

Translating Trauma into Testimony: Collaborative Storytelling with Former ISIS Child Soldiers in Northern Iraq

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Abstract

Research involving highly vulnerable groups, such as those with deeply traumatic experiences, presents researchers with significant ethical and methodological hurdles. This article outlines a project conducted in northern Iraq with former ISIS child soldiers. We reflect on our methodological and ethical decisions within the framework of the *do no harm* imperative—a cornerstone of research ethics that has faced criticism for its perceived inadequacy. Our focus lies in detailing the development, theoretical underpinnings, methodological justification, and practical application of a participatory approach through collaborative storytelling with children and adolescents. In addition to adhering to the *do no harm* principle, which seeks to prevent adverse consequences such as re-traumatization, we advocate for a positive ethic of recognition. This approach facilitates the methodological translation of traumatic experiences and their socio-political transformation into testimonies.

Keywords

do no harm, participatory research, recognition, research ethics, vulnerability

Introduction

“Do no harm!” is largely and across disciplines considered a key ethical imperative for research—the *modus operandi* of the ethics process” (Hammett et al., 2022, p. 582; original emphasis), a “primary ethical obligation” (MacKinnon, 2017, p. 75). It is, for instance, prominently represented in “Principle A: Beneficence and Nonmaleficence” of the *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2017): “Psychologists strive to benefit those with whom they work and take care to do no harm.” However, despite a broad consensus about the paramount importance of the principle in empirical research, its precise meaning largely varies. A minimum characteristic seems to be an informed consent, as Dixon and Quirke (2018) elaborate based on their analysis of qualitative methods textbooks (for examples, see, Singleton Jr. & Straits, 2011; Babbie, 2014).

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This rather general and superficial interpretation of *do no harm* is inadequate as an ethical foundation for research precisely where it would be particularly important, namely in research with vulnerable groups.⁵ In this sense, Mackenzie et al. (2007) discuss the implications posed by the ethical imperative in their research with refugees. Hugman et al. (2011) elaborate on their struggles of researching “refugees and other vulnerable groups”. Surtees and Brunovskis (2015) outline challenges in working with trafficked persons. What these research projects have in common is a discomfort with the common interpretation of the imperative and mark its insufficiency as an ethically reflected research practice. Mackenzie et al. (2007), for example, argue that social science research with refugees in conflict and crisis situations faces “difficulties of constructing an ethical consent process and obtaining genuinely informed consent” and “taking fully into account and responding to refugee participants’ capacities for autonomy” (p. 310). They highlight their experience that institutionalised ethics review processes do not meet the requirement of doing refugee research. Reflecting on instances of ethically inappropriate practice, documented by the UNSW Centre for Refugee Research, Hugman et al. (2011) show that:

[A]lthough the refugee in each instance provides information willingly, such willingness appears to be based on a misapprehension of the research process. These views indicate that the purposes of research, possible outcomes, the steps that will be taken by researchers to protect participants and, indeed, the longer-term moral relationship between researchers and researched have all been seriously misunderstood. (p. 1277)

Surtees and Brunovskis (2015) argue that in their field of research, “avoiding harm is neither simple nor direct” (p. 137). It would, for example, require “providing information about assistance to respondents” (Surtees & Brunovskis, 2015, p. 137) in socio-political contexts in which appropriate services are unavailable or inaccessible to trafficking victims due to their legal status. In all these cases, it is emphasised that research ethics must go far beyond *do no harm* and that this must also be reflected in the methodological approach and concrete research practice. Consequently, these studies discuss participatory research approaches and possibilities of reciprocal benefits for the participants and their respective communities.⁶ Furthermore, *do no harm* should not only be applied to the research partners, but also to the risks researchers face in the context of an ethic of care (e.g., Groot et al., 2019; Schulz et al., 2023).

These examples reflect a wider criticism of an institutionalised research ethic that is primarily based on *do no harm*, often without contextualising and concretising it. Three emerging lines of criticism are particularly relevant to this article.

- Firstly, it is argued that the criteria for general quality and ethics of quantitative research, which are usually the basis for actions and decisions by ethics committees at universities, do not apply to qualitative research, or only to a limited extent. Qualitative research does not take place under supposedly controllable laboratory conditions. It unfolds *beyond the fiction of control*, as Kühner (2018; translated by the authors of this article, Langer and Ahmad) succinctly puts it; it is “messy” through and through (Dawson, 2006; Clarke, 2022). Against this backdrop, alternative criteria are discussed by which the quality of qualitative studies could be better recognised, and which should be considered when designing studies. Levitt et al. (2021), for example, suggest trustworthiness, methodological integrity, fidelity, and utility. “Reciprocal benefits” are also prominent in

⁵ In contrast, Verena Muckermann (2023) shows, in a recent article on cases of medical involvement in torture from Syria, how “harm” can be used as an analytical concept to grasp violent phenomena beyond obvious simplifications. In this respect, the contributions in a special issue of *Terrorism and Political Violence*, edited by Taylor and Horgan (2021), are also stimulating and reflect the productive complexity of the concept.

⁶ It should be noted that these proposals are not new. Corresponding elements of emancipatory and partly participatory research can already be found in the classical study *The Unemployed of Marienthal* (Jahoda, et al., 1933). Clothing donations and free medical services in the Austrian study context — characterized by mass unemployment — can be understood as “reciprocal benefits” and efforts to “give back”. However, they were problematic in terms of research ethics, as they were not made transparent as a simultaneous survey method (on the socio-economic situation of families and the health status of the community) and did not protect the privacy of the interviewees. See Kühner and Langer (2010) on the systematic combination of research ethics and research methodology and the resulting dilemmas.

the debate, especially in the context of participatory approaches, which emphasise the ethical necessity of “giving back” (Swartz, 2011; Tubaro, 2021).⁷ The extent to which formal ethics committees can adequately reflect this and take it into account in their decision-making processes is currently questionable. This is especially the case in sensitive research fields in which creative new methods are developed and applied to meet the aforementioned criteria.

- Secondly, qualitative research, characterised by being open, flexible, and process-oriented, unfolds through (at best: reflected) research decisions that can rarely be determined in detail in advance (i.e., they can appear “messy”). This has implications for an understanding of research ethics that cannot be set statically in advance but must dynamically consider the requirements of complex and often contradictory relationships in the field. How can formalised consent really prevent research participants from any harm related to the research at hand when it is based on information that was mostly compiled before the research activities began and includes only generally normative dos and don’ts? Delving into field research usually comes with surprises of unforeseen issues, frustrated expectations, and the experience that one cannot anticipate all — or even much — of the research situation and the interaction dynamics that unfold within them. In their article “Ethics, reflexivity, and ‘ethically important moments’ in research”, Guillemin and Gillam (2004) provide an example of what can be derived from this in terms of research ethics. They distinguish between two dimensions of ethics in research and place procedural ethics alongside “ethics in practice”, which is at least equally important. They focus on dealing with “ethically important moments” — “the difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research” (p. 262) — and emphasise the concept of reflexivity as the central ethical instance of qualitative research. This is reflected in more recent approaches to “strong reflexivity” (Kuehner et al., 2016; Brehm & Kuhlmann, 2018; Brehm & Langer, 2024), in which researchers’ subjectivity is evoked as a central instrument. This can be linked to ongoing debates on the extensions of *do no harm*. Hammett et al. (2022) criticise the status quo: “Too often research ethics is reduced to a bureaucratic hurdle, a singular moment of approval that overlooks the dynamic, messy, and complex realities of the research journey” (p. 582). As an option that is based on the “ethically important moments” in a highly reflective manner, they suggest keeping an “ethics diary” “to note and reflect on what is happening in the field, [...] on not only major ethical dilemmas but also the everyday and seemingly inconsequential ethical decisions encountered during the messiness of the research journey” (Horton, 2008, p. 374). They aim at capturing “the banal, everyday situations that we get into ... and the small ‘failures’ which chequer our practices’ which are ‘of absolutely fundamental importance, ethically’” (Horton, 2008, p. 374).
- Thirdly, labelling subjects, groups, or communities as “vulnerable” and thus particularly subject to the imperative of *do no harm* is ambivalent. It is a tiresome fact that research — with its authoritarian and powerfully mediated, objectified “findings” — has not only contributed to, supported, and empirically justified socio-political relations of oppression and violence in the past (e.g., Walker, 2003; Marshall et al., 2019; Smith, 2021). A socially critical, emancipatory, qualitative approach aims precisely to set up power-sensitive, empowering, participatory research with vulnerable groups. This refers to “minority, marginalised, and excluded populations” who have a so-called “lack of social, political and economic capital held by such groups when compared to the societal norm” (von Benzon & van Blerk, 2018, p. 898). As a matter of research ethics, there is nothing wrong with this in the first place. It becomes problematic when the construction of vulnerability and its implications are not critically reflected upon. All too often, “vulnerable” groups are spoken of as fixed collective subjects. One prominent example of this is the United Nations’ “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” *Transforming our World* (UN, 2015); it defines as vulnerable “all children, youth, persons with disabilities (of whom more than 80% live in poverty), people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, indigenous

⁷ “Giving back” results as an ethical urgency from the inner self-conception of participatory research. One could argue that it is relevant for research on vulnerable groups, regardless of the research paradigm. However, this would imply an ethical framework that is external to the chosen design. It is no coincidence that hardly any aspects of “giving back” are addressed in literature for quantitative methodologies. It is certainly also no coincidence that the few instances come from the field of indigenous quantitative research (e.g. Haar et al., 2018; Lopez & Cuasialpud Canchala, 2023).

peoples, refugees and internally displaced persons and migrants" (p. 8). This is reflected in studies that speak of "vulnerable groups" without attempting to define them more precisely. Even in the above-mentioned article, Hugman et al. (2011), for example, without elaborating further, refer to "the vulnerability and marginalisation of refugee communities" (p. 1272) and "vulnerable populations such as refugees" (p. 1282). It is obvious that there are powerful differences in the groups and communities mentioned, which make a blanket label of "vulnerable" open to injury. Equipped with few resources, capital and agency appear theoretically little differentiated and empirically questionable, not least from an intersectional perspective. At the same time, this attribution has highly problematic implications. What Brown (2011) elaborates in her insightful article "Vulnerability: Handle with Care" for social work practice can also be applied to research. She concisely points out that the concept of vulnerability "is a *paternalistic and oppressive* idea, [...] that it functions as a *mechanism of widening social control* and [...] that calling individuals or groups 'vulnerable' can act to *exclude and stigmatize* them, particularly where people's behaviour may not conform to accepted notions of victimhood or innocence" (p. 316; original emphases). It is a powerful attribution of a special need for protection that can also leave those affected speechless. Considering that emancipatory research always goes hand in hand with a paternalistic drive (Langer, 2018; von Benzon & van Blerk, 2018) should be kept in mind, one could ask: How do researchers manage to strike a balance between protecting research partners and giving them a voice without assuming a representative position to speak for them? What conditions are needed for the vulnerable to speak for him/her/themselves? It could also be asked whether the attribution of a high degree of vulnerability, with the consequence of citing welfare reasons for not even conducting the research, is an expression of the researchers' unwillingness to know. In terms of specific projects, the question would be as to when the risk of possible re-traumatisation refers to the researchers' fear of not being able to endure something they believe they will be confronted with. In terms of research ethics, ambivalences and dilemmas are inscribed in the concept of vulnerability, which cannot simply be resolved, and can only be approached in an ethically reflective manner.

With this article, we would like to contribute to the current struggle for critically reflective research practices in fields that are not so easily contained by formalised ethical procedures. In the following section, we outline the development process and methodological design of the research project "Psychosocial Needs of Former ISIS Child Soldiers in Northern Iraq". The development and justification of collaborative storytelling as a metho(dolog)ical response to the ethical challenges of *do no harm* is the subject of the third section. In the fourth section, we attempt to bundle research experiences within the framework of "strong reflexivity" in terms of research ethics. Using the collaborative method, we address the ambivalences of vulnerability. We argue that they enable a transformation of one's perception (and self-perception) of extremely traumatised children as victims (and perpetrators) of excessive violence into witnesses of extreme social injustice and blatant violation of human rights. The stories become readable not so much as expressions of traumatic experiences, but as testimonies of suffering and injustice. In this way, the political dimension of trauma discourse, which has been de-politicised through increasing tendencies towards psychopathologisation, is regained.

The ISIS Child Soldiers Project — Methodological and Ethical Challenges

The qualitative research project we are reporting on here (see also, Langer & Ahmad, 2019; Langer, 2020) came about in an unexpected and unusual way. While we both participated in an international conference on genocide and mass trauma at the University of Duhok in Spring 2018, local psychotherapists and social workers presented empirical studies on, and case reflections of, working with former ISIS child soldiers in the region. Talking urgently and impressively about their professional struggle with the young boys' extremely traumatising experiences, notions of victimhood and perpetration were inseparably merged. It was striking that all the panellists referred to "brainwashing" as a key term for understanding the process of indoctrination into ISIS ideology and militarisation for the organisation's war. However, specific questions during plenary discussions about how "brainwashing" should be understood in this context revealed that the term tended to serve as a kind of conceptual black box that masked an anxious sense of not knowing (much, to be precise). There was not only a significant lack of knowledge about the exact and

precise number of militarised children in Northern Iraq or the places where they were situated – or rather, held. Information was also missing about the biographical and social trajectories that led or forced the children into ISIS, the psychosocial process of becoming a “cub of the caliphate” — an internal label for an ISIS-affiliated child (e.g., Mehran, 2019; Morris & Dunning, 2020) — and the traumatic traces all this had left psychologically. On the last day of the conference, we approached a colleague at a German governmental organisation who was the head of a larger program in the Middle East with whom we were involved in a different project (see., for e.g., Jacobi et al., 2019). We explained our concern about the state of empirical knowledge on this troubling issue, briefly outlined some general ideas of a possible research project that we thought would provide at least tentative insights to the past and present of the young people and asked whether she had knowledge of any funding options. Unexpectedly for us, within an hour, the colleague replied in her role as head of the program and asked us to state the budget we would need to implement such a project. The organisation, too, had identified these boys as one of the “highly vulnerable groups” (e.g., Wintermeier & Heinzl, 2018) that should be provided psychosocial support in the context of the program. They shared our concerns and were looking for data and insights to substantiate their interventions in the field. We began drafting a project immediately, but it still took a couple of weeks to finalize a sound project design for the application, which we then submitted, and the project funding was finally granted in August 2018.

The research project aimed at answering the following interrelated questions: What are the psychosocial needs of former ISIS child soldiers in Northern Iraq? How are former ISIS child soldiers perceived by their social environment, and how does this affect their current situation? Which services for them are already in place in the region, and what approaches seem to be helpful? Which additional services should be provided to gain and sustain a meaningful state of mental integrity, social agency, and societal integration of the children?

To answer these questions, we developed a multimethodological approach by combining the following elements: a systematic review of existing research literature; explorative fieldwork in the region, accompanied by formal and informal interviews with regional and international experts; actor and service mapping of organisations and projects working with former ISIS child soldiers in the region based on web research and structured telephone interviews with representatives of the identified organisations; and a participatory method to work directly with former ISIS-affiliated children in different settings, which we had not yet specified at the time. In addition, we took the initiative to create joint effort spaces (“round table”) for exchanging experiences for organizations that work for and with former child soldiers. In humanitarian and development aid terms, these could be referred to as a strategy of capacity building, thereby allowing for a critical discussion of our observations and interpretations.

Starting our research project with a review of the relevant literature was certainly in line with established standard procedures. Retrospectively, collecting and engaging with what other colleagues had written about, child soldiering and militarised youths, seemed to have also served as a symbolic shield of armour. Anticipating the confrontation with experiences of excessive violence, existential suffering, and extreme traumatisation in the field that we felt could easily transcend our imagination inevitably produced anxieties (Kühner, 2018). What would we hear and learn about from the children that would be quite unbearable? One of the articles that we came across in our reading reflects these anxieties precisely in its title: “Meeting the murderous self” (Draijer & Van Zon, 2013). Could we ever do justice to the young peoples’ experiences and expectations? How would it even be possible to gain their trust and find common ground beyond the radically different worlds they and we had been living through and in? How could we make sure that our research would not be instrumentalised in political debates exclusively framing these boys in terms of radicalised subjects and ongoing potential threats, as indicated in the first informal talks? Although we had extensive research experience in Afghanistan — a country with over 40 years of violent conflict and war — and had worked with victims of war in the MENA (Middle East North Africa) region, we had not previously worked with children actively involved in war as soldiers. In the midst of media images of ISIS child soldiers, borne by the fascination of extreme cruelty, it was anything but easy to enter the research field with an open mind. By immersing ourselves into existing research, we hoped to find clear scientific guidance and accompanying affective reassurance in dealing with these issues — a kind of stable framework for our own project.

The hope, however, was not fulfilled; the research did not deliver what we expected. While we identified more than 400 studies on child soldiering that seemed to be somehow

relevant for our project, only a few were related to ISIS, which was unsurprising given the novelty of the terrorist organisation's military activities in the region. What was surprising was the mere handful of studies discussing psychotherapeutic interventions with child soldiers (e.g., Betancourt et al., 2012; McMullen et al., 2013). Their findings were highly context-specific and inconclusive regarding the effectiveness of the therapeutic approaches they reported on, and they revealed a significant lack of therapy-related knowledge in the field.

We, therefore, had to take off our symbolic shield of armour and enter the field. Having been to Northern Iraq multiple times before in the context of the other research project mentioned above, we were fortunate to be able to rely on established cooperations. These non-governmental organisations, governmental agencies, and universities in the region offered their support in approaching the topic of militarised youths, with which at least some were familiar.

The question of linguistically naming the children immediately came into play, as various actors referred to them differently. Whether we speak of (former) ISIS child soldiers, ISIS- or Daesh-affiliated children, children militarised by ISIS or (traumatised) Daesh survivors, for example, is indeed not a trivial matter. Their definitions of what is involved in being a former ISIS child soldier highly shaped their response to the challenges these children face for achieving their goals of security, transitional justice, societal integration, empowerment, or mental health. It essentially touches on ethical aspects that simultaneously have methodological, psychological, and legal implications in a discursive network. The disturbing perceptions of children as both victims and perpetrators are fundamentally addressed here, reflected in the ambivalent term "child soldier" with its association of the innocent child as passive victim and the violent soldier as perpetrator. An exclusive emphasis on victimhood was criticised as unhelpful from a psychotherapeutic perspective, since — bearing in mind the above-mentioned title of the study by Draijer and Van Zon (2013) — it must also involve recognising one's own role as a perpetrator. The alternative of referring to them as survivors was nevertheless rejected by other actors, for example, in an expert interview, conducted on May 11, 2023, with an employee of a regional NGO in Iraq:

Most of them are also, at the same time, talking about being kind of labeled as survivors. So as something different. And then within, I find it very interesting. Many of them actually go rather deep into the concept of survivors, being survivor victims, and the concept of survivors almost taking away their right to feel pain and the feeling of not being guilty for what happened. So, they're ambivalent about the concept of being a survivor in a way.

We are familiar with the struggle for linguistic terms in dealing with extremely traumatic events from debates about victims/survivors/witnesses of the Shoah (cf. e.g., Levine, 2006; Waxman, 2008; Sabrow & Frei, 2012; Dean, 2017). In this project, we decided to speak of "child soldiers" in external communication, as the term had been previously introduced in international literature. With reference to international legal frameworks, rejecting prosecutable accusations of crimes and strengthening traumatic experiences could be justified to emphasise the special need for the protection of children. In this sense, we followed the definition formulated in the *Paris Principles* as the most prominent in the field; it defines a child soldier as:

[A]ny person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities. (UNICEF, 2007, p. 7)

The definition reflects an important diversity: of pathways into armed groups (from recruitment based on some degree of willingness to forceful, violent abduction); of armed groups themselves (from the military as governmental institution to any kind of paramilitary or terror organisation); of children (e.g., with regard to age and gender); and of roles and functions within the armed group that could include fighting and killing. The term includes all possible misuses of children for military-related purposes and beyond, as the explicit inclusion of sexualised violence indicates.

We spent two weeks travelling through the provinces of Duhok, Erbil, and Sulaimaniyya in the Kurdish Region of Iraq, visiting organisations that were said to work with ISIS-affiliated children. We interviewed different actors such as therapists, social workers, and government officials. The more we learned, the more it became clear that we were moving in a politically difficult field with slippery slopes all over and that our research itself would be a political intervention. It was — and still is — impossible to get reliable data about the number of former ISIS child soldiers in the region. It is also difficult due to other (post-)conflict contexts to estimate such numbers, not only because of different definitions of what or who counts as a child soldier; from the 1990s on, reports and studies repeat a steady estimation of 300,000 children world-wide, which was vague and not yet empirically grounded (e.g., Rosen, 2015, p. 135; Plowright, 2021, p. 1). In Northern Iraq, the irritating silence of governmental agencies reflected a political decision not to address the topic publicly, reminding us of Foucault's (1978) remark about the "triple edict of taboo, nonexistence, and silence" (p. 5). His analysis about sexuality in Victorian era discourse in general, and the example of children's sexuality in particular, can also be applied to the phenomenon of children's role in war: "It would be driven out, denied, and reduced to silence. Not only did it not exist, it had no right to exist and would be made to disappear upon its least manifestation — whether in acts or in words" (Foucault, 1978, p. 4). One aspect of the discursive silence, we assume, is related to the composition of this diverse group of children affiliated with ISIS. ISIS child soldiers can mainly be categorised into three subgroups based on their backgrounds: Arab-Sunni boys, Yezidi boys, and the children of foreign fighters or young people who came from mostly Western countries to join ISIS. While child soldiers with a Yezidi background were kidnapped, forcefully converted, and indoctrinated, the involvement of Arab-Sunni children is ambiguous. Some seemed to have joined voluntarily — whatever that means under the given circumstances — others were recruited under false pretences and exploited as child soldiers; this also applies to the children of foreign fighters. The majority of ISIS child soldiers remained under the control of ISIS until the liberation of ISIS-held territories in central Iraq. Since then, many of those children and adolescents who were recruited and mobilised by ISIS have been under surveillance and detention by the authorities in the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) and Central Iraq and prosecuted under antiterrorism legislation. This legislation is specially designed to deal with terrorist groups like ISIS. However, the implementation of this legislation seems problematic considering that proof that someone supported ISIS or war efforts in some way is enough for the courts to issue a guilty verdict. There is no proof needed that an individual directly committed crimes. This legislation had been implemented in KRI as well as in Iraq, with the difference that, in KRI, unlike in Central Iraq, there was no death penalty. Like the actual numbers of child soldiers within ISIS, the number of former ISIS child soldiers in Iraqi prisons and detention centres was — and still is — unknown. Interviews we conducted with experts pointed out that formerly ISIS-affiliated children are subject to torture in juvenile detention centres as well as during investigations by Iraqi and Kurdish intelligence services. In addition, unfair trials and the lack of legal counselling are criticised. After release from detention centres, Arab-Sunni boys are placed in remote or isolated camps, lacking even basic facilities, where only families of ISIS members are detained. These boys faced heavy stigma and at the time, led lives in camps with no prospects. Continuing education was not possible since they often lacked documents which they are required to obtain from their hometowns. Returning to their respective hometowns also seemed impossible, for now since Hash'd al Shaabi (Shiite Militia) controlled (and continue to control) these areas, and their lives would be in imminent danger if they returned.

The following actor mapping, that we conducted to gain an overview of psychosocial services that were already in place, showed only a few specific NGOs that had considered former ISIS child soldiers as a target group (for details, see, Langer & Ahmad, 2019). The majority of the 49 organisations that provided information about their services (25 of 49; 51%) reported not to have any cases of former ISIS child soldiers or not to work with former ISIS child soldiers. Four organisations (8%) stated that they do not know (or do not want to know) whether former child soldiers are among their clients. Nine organisations (18 %) reported to know (or strongly assume) that former child soldiers are among their clients but stressed that they would provide the same service to every child, without considering the backgrounds and war-related experiences of the children. Eleven organisations (22%) explicitly worked with and provided special services to former ISIS child soldiers as one group of clients, among others. They provided information about their approaches, including certain methods and techniques they use in psychosocial work with former child soldiers. Consistent psychosocial and psychotherapeutic approaches, however, were

missing. Most of these organisations worked with Kurdish boys. Only one of the organisations interviewed stated that it explicitly worked with the group of Arab-Sunni former child soldiers. We were able to discern that securing funding for individuals perceived as perpetrators posed significant challenges. Both NGOs and their employees grappled with allegations regarding potential collaboration with ISIS.

Hence, the field work and research on background information made it clear that the group of former ISIS child soldiers was highly stigmatised, especially boys with an Arab-Sunni background. While Yezidi boys were more likely to be perceived as forcefully abducted victims, Arab-Sunni boys were more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators, by assuming they voluntarily decided to join ISIS. Our analysis of the interviews conducted in KRI suggests that former Yezidi child soldiers were not held in detention for long if they were interrogated by the Asayish (the primary Kurdish intelligence agency) and did not indicate a security threat. They were, if possible, allowed to join their families that mostly live in IDP camps. Otherwise, they were placed alone in the camps. At the time of our research, there were nearly 24 refugee camps in the governorates of Duhok and Zakho, housing up to 28,000 refugees where these boys were accommodated. Resources in the IDP camps where most of these children were and are placed are scarce. However, many camps have now been closed leading many to go into hiding as they are still afraid to return to their respective hometowns and villages since Hash'd al Shaabi is in control of these areas.

The condensed outline of the situation of former ISIS child soldiers in 2018 and 2019 shows that we were acting within a highly complex and contested, politicised, and emotionalised field. Multiple actors were involved, from national and regional politics, national and international law, donors, communities, as well as NGOs focusing on human rights, reconciliation, psychosocial, and therapeutic support. The field work made it evident that for former ISIS child soldiers, there was hardly any possibility for processing and coping with their experiences. It was clear that we needed to be extremely cautious in the research process and thus needed a research design that was suitable to minimise harm to all those involved to the greatest extent possible.

Collaborative Storytelling: A Method in the Making

Each one of us knows that who we meet always has a unique story [storia]. And this is true even if we meet them for the first time without knowing their story at all. Moreover, we are all familiar with the narrative work of memory, which, in a totally involuntary way, continues to tell us our own personal story. (Cavarero, 2014, p. 33)

How could we do research without putting the children, the organisations working with them, and ourselves — in short: anyone involved — at risk of harm? Before we describe and give reasons for our collaborative storytelling as a methodological response to this, we must point out a research decision that we made consciously, but which may be controversial in view of the discourse on research with highly vulnerable groups described above: We chose not to obtain a formal ethics vote from the university's ethics committee. There were several reasons for this. It was made possible by the fact that the organisation funding the project had not made an ethics vote a prerequisite. In our opinion, the initial research activities — from the literature review to the ethnographic work with expert interviews, and the actor and service mapping in the region — did not require a formal vote. It could be argued that we put ourselves in danger by conducting field research in a post-conflict region that was (and is) still not without danger and not yet “post-”. Against the background of intensive research experience in the region, in the wider Middle East, and in Afghanistan, in addition to the security protocols developed and practiced there, as well as close contacts with the experts responsible for security at the sponsoring organisation, we felt well prepared. And the interviews with the experts on site — a “group” that was not considered “vulnerable” and on whose “informed consent” we could rely as reflected actors — could be conducted well with reference to research ethics as a matter of course. The situation was different for direct research with children. We could assume they had had extremely traumatic experiences that they had not yet been able to process appropriately, whatever that means. They lived in highly fragile social contexts, their life and limb were at risk — even after ISIS — in a society that was often hostile to them, and their autonomy of decision as children and adolescents could not be

assumed a priori. Obtaining consent before the start of the research project, when we still had no idea how we could methodically design the research with the children, seemed hopeless. How can one ask for an ethical assessment of something that has not yet been determined? When the time came, we only had a few months left in the project for the field research. As an exploratory project with a total duration of only nine months, it was more than ambitious, but this corresponded to the urgency of the matter in a rapidly changing field. So, at best, we would wait a month for the ethics assessment, incorporate the critical comments again, if necessary, submit a second time and then state at the end that it was no longer possible in terms of time? With the assumption that our proposal might even have been rejected by a committee largely made up of quantitative researchers due to its highly experimental nature, which even went beyond the “usual” approaches of participatory qualitative research? On the grounds that *do no harm* could not be ruled out? When we opted for the “simpler” and simultaneously pragmatic way of proceeding without a formal vote, we were taking a risk. Nevertheless, this awareness forced us to think very carefully and to reflect on the possible implications of what we were doing; we built in collegial review mechanisms to gain a sense of being on a viable path.

In the research design we laid out at the beginning of the project, we had decided that we would work with the young people using a yet-to-be-determined qualitative participatory method as we were interested in their subjective experiences and their trajectories. Moreover, we wanted to gain in-depth information about their perspectives as former ISIS child soldiers. In this context, we began to reflect on a context-appropriate method that would be sensitive to age, cultural background, experiences of violence, and the fragile life situation at the time of our research. One might think the qualitative interview — subject-oriented, power-sensitive and able to create an intimate and confidential “safe space” to talk about “difficult”, tabooed experiences — would usually be a good choice. The initially obvious method of conducting interviews, however, was quickly discarded in view of possible risks to and unexpected perceptions of interviews by the young people. How could we make it possible for them to tell their stories without putting themselves in various kinds of dangers at the same time? Generating safe spaces in IDP camps and even more so in prisons — the two places where we knew, based on our ethnographic work, that children and young people with ISIS connections were living and where we wanted to focus our research — seemed impossible. The consequences of unintentionally coming out as former ISIS Child Soldiers in a camp where survivors of ISIS’s excessive violence were forced to live after losing their homes were unforeseeable. The consequences of institutional disclosure of reports of violent acts during time with ISIS within the prison, where these were prosecuted as criminal offenses and handled through torture and death sentences, were unfortunately all too clear. Furthermore, interviews were impossible from the children’s perspective. Psychotherapists reported in interviews that their therapy sessions had been perceived as disguised interrogations by the children, reflecting the children’s experiences of forceful and even violent interrogations during ISIS and afterwards by the Kurdish and/or Iraqi security forces and intelligence agencies.

So, how were we to engage with children in a participatory way, gain their perspectives, and use narrative research so they could share their stories of their lives within ISIS and how their former involvement continues to impact their lives? To us, it was clear early on that we wanted to create a central place for their stories. As Cavarero (2014) has put it, everyone has a story to tell.

An anecdotal situation from the process of thinking about the “right” method proved to be the key to concretizing what we (further) developed as collaborative storytelling. Based on our experience of doing field work in Afghanistan (Langer et al., 2019; Langer et al., 2021; Ahmad, 2024), which already included field researchers while designing the research, and given the vulnerability of the group of former ISIS child soldiers, we were convinced it would be crucial to work with the field researchers from the very beginning here as well. During our initial field research, we were able to connect with NGOs and universities that were working with former ISIS child soldiers in different settings. We reached out to ask whether they and their staff would be interested in joining us in our endeavour on a participatory project with former ISIS child soldiers and were able to acquire seven field researchers — psychotherapists and social workers — who also had promising access to IDP camps and juvenile detention centres. At a preparatory meeting, one of the social workers reported on one of her sessions in a camp with young people who had been abused as soldiers for ISIS. She had worked with them on social skills, played soccer, and wanted to do a meditation exercise with them to wind down. To do this, she lit a candle in the middle. But instead of going into meditation, one of the boys began to talk about the time in ISIS when they only had one candle in their tent providing light in the evening and some warmth

against the cold of the night. This motivated another boy to follow up with a short story from that time, followed by a third. Thus, unplanned and unexpectedly, a narrative space developed around the candle in the tent, in which individual stories could find their way in, connect, and interweave. This fascinating situation was immediately obvious to us as a concept to develop into a method of data generating through collaborative storytelling.

In this respect, we were able to build on a tradition of participatory research using storytelling that is still growing in terms of quantity and simultaneously very rich in terms of quality, with the aim of providing marginalised groups a voice in scientific discourse (see, for e.g., Mahoney, 2007; Caxaj, 2015; Hydén, 2017; Moeke-Maxwell et al., 2018). There could, however, be no simple adjustment to the context as the way of storytelling was reported as highly specific in the respective communities. There was — and is — hardly any experience with this methodological approach in contexts characterised by trauma. Whether it would work in ours was anything but certain, despite the anecdotally positive sequence described. At this point in the research process, we put together our own ethics committee, so to speak, to discuss and concretise our methodological and practical considerations on collaborative storytelling, especially in terms of research ethics. We asked for (especially critical) feedback from the following: two psychotherapists who work with trauma patients, one of whom focuses on children and adolescents; two social researchers who work with vulnerable groups, one of whom has conducted qualitative research with child soldiers; and a social scientist with a proven track record in the field of ethics who was familiar with our research. Collegial reassurance was essential to us; the advice from our colleagues, for example, to consider the potential harm for researchers in the field, was taken into account in the design through the offer of research supervision, among other measures. So, how did we envision the process of guided storytelling? In group processes led by the field researchers with regular sessions over the course of a few weeks, three to five young people in IDP camps and juvenile detention centres who had been involved with ISIS would come together to collaboratively tell and write stories on their involvement with ISIS. To create structure, we developed a manual to conduct the collaborative stories by gaining valuable insights from the field researchers on the social and political situation and discourse, including their challenges and experiences working with former ISIS child soldiers.

Even for those field researchers who had been working with former ISIS child soldiers, it could be quite challenging to build a trusting relationship where the young people and children would feel comfortable enough to participate in the storytelling method. The first part of the manual therefore focused on relationship building. This included the introduction of the project, its aim, institutional frame, and content in terms of voluntary participation build on informed consent. This communication also introduced principles and rules of the joint working method, especially confidentiality, autonomy, ownership, respect, equality, and security. Security in this context meant that participants are aware that *do no harm* is the first principle that is being followed, meaning that nothing will be done or said that will put the participants in any danger. Ownership signifies that whatever is produced within the group belongs to the group and is not used without their consent. Respect and equality refer to the fact that the experiences, stories, opinions, and integrity of everyone involved shall be valued while all voices of the participants count equally, and hierarchies shall be avoided. Confidentiality in this context means that anything that is done or said during the sessions is treated as confidential. Hence, no information is shared beyond the project frame, and the participants also agree on treating personal accounts from one another confidentially.

Reading a story together and reflecting on it was another key building block of the first part. It was aimed at conveying a feeling for the development and unfolding of a fictional story and at the same time opening up a space for imagination. However, finding a story for children to read collaboratively was not easy, as the children spoke either Kurdish or Arabic and also belonged to different age groups. It is difficult to recollect the process that led to the decision to read the *Little Prince*. Quite unexpectedly, however, the book was available in Kurdish (Sorani) and Arabic and could be read with children and youth of different ages and also includes drawings — an element we additionally included in the collective storytelling process.

The second part of the manual was about collaboratively developing a story of a fictional boy who had been with ISIS. The children were once again told that, while they are not asked to share their personal stories, they are invited to collaboratively develop with others a story of a boy who was with ISIS as a child soldier, emphasising that experiences and ideas are equally welcome.

We structured this part of the manual into six chronological chapters, starting with the time before the fictional character (voluntarily or forcefully) joined ISIS, to entering ISIS, the time within ISIS, leaving ISIS, the current situation, and an outlook to the future. For all chapters, we developed several questions for guiding the storytelling process. The questions aimed at gaining insights into changing personal, social, and political situations. These are defined by the change of the political system, changes of the economic situation, the security situation, changes into the family system, as well as the changes into the psychosocial situation of the character. Such changes are, in turn, defined by experiences of agency or loss of social agency, accomplishment and joy, but also of violence, loss of family members and friends, and grief. Once the children completed the story, the third and final part focused on reflecting on the process. During the third part, the children discuss how they experienced the overall process, what they liked and did not like, and which recommendations they had for adjusting the method for working with other groups in the future.

Conceptually speaking, the following considerations guided the idea of the collaborative storytelling in responding to the outlined challenges in the field, especially the ethical challenges of working with a group that was perceived as highly vulnerable, shaped by extremely traumatic experiences, and lived in fragile situations under stigmatised conditions:

- Firstly, the significance of narratives in both research and therapy contexts has been widely emphasised. Crafting stories into coherent and meaningful narratives within traumatic contexts offers children the opportunity to integrate their challenging experiences into their identities and to distance themselves from the past. Through narrative construction, the past can be presented as an event that has occurred but is now concluded. Simultaneously, these narratives serve as records that acknowledge the individual's past as an integral component of their existence. As Brison (1999) observes:

Working through or remastering traumatic memory involves a shift from being the object or medium of someone else's speech to being the subject of one's own. The act of bearing witness to the trauma facilitates the shift not only by transforming traumatic memory into a coherent narrative that can be integrated into the survivor's sense of self and view of the world but also by reintegrating the survivor into the community, reestablishing connections essential to selfhood. The study of trauma provides support for the view of the self as fundamentally relational-vulnerable enough to be undone by violence and yet resilient enough to be reconstructed with the help of others. (p. 39; see also Pasupathi et al., 2016)

- Secondly, the development of a fictional story represents an "as if" mode that is also utilised in psychotherapeutic approaches. This method enables individuals to express their own narrative "in the name" of another. Such an approach proves crucial when addressing issues that are laden with shame, stigma, or are otherwise challenging to discuss openly. Discussing personal experiences related to ISIS encompasses all three of these aspects. Particularly in environments under institutional control, such as prisons, sharing one's own story can pose risks and potential harm to children. However, through collaborative storytelling, individuals can integrate their personal narratives, process their experiences, and engage in therapeutic exploration.
- Thirdly, the collaborative development of a storyline, coupled with the use of drawings, introduces a playful element that renders the approach particularly suitable for engaging with children. Concurrently, it adheres to the imperative of non-harm by minimising the risks of re-traumatisation. In the realm of trauma research, participants are often asked to recount their traumatic life events and circumstances in meticulous detail, typically through interviews, written narratives, or questionnaires. Such reports and discussions may evoke negative emotional reactions among participants. For instance, in a study involving Vietnam War veterans, 30% of the participants reported experiencing distress when providing their accounts (Parslow et al., 2000). Similar findings have been observed in studies involving individuals who have experienced events like 9/11, other terrorist

attacks, or sexual abuse, where the intensity of stress exposure correlates with distress levels (Walker et al., 1997; Newman et al., 1999; Johnson & Benight, 2003; Boscarino et al., 2004; Galea et al., 2005). Carter-Visscher et al. (2007) conducted a study with college-aged survivors of childhood trauma, examining participants' descriptions of abuse and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. In a subsequent session held one week later, participants' reactions to the study were assessed. The researchers found that distress rates were low, and although individuals with PTSD symptoms reported more distress when discussing their trauma histories compared to other participants, the level of distress among participants with and without PTSD symptoms was mild and dissipated over time (Legerski & Bunnell, 2010). Hence, it is imperative to distinguish between re-traumatisation and emotional distress. While research participation may induce distress, engaging in discussions about past experiences within the context of a research study is unlikely to equate to re-traumatisation. Using the risks of re-traumatisation as an argument for not eliciting individuals' experiences may sometimes reflect researchers' apprehension about confronting stories they perceive as unbearable.

- Fourthly, Keilson's and Sarphatie's theory (1992) of sequential trauma underscores the significance of the "time after" a key traumatic event, such as the period after leaving ISIS, as being equally crucial as the time within it, if not more so, in terms of psychosocial consequences. Collaboratively constructing narratives affords children a sense of agency, ownership, and acknowledgment, while also providing a space to contemplate a future life beyond their current circumstances. From a research standpoint, delving into their past experiences becomes essential for comprehending their present psychosocial situations, thus forming the foundation for their storytelling efforts and future perspectives.
- Fifthly and finally, socially recognised narratives play a pivotal role in articulating individual traumatic experiences. Established narratives can be used to at least tentatively give voice to one's struggles as something previously unspeakable. Research on the Holocaust reveals that survivors were able to openly talk about their lives only when collectively shared narratives had been established, often shaped by media, art representations, and oral history projects (Langer, 2002; Levy & Sznaider, 2002). The collective storytelling approach aims to fulfil a similar function by presenting a diverse array of life stories for children affiliated with ISIS to draw upon in discussing their own experiences. The compilation of these stories may serve as an addition to the basis for a collective memory among a generation of children who were associated with ISIS, creating a space for socioculturally meaningful discourse.

The stories were generated from February to April 2019. In total, five stories by former ISIS child soldiers were collected during the course of the project. The stories depict the diverse group of former ISIS child soldiers and their current situations. While two stories were collected in juvenile detention centres where boys from Arab-Sunni background were detained, three stories were collected in IDP camps. Two of the stories from the camps were developed by a group of Yezidi children and one by a group of Arab-Sunni children living in an IDP camp for so-called ISIS families. The stories are available in an unedited first version in Arab and English online (Ahmad et al., 2019).

Towards an Ethics of Recognition

The method of collaborative storytelling was remarkably successful with the five texts and drawings it generated, considering the difficult research conditions and the untested novelty of the methodological approach. But what is it exactly about the method and the stories it produces that promises insights? The question is anything but trivial. Let us think of a seemingly simple method like the interview: Even an individual interview meant to address "real" experiences is quite a complex social practice, staging a joint co-production of meaning by both the interviewer and the interviewee in an artificial research setting. So, how can we understand the much more complex collaborative storytelling, in which a group, led by a facilitator and guiding questions, invents a fictional story whose relation to the real experiences of the group members must remain constitutively open? And how should this be reflected upon in terms of research ethics?

To answer these questions, it is worthwhile to trace the status of stories in terms of narrative theory, necessarily in a sketchy manner, within the framework of this essay. Storytelling is very often interchangeably used with the term narrative. Abbott (2008) specifies that the "narrative

is the representation of events, [...]; story is an event or sequence of events (the action); and narrative discourse is those events as represented" (p. 19) or as Ryan (2008) laconically puts it, storytelling is the sharing of oral (or signed) narrative. In most societies, if not all, storytelling is one of the oldest and most widespread kinds of everyday communication (Stein, 1982). The process of telling stories incorporates imaginary or real events through which characters go and by which they are changed (Ricoeur, 1984). Seen in this light, stimulating people to tell stories could be understood as the original qualitative research method, since storytelling has been understood as a technique that not only allows one to make sense of the self but also of the other. From a historical-anthropological perspective, stories were used to preserve the culture of a society and were an essential part of understanding how people came to recognize stories in comparison to other forms of discourse. Passing oral stories from one generation to the next was, in many societies, especially those without a written language or access to written materials, the only way to record and transmit stories, myths, legends, historical events, and cultural practices. Thus, stories were told with great care in terms of accuracy of events that were significant for the development of the society. Additionally, stories were told to reflect a society's dominant social and moral norms. In fact, some stories have been recounted throughout history and continue to be told now to teach young people and adults new ways of thinking about morality and to express viewpoints that may immediately conflict with those of the listener or reader. Stein (1982) continues to explain that resolving social issues on a personal level and summarising and rearranging personal experiences are two further significant functions of storytelling. She states that, based on various studies, it has been discovered that both children and adults routinely replicate their past experiences in the form of stories, often adding to or changing the way events were organized. Both children and adults frequently place a more complex framework on their personal knowledge of an event by retelling a personal story. By doing this, the teller frequently combines disparate pieces of knowledge into a more coherent narrative (Stein, 1982, p. 482–483).

Hence, it is through authentic repetition (i.e., storytelling) that humans narrate ways of knowing and being. Young and Saver (2001) point out:

Our retention of the story's core will make a cognitive space or an environment for thought that can be drawn upon when the gist of the story serves a new purpose. To be without stories means . . . to be without memories, which means something like being without a self. (p. 74)

Thus, among the several function that stories can fulfil are safeguarding cultural traditions, imparting knowledge to others, reshaping experiences to promote greater understanding, and addressing societal issues. Stories are therefore regarded as therapeutic (Young & Saver, 2001) and are used as part of remoralisation. Engaging in the relationships of storytelling restores people, relationships, and communities. Stories can support those engaged in the storytelling relationship by distancing them from threats they are facing. Frank (2000) continues his chain of thought by elaborating that:

[...] stories are told with — not only to — listeners who are part of the storytelling. Storytelling is the recursive elaboration of the relationship between those sharing the story. Shared memories are made present, and shared futures are projected in the form of some day when stories. Stories reaffirm what people mean to each other and who they are with respect to each other. (p. 354)

While most story-based research from the Western canon has taken up storytelling as a means of organising and sharing experiences that can be theorised, the indigenous perspective on the other side sees storytelling itself as theory (Rice & Mündel, 2018, p. 11). As a theory, stories convey people's most deeply held world views and assumptions. Storytelling can also be understood as a form of knowledge translation. Senehi (2002) emphasises that storytelling is also a part of a larger discourse that organises socially constructed knowledge. During the process of storytelling, the storyteller is in a unique position of being able to influence the social construction of meaning (Bauman & Briggs, 1990). The notion that storytelling is an inter-subjective, situated,

and collaborative practice involving storytellers and audiences interacting in particular settings is specifically relevant to the umbrella of narrative methodologies (Rice & Mündel, 2018, p. 11).

Against this broadly outlined theoretical background, collaborative storytelling can be understood as a group-based process of making sense of shared experiences in relation to a current concern. In our project, it enabled us, on the one hand, with all interpretative caution, to develop theses on the experiences of the children during their time with ISIS; on the other hand, and above all, we could learn something about how these experiences are talked about under the given socio-political conditions in the post-conflict context of KRI; that also includes in the life worlds of the camps and prisons. We also learned what can and cannot become thematic — and what message the respective group would like to convey to their addressees — the researchers and, via the researchers, the socio-politically significant actors in the field.

This can be exemplified by the remarkable differences in the stories of the two groups of boys we worked with in the project. The groups of Arab-Sunni boys describe in their stories — in line with the dominant public attribution — voluntary access of their protagonists to ISIS. However, they use “justification narratives” to problematise the voluntary nature connoted with guilt. For example, they portray altruistic motives for helping their suffering communities and a misperception of ISIS as a “good” organisation, which is later exposed in the stories as a propagandistic lie. To illustrate the protagonist of a collaborative story by Arab-Sunni boys, Hasan describes his entry into ISIS:

Other reasons why also other people joined were that they needed money and food as there were no jobs anymore and no food. When Hassan saw them on the street, he asked if he could join and become one of them, they took him. After that moment, he did not go back home. Hassan was happy and proud to be with ISIS (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 36).

Similarly, Khadr is described as joining ISIS voluntarily because he thought it was a good organisation that would take care of him. We have deliberately chosen a longer quote from the story because we want to show the chain of Khadr’s thoughts in retrospect, which can also be seen as a means of justification:

When Khadr went to the market with his father, he saw people praising and proclaiming their love for ISIS. He did not know that most people were praising them out of fear. When Khadr went to the market with his father, the organization was showing how to train children on large television screens set up on public roads. They also hung these screens where young people and children would gather, trying to drag them into their ranks. Khadr saw these clips on television, and he asked himself, “Why don’t I join this organization? People will praise me, be afraid of me (he was a troublemaker and liked fighting, after all), and I also saw that those who join them are provided with everything from food and oil fuel”.

Once he went to the market alone. He saw them again and approached them. He told them that he wanted to join. He went with them; they talked to him and changed his thinking. They urged him to practice Islam and to be devout. (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 16)

Social and family problems and individual personality problems of the protagonists are also used as an excuse to reject the attribution of deliberate perpetration. The result is a counter-narrative to the public perception, which is succinctly expressed in a remarkable dedication with which the young people preface one of the stories: “To every child who has lived through the tragedy of the war and had his innocence taken away” (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 12). Consequently, the stories of the Arab-Sunni children do not mention any acts of violence carried out in the context of ISIS affiliation.

The fictional protagonists were not involved in any acts of violence, but were entrusted with non-violent functions, for example at checkpoints. Hassan's story can illustrate this:

A typical day for Hassan while being with ISIS used to look like this: He used to get up early to perform his prayers and after that he had breakfast with yogurt, eggs, cheese, and tea. After having breakfast Hassan would leave for his duty. His duty was at a checkpoint where he would ask people for their identification, where they would be coming from and going to. [...] He used to go to his duty and have lunch and dinner with a group of ISIS members. The food he consumed with ISIS was very similar to the food he used to have at home with his family. Especially when he used to receive money by ISIS, Hassan was happy (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 37).

The stories of the Yazidi boys are quite different. Here too — in line with the dominant public perception — we are told of a highly violent and forced recruitment of the protagonists, even if details of the genocidal violence, which have been empirically proven, are left vague. During the time in ISIS, however, events of violence are described in great detail. One of the protagonists, Nuri, for example, is followed by the storytelling boys in the troubling process of being desensitised to violence:

AbuMujahid [an ISIS commander who Nuri lived with in the story; ANA/PCL] was taking Nuri to the weapon training camps and Nuri was easily learning how to use rifles and pistols. Even though the rifle was a bit heavy for him and he was preferring pistol he still was supposed to learn. It was fun to shoot, and Nuri felt he was becoming a strong man. Nuri learned to shoot very well and therefore AbuMujahid ordered him to execute a prisoner, but Nuri was scared and cried he said, "I can't". But the next day, Nuri was ordered to execute a black dog and he did it with a 9mm pistol. (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 26)

The narrative then sketches Nuri's joyful and proud war adventures, as he also invades Syria with tanks. The accompanying drawing shows Nuri in battle on a very detailed illustrated tank. Nuri, we learn was with ISIS fighters

[W]hen raiding houses and [going] to places where ISIS was executing rebels. Three years had gone by and Nuri had become stronger and bigger and was now able to carry a rifle with him along with a pistol. Nuri learned how to drive trucks and he also rode tanks in Syria sometimes" (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 37).

In an insightful paper, Wessells (2016) emphasised that "children who had been recruited by force or other means frequently undergo an identity transformation as armed groups resocialise them to see themselves and to be seen by others as soldiers and warriors" (p. 105). Returning to the community, which was targeted from exactly the group that was responsible for the genocide and that they were forced to belong to, is all but easy and may not be perceived and felt like a liberation by the children. This is also reflected in the stories, in which leaving ISIS is only partially described as liberation, and feelings of alienation from their communities emerge. In an interview we conducted with a therapist working with former child soldiers from the Yazidi community, the term *bomb of sadness* was coined. This metaphorically describes a possible reaction — psychoanalytically, one could speak of splitting — a defence mechanism that might work for a while and suggests some kind of social adaptation that can collapse at any time.

On the one hand, the stories depict multiple — empirically quite accurate — moments of experience of child soldiers in ISIS, which, in conjunction with supplementary empirical material, can provide exciting insights into the terrorist group's recruitment and socialisation practices. On the other hand — and this seems almost more important to us — they provide information about

group-related collective interpretation processes in a determined confrontation with socially dominant thematisation frameworks. They are testimony to a struggle for interpretative sovereignty regarding one's own experiences and an articulation of moments of experience opened up from the public discourse. This means rejection of the highly stigmatising and legally consequential exclusive labelling as perpetrators on the part of the Arab-Sunni boys and highlighting perpetrator elements that are particularly taboo in the Yazidi communities and a return to the communities free of ambivalence.

This interpretation enables an exciting shift and expansion of the research ethics perspective of the project.

Some Concluding Remarks

We began this article with a discussion of the necessity and simultaneous inadequacy of the research ethics imperative of *do no harm*. While this was, of course, decisive for our project and led to the development of the collaborative storytelling method, the realisation, publication, and use of the stories in various practical contexts beyond the project brings to light a second and equally important research ethics function: that of bearing witness.⁸

Incidentally, this can also only be briefly outlined here and can be linked to considerations that originate from critical trauma discourse (see, for example, Kühner, 2008; Brunner, 2012). There, it is pointed out that trauma does not speak for itself but always requires professional witnesses in order to be articulated and recognised: "The survivor must tell the story to someone who, through perceptive listening, bears witness to both the trauma of the survivor and the traumatic historical event..." (McKinney, 2007; see also, Karpf, 2013). Contrary to a psychopathologising narrow definition of trauma as PTSD (Becker, 2014; Langer et al., 2021), which is also reflected in the (undeniable) concern about re-traumatisation in research, it would be a matter of understanding the articulation of traumatic experiences as testimony to injustice suffered. In this respect, the method of collaborative storytelling is an attempt to open space for articulation that is as participatory with as little authoritative structure as possible, which young people can fill with their experiences.

More recent discussions on the importance of witnessing and testimony in qualitative research (e.g., Guishard et al., 2018; McAleese & Kilty, 2019; Quintero & Peña, 2021; Koensler & Näser-Lather, 2023) stimulate our interest in exploring an *ethics of recognition*. This refers to a significant function of the generated stories that lies precisely in the opening of a discursive space in which different experiences of the children appear as narrative patterns that allow others to express their own particular experiences. The five stories generated can only be a start. The extent to which they will be continued in the future — through work with former child soldiers by psychosocial actors in the region, further research projects, or autobiographical publications by the adults — must remain open at this point. Nevertheless, our hope is that the method outlined will entice other researchers to conduct methodological experiments in order to further develop this significant perspective for research ethics in their projects, and to mythologically translate and socio-politically transform trauma into testimony.

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⁸ In this respect, we see this article as an impetus for decision-making processes in ethics committees. Sound recommendations are already available for reviewers on how to conduct reviews of critical qualitative research (Levitt et al., 2021). The struggle of researchers with ethical challenges in particularly sensitive fields, such as with children and adolescents in conflict and war zones (see, for e.g., Langer et al., 2021, pp 49–102), could help unfolding further dimensions of critical research ethics in the future. Research contexts characterised by excessive violence transgress social spaces of experience with "normal" cultural practices that are the reference of conventional research ethics. The subsequent question would therefore be whether a "normal" methodological (and ethical) approach is perhaps no longer appropriate. More creative solutions in research would then be necessary.

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