higher levels of “aggression” when they returned from deployment, they also acknowledged that their own violence did not begin or significantly escalate under such circumstances. Instead, other victim performances emerged more strongly from the interviews. Some of these were not specific to the military context but, rather, overlapped considerably with similar victimhood narratives, which are common in civilian domestic violence cases. Some, for example, attributed their perpetration of abuse to the everyday (e.g., not specifically combat-related) stresses of their jobs, and others to mental health problems not connected to experiences of deployment. Other research subjects positioned themselves as victims of their wives’ bad behavior which, they suggested, had pushed them towards resorting to violence - including reports of wives’ infidelity, disrespect, or failure to seek their permission before going out with friends. Several complained that they had been unfairly treated by military and civilian authorities who were more likely to believe women over men in such circumstances. Others were more specific to the military space. Several participants identified military life and culture as innately aggressive and controlling, and suggested that they had become unable to separate work-life and home-life; military culture seeped into and shaped their behavior in their family relationships. Similar to explanatory narratives around PTSD, domestic violence appears in these accounts as something not entirely under its perpetrators’ control: perpetrators emerge as somehow weakened or damaged and, therefore, unable to control their actions, thus echoing those in the DRC case.

The performances of victimhood and the reiteration of a narrative that positioned combat-related PTSD as a cause of domestic violence did not come as a surprise. Indeed, the project itself was in part motivated by a curiosity around and frustration with this assumption. Specifically, before beginning the research I had been working at a British domestic violence charity, and in that role I was asked to contribute to a response to a radio documentary program, which positioned domestic violence as a ‘symptom’ of PTSD, along with insomnia, panic attacks, and flashbacks. This request was immensely frustrating to me as someone steeped in the feminist understandings of domestic violence that informed the work of the charity, which approached domestic violence as a gender-based form of violence rooted in socially constructed inequalities between women and men. Reflecting much contemporary scholarship on SGBV, I had, through my experiences at the charity, come to understand domestic violence as a pattern of violent and controlling behavior rooted in perpetrators’ attempts to exert power and control over their partners. This behavior was bolstered by the gendered structures and norms that entrench and normalize such relations of dominance (Anderson 2009; Stark 2007). In contrast, the framing of military domestic violence as caused by PTSD, in my (feminist) understanding, masks both the gendered nature of such violence and the agency of perpetrators. It positions the perpetrator as victim, damaged by the experience of war to the extent that he [sic] has little or no control over his use of violence within his relationship and, as such, cannot be truly blamed for it (for further discussion, see Gray 2016a). As such, I encountered the PTSD narrative as similar to other causal assumptions which feminist scholars working in civilian spaces have critiqued for displacing the causes of domestic violence away from perpetrators themselves – such as those which place the blame on alcohol, on stress, or on victim-survivors themselves (Women’s Aid 2016).

Hence, and in contrast to Eriksson Baaz and Stern’s experiences outlined above, my own theoretical desires were not well reflected in these narratives of victimhood. I was primed to read these narratives as a *displacement* of the causes of domestic violence away from the agent of the violence. As a result, it is likely that I was less inclined to listen and carefully attend to such narratives than I was to those that did resonate with my theoretical and ethico-political desires, such as those that described perpetrators’ use of controlling behavior (which also emerged frequently from the interviews), and as reflected in the vignette that opens this article. This does not mean that I ignored or disregarded performances of victimhood, but rather that I approached them from a particular vantage point: I argue elsewhere (Gray 2016a) for example that performances of victimhood obscure and depoliticize the gendered inequalities that underpin domestic violence. As such, I framed these narratives in a distinct way, which perhaps downplayed other meanings that would have emerged through alternative registers.

**The workings of shifting discursive registers**

Let us now turn to further probe how to make sense of the different repertoires of victimhood that we encountered in these two research projects by querying the discursive context in which they were staged. The soldiers’ performances surely reflect a range of circumstances, not the least the markedly different material circumstances in which they live and work, as well as the different conflict settings that they have experienced. However, they surely also reflect the more general discursive registers available to them.

***DRC: From poverty to ordered rape and the absence of PTSD—Eriksson Baaz and Stern***

While narratives of PTSD as causal of SGBV arose in the UK case, they were largely absent in the DRC. The FARDC soldiers certainly referred to war (and the use of drugs) as “destroying people’s heads and making them crazy” (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013). However such accounts mainly occurred when the soldiers sought to make sense of extreme forms of sexual and other violence committed in and just after combat situations. Moreover, while soldiers spoke of sleep-deprivation and painful memories (symptoms often associated with PTSD), they seldom attributed the violence committed to such problems. Hence, the familiar PTSD narrative of wartime trauma as cause of violence enacted outside of combat settings was uncommon.

Given the ways in which PTSD (as it is exemplified in the UK case) would resonate well with the performances of victimcy that FARDC soldiers expressed, the absence of the PTSD narrative in the DRC is probably best explained by the simple fact that this discursive register was not readily available to the soldiers (except for some army chaplains). Neither was it common among the (‘Western’) countries engaged in defense reform in the DRC (such as the US, the EU, and various EU member states), as we saw in our opening vignette. Given the attention and importance allocated to PTSD in many of the donor countries, this lack of attention to PTSD in army reform interventions in the DRC appeared both curious and discomforting. It clearly lent itself to post-colonial interpretations: e.g. that Congolese soldiers are rendered as deviant Others, whose violence, in contrast to that of ‘our’ soldiers, is better understood through innate brutality – a reading that certainly also contributed to our urge to turn to our post-colonial lexicons.

RWOW is another discursive register that was not initially readily available to the soldiers. When we first embarked on the research project in 2005, this narrative was already well established in the academic and policy world (in the wake of the conflicts in Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s). As noted above, It was also firmly established in our expectations as researchers; we expected to—yet did not—hear stories of rape that had been ordered or even encouraged (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2016). Given that the soldiers we talked to not only inhabited a clear position of victimcy, but also put the blame on corrupt, morally depraved commanders (and thus seemed not to nurture any urge to protect them), we eventually interpreted this absence as sign of the limited applicability of the RWOW narrative in our case.

Yet, the absence of accounts of ordered and encouraged sexual violence in the narratives we collected also suggest that the RWOW discourse was not yet widespread in the DRC, and thus not readily available to the soldiers as a frame through which to narrate their experiences to us. Except for some accounts of rapes committed by the ‘Rwandophone invaders’ (articulated both in military and civilian spaces) the RWOW discourse was seldom invoked. However, more recently, the idea that rape is indeed mainly or only a weapon and strategy of war has become widely established in the DRC; various actors and outlets, such as NGOs, media and politicians (both local and international) consistently repeated the mantra that sexual violence is an “arme du guerre” (weapon of war). In the wake of this, soldiers and combatants’ claims that they were ordered to rape have also increased (see for instance Elbert *et al.* 2013).

Clearly, the increasing prevalence of such reports could mean that the dynamics of violence and conflict in the DRC have changed, and that ordered rape in fact has become recurrent. Yet, it could also reflect the ways in which the idea that rape is a weapon of war has become a readily available discursive frame through which perpetrators account for sexual violence. Given the ways that this narrative fits into victimcy positions by putting the blame elsewhere in the chain of command, which is also enabled through the legal notion of command responsibility, and the increasing prospects of legal prosecution in the wake of the surge in rape tribunals (see Lake 2014), such a scenario appears likely. Moreover, more recent accounts of ordered rape have been provided in military contexts that do not easily allow for such orders in that they exhibit a complete breakdown of the chain of command and on-going chaotic movement (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2013b).

***UK: The workings of feminist-informed perpetrator programs— Gray***

The UK case provides an example of a discourse being consciously and deliberately introduced into research subjects’ ways of thinking through education. The perpetrator research subjects were all recruited through a perpetrator program in which they were, or had previously been, enrolled. Domestic violence perpetrator programs were developed in the USA, and began to appear in the UK in the 1980s. Some contemporary British perpetrator programs are run by the National Probation Service and the National Prison Service, and can be court-mandated as an alternative to other forms of punishment or as part of probation. Others, including the one through which I recruited participants for my study, are undertaken on a voluntary basis and run by third-sector organizations. These are not anger management programs, but instead are based on feminist principles and aim to change the attitudes and behaviors of abusive men, and thus to help them to build healthy and respectful relationships in order promote the safety and wellbeing of women and children (Westmarland *et al*. 2010). That is, similarly to the understandings that informed the work of the domestic violence charity at which I used to work (which is outlined above), these services are largely informed by the ”coercive control” approach to domestic violence (Stark 2007). They approach domestic violence as a gender-based form of violence, embedded in the social inequalities between women and men.

Perpetrator programs typically use group work to help men to stop being violent, to teach them how to relate to their partners in respectful and equal ways, and to equip them to deal with difficulties and anger in non-abusive ways (Respect no date). Participants discuss their experiences and are encouraged to take responsibility for their past and present behavior. A large part of the work of such programs, then, is to encourage men who have perpetrated domestic violence to change their understandings of their violence and the causes behind it, and their understandings of the appropriate relationships between women and men and, through this, to change their behavior. This is something of which the researcher subjects were very much aware. When asked how they came to be on the course, one stated that he had been encouraged to attend the course by social services in order to be “educated… to learn about domestic violence.” As such, this program represents a deliberate and overt attempt to reshape the discursive frames through which participants make sense of their experiences.

The effectiveness of this, unsurprisingly, appeared to vary between participants. However, most spoke of a real change in their understandings of their own violence. In addition, many drew on the language of the course to describe their behavior as both violent and controlling, and several emphasized the gendered nature of the abuse they perpetrated, referring, for example, to the idea that abuse occurs because “every man is… brought up to think that women are less than men.” Several participants stated overtly that prior to beginning the course they had felt that violent and controlling behavior towards their wives was acceptable, or at least understandable in the circumstances (such as extreme stress, or feeling that their wives had disrespected them). Some participants spoke of how they had reevaluated their past experiences in light of what they had learned. One, for example, stated that while he had never been accused of domestic abuse in relationships previous to the one he was in when he began the course, looking back he now understands that his prior relationships were also abusive and controlling (although not physically violent): “I didn’t realize until I started this course… It wasn’t until getting here and realizing, actually, it was domestic abuse.” In explaining their current views about the importance of equality and respect within a relationship, several referred explicitly to what the course leaders had told them and to what they had learned from videos they had watched in the group sessions. Some seemed to ‘correct’ themselves as they spoke, clearly using the language of the course to reframe their actions as they narrated them: “I was quite abusive. I say ’quite,’ that’s minimizing,[[2]](#footnote-2) but, er, I was, I was angry, I was violent, I was abusive.”

Again, we are not suggesting here that the ‘truth’ of participants’ narratives was masked by the imposition of the narratives of the course over their previous understandings,[[3]](#footnote-3) but rather, aim to highlight how all subjects make sense of their experiences in conversation with the discourses to which they are exposed. That said, the ‘success’ of the course narratives in providing the lens through which participants narrated their violences in the space of the interview may explain, to some degree, why PTSD was significantly less likely to appear in these interviews. That is, while the PTSD discourse was the dominant one to which victim-survivors and (some) support workers had been exposed - ubiquitous as it is in popular and media discourse around such violence - perpetrator participants had been exposed to different discourses and framed their experiences differently. Indeed, it may be that clients enrolled in the programme were exposed to discourses that explicitly denied a causal link between PTSD and domestic violence, as reflected in the statements of the support worker (who was an employee of the organization in question) in the introductory vignette. Of course, as I explore above, this shift was not totalizing, as narratives of victimhood did appear in interviews with perpetrators. Moreover, other explanations for this discrepancy could of course be identified, not least the possibility that perpetrators did not want to embrace the stigma associated with PTSD. However, this discussion demonstrates the significant fluidity that exists in how particular acts come to be understood and to be storied, depending on the discourses with which research subjects are familiar.

Moreover, and importantly for the purposes of our discussions herein, if I had not known about participants’ enrollment in the program, for example, if I had been interviewing them at a different time or a different context, it may have been more difficult to see how they had come to frame their violence through recourse to a particular discourse to which they had been deliberately exposed (and which I share). Without the process of critical self-reflection in which we engage in this article, I would perhaps be more likely to take their stories about controlling behavior at ‘face value’, in particular because, as already discussed, they fit so well with my own ethico-political and theoretical desires and investments.

**Attending to ‘shared desirable truths’ and un/ease: some concluding reflections**

In this article we have sought to position the ethico-political desires of the researcher at center stage, and to indicate how our respective research projects would surely have benefited from further (self)critical reflections. Yet, such self-reflection is clearly a tricky endeavor, as desires tend to shift and are highly contextual. Moreover, self-reflection requires not only recognizing *that* we harbor desires, but also engaging in uncomfortable considerations of how our desires appear to manifest themselves in what we hear and do not hear in the narratives we collect - and ultimately in the research results that we present.

Additionally, we have called for further attention to and critical reflection of the discourses to which our research subjects have access, as these will inevitably come to inform and to shape the logics through which they make sense of, and narrate, their experiences. While we have explored this in relation to perpetrator-centered research, such critical attention is clearly crucial wherever our research subjects are located along the (often blurry) survivor-perpetrator line. Little methodological attention and reflection has been directed at how such discourses shift over time, at how they may overlap with dominant discourses in the scholarly community on SGBV, or to the consequences this might have for the knowledge we produce. By probing how the various perpetrator performances we (and others) encountered differed, overlapped and, importantly, shifted over time, the article gives rise to several questions that problematize common research conclusions within the field (in addition to our own). For instance: might recent accounts of ordered rape also (or even mainly) reflect the dominance of the RWOW discourse in multiple sites and the ways in which it fits performances of victimhood? Similarly, are the reported correlations between PTSD and domestic violence (e.g. Byrne and Riggs 1996; Taft *et al.* 2009) rooted in part in the dominance of the discursive connections between these issues in many northern contexts? Conversely, does the relative absence of narratives of PTSD in certain contexts simply reflect the absence of this discursive framing? Moreover, might conclusions that draw linkages between forced recruitment and the perpetration of rape (Cohen 2016) also reflect the ways in which performances of victimhood vary between armed groups, and particularly across time (e.g. victimhood performances tend to increase in post-conflict as opposed to conflict settings) (see Utas 2004; 2005)?

Clearly, there are no easy manuals to resort to and no battery of fixed questions to be posed. Yet, crucial to the self-critical reflections that we invite are continuous efforts to be attentive to and query our emotions and affective responses. Elsewhere, Eriksson Baaz and Stern (2016) argued for a methodology of unease, where instead of glossing over a potential sense of discomfort with what our research subjects tell us, we take such discomfort seriously, linger on the apprehension, and continue to ask uncomfortable questions. In addition to such a methodological route, what we propose here is also the flip-side. We would also benefit from being attentive to - and suspicious of - our feelings of comfort and ease. Instead of simply accepting our sense of comfort with our research results, we can take our feelings of ease seriously and critically probe how they are entangled with our ethico-political desires, and inevitably shape the stories we tell and silence other narratives and aspects that might matter for a better understanding of conflict-related SGBV.

Further critical self-reflection within the field is imperative given the high political stakes attached to conflict-related SGBV. These high stakes arguably make the field prone not only to the re-production of certain ‘desirable truths’ such as those outlined in the article, but also to a policing of knowledge (Eriksson Baaz 2018). In short, if we fail to problematize and query the shifting performances and repertoire of discourses available to our research subjects and, importantly, how these overlap with our own theoretical assumptions and desires, we might ultimately reproduce what we already (want to) know. We thus risk not only obscuring novel insights, but also undermining our efforts to prevent conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence.

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1. In Eriksson Baaz and Stern (2016) we develop our ‘methodology of unease’, tracing how different registers of unease guided us in our research endeavor. This section draws heavily upon points also raised there. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Minimizing’ is a term regularly used by domestic violence service providers to refer to narratives which position domestic violence as not particularly serious. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Although, others have: Hudson, for example, suggests that perpetrators of sexual violence may learn to “talk the talk” of perpetrator programmes in order to mask their true, justificatory attitudes towards their violence from the authorities (Hudson 2005, 108-113). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)