Situating Trust, Values, and Ethics in the Politics of Knowledge Production: An Epistemic Shift in the Co-Production of Studying Violent Extremism

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Research Article

Situating Trust, Values, and Ethics in the Politics of Knowledge Production: An Epistemic Shift in the Co-Production of Studying Violent Extremism

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Abstract

This article aligns with voices arguing for the need for trust-building in the co-production of knowledge on violent extremism. Trying to internalize the concept of violent extremism in local communities comes with its own political nuances in the knowledge-making process. A focus on trust-building approaches is relevant not only to those scholars who work on violent extremism research but also to the broad academic study of conflicts, postconflict, and terrorism. By drawing examples from a workshop conducted on trust-building in violent extremism research, the article presents some of the complexities in violent extremism research fieldwork and how researchers have been building trust with their research participants by navigating complex situations. This entails how different values contradict or merge in co-producing knowledge and the need for ethics to go beyond the institutional research ethical guidelines in understanding "universal values" for building trust in fieldwork.

Keywords

trust, values, ethics, politics of knowledge production, co-production of knowledge, violent extremism research, fieldwork

Introduction

This article explores how knowledge production in sensitive subjects, such as violent extremism, is intimately connected to trust building between the researchers and the researched and their underlying values and ethics. Trust building in the field can be viewed as research participants "entering into a relationship with researchers whom they may not know but need to trust" (National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC], 2015, p. 3). Trust-building processes in research contribute to the values and ethics of the co-production of knowledge (Page, 2022). Co-production of knowledge refers to collaborative approaches that enable socially relevant and scientifically reliable knowledge intended to solve real-world problems with a broader range of participant engagement (Djenontin & Meadow, 2018; Fraser et al., 2006; Polk, 2015). The importance of values and ethics in the co-production of knowledge has been well emphasized, which exemplifies the overall trust element in the knowledge-building process (Filipe et al., 2017).

The topic of this article, violent extremism, has no single definition. Broadly, violent extremism can be explained as a form of extremism that condones and enacts violence based on ideological reasoning, which could be religious or political (Bak et al., 2019). While scholars argue between narrower and broader perspectives in defining violent extremism, violent extremism is often a politically laden, top-down, defined term flaunted within donor circles with intentions to counter the Islamist extremist threat in the West. Subsequently, the knowledge produced on violent extremism flows vertically from the Global North to the Global South institutionally, influencing materially and epistemically often in a patronizing and solution-driven way (Ellerman, 2002; McFarlane, 2006). Such definitions of violent extremism are critiqued, and local perspectives are sought to develop grounded definitions (Badurdeen et al.,

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2022). Local knowledge plays a crucial role in knowledge production for preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE), and trust-building is essential in PCVE research aimed at strengthening the empirical base for PCVE interventions.

Given its apparent importance and the value that trust creates, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has developed the IGAD Manual for Researchers of Violent Extremism (Sommers, 2019), promoting "Trust-based Qualitative Field Methods" to manage the intricacies involved in researching violent extremism. The process of building trust is at the heart of researching hard-to-reach individuals in communities often viewed as marginalized or stigmatized (Devany, 2021; Ruiz-Casares, 2011) and in contexts labeled as "hotspots" for violent extremism. Trust-building is a key principle in knowledge-building, where the politics of the donors or the structures of national power or elites can overwhelm the discourse of knowledge production limiting the inclusivity of others or alternative views (Adel, 2022).

The methodology for this article is based on reflections from a research workshop on building trust between the researcher and the researched participants in violent extremism research in Kenya. Using this approach, the article provides insights on trust-building for researchers and practitioners in peacebuilding and preventing and countering violent extremism in communities by reflecting on the relationship between trust, values, and ethics in research-related fieldwork. More specifically, it highlights the significance of the positionalities of the researchers and the research participants in fieldwork and how they navigate their positionalities in constructing truth in environments fueled with fear, stigma, and surveillance, succumbing to the politics of violent extremism discourses or terrain. The concept of "trust" in violent extremism research in the Kenyan context is often discussed but rarely explored. Therefore, the article contributes to the body of literature on building trust in research work, especially in working in conflict or violent extremism contexts where research projects are embedded in the politics of power.

Following the introduction, the next section reviews existing literature on trust-building and the co-production of knowledge and situates trust within values and ethics. The subsequent section briefly describes the methodology used for the article. Then, the first analysis section identifies the foundations of trust in co-producing knowledge on the construction of violent extremism. This is followed by the final analysis section, which reflects on the trust-building processes in violent extremism research. Epistemological reflections on values, trust, and ethics on the co-production of the concept of violent extremism in research are discussed in this section before concluding the article.

Conceptualizing Trust—Where Values and Ethics Intersect in Knowledge Production

Power and positionality are well-documented concepts within the exploration of knowledge production (see Foucault, 1972; Rose, 1997). Recognizing that knowledge production is rarely neutral and often based on power, opens a space for debate on the ethics, values, and trust involved in the co-production of knowledge. Co-production of knowledge refers to the active mobilization of knowledge by community members or end users of the research and the phenomenology studied within a given context (Langley et al., 2018). It values formal and experiential knowledge from the community through participatory research (Beckett et al., 2018), and facilitates collective sensemaking of the phenomenon studied, thereby opening up spaces for increased trust in the research process (Filipe et al., 2017). Therefore, conceptualizing the trust process as a fluid process that is fragile and intermittent over time influences the nature of trusting relationships through the need for constant negotiation and re-negotiation in knowledge building (Armstrong et al., 2022).

The concept of building trust in research fieldwork is complex, multidimensional, and characterized differently depending on the contexts and communities involved. The relationship between the researcher and the researched participants is characterized by notions of expectations, anticipation, and positive belief (Armstrong et al., 2022; Mcknight & Chervany, 2001). For example, the research participant is more likely to trust the researcher if he or she can expect, for example, the benevolence, competence, or reliability of the other. The participant evaluates the relationship based on his or her perceptions and opinions about whether they should trust each other or not. This informs the participant whether the researcher is trustworthy because his or her interests or motives lead to the assumption that the other will be trustworthy (Edwards et al., 2008). Therefore, trust can be conceptualized as an interpersonal relationship where one person relies on another person to act in a particular way (Hardin, 2002). In this relationship, the trustor is vulnerable because he or she has to rely on the goodwill of the person being trusted. According to Jones (2012), trust is more than reliance on goodwill. An honest trust relationship can be fruitful when the trustee invites trust in a way that shows his promise to be trustworthy.

Accordingly, trust involves risk-taking and vulnerability for the research participant and/or the researcher, which can lead to the potential for subordination and dependence. To trust, either individual must take a risk and commit (Paquette & Derrington, 2018), which goes beyond reasoning alone and can be emotional, spontaneous, or based on feelings

developed during the research fieldwork. For the researcher and the participant, trust can be a sign of a reciprocal belief in interdependence and a vulnerability in the relationship in that he or she could win or lose in a more or less equal relationship (Malik, 2019). In field research, trust is built up gradually (Glasius et al., 2018), with varying degrees of participant involvement. Trust includes two forms: Knowledge-Based Trust (KBT) and Identification-Based Trust (IBT) (Lewicki, 2006). KBT occurs when parties can predict cooperative behavior in their interactions based on the knowledge they have of each other (Shapiro et al., 1992).

IBT is a function of both interpersonal and impersonal relationships, and it is a form of a trust where either party internalizes and empathizes with the other's interests. Shapiro et al. (1992) categorize IBT as the highest form of trust, which normally occurs among members of the same group with shared values, goals, and focus. IBT is achievable when the parties understand and appreciate the shared values and objectives of their relationship. However, it needs to be noted that values are culturally relative, and values and moral standards are culturally defined (Forsyth et al., 2008). For example, a research participant might find it easier to place his or her trust in a researcher who expounds the same values, has similar religious, ethnic, or cultural characteristics, has been known for some time, has similar representation in community organizations, has similar workplace or kinship ties, or has credibility in society.

Moreover, trust embeds itself in research ethics, which can be categorized as institutional, situational, and relational ethics (Ellis, 2007). First and foremost is the procedural ethics mandated by Institutional Review Board (IRB) committees to ensure research follows adequate procedures such as rights to privacy, informed consent, and confidentiality, especially in topics such as violent extremism and terrorism (Dolnik, 2013; Morrison et al., 2021). The focus has been constantly on institutional ethics, which involves research ethical clearances and research permits to start the research, rather than the "informal" social or cultural permits crucial for trust building and entry into the community. The second is situational ethics, which arises in practice. For example, ethics, which we deal with when something unpredictable and important comes up in fieldwork (Mills et al., 2020). This may include being privy to undisclosed information about participants to state authorities concerning national security or a participant asking for assistance, which may be viewed as unethical as a researcher but morally addresses a serious concern. What we quite often lack in discussion while researching topics such as violent extremism or terrorism is relational trust and ethics based on the concern we as researchers have for our participants centered on our interpersonal bonding due to long-term fieldwork relationships (Allmark et al., 2009; Miller, 2017). This involves the connectedness between the researcher and the researched participant and between the researcher and the communities he or she is working in (Corbin & Morse, 2003; Duncombe & Jessop, 2012). Human connectedness is based on the gradual evolution of the relationship between the researcher and the researched participant and the acknowledgment of interpersonal bonds with others.

The Kenyan context is an excellent point of focus to begin our study on trust-building and knowledge co-production because it attracts many researchers interested in exploring violent extremism. Violent extremism in Kenya has its foundations in the 1980s through a series of attacks perpetrated by terrorist groups. These incidents set the scene for numerous terrorist attacks over the past four decades from groups associated with the Palestine Liberation Organization, Al-Qaeda, and more recently, the Al-Shabaab and the Islamic State. These attacks have strengthened the need for what the international community promotes as PCVE interventions and the focus on thwarting Islamist extremism, negating historical outbreaks of violence, local conflicts, structural violence, and regional grievances. Yet local meaning-making of violent extremism is severely lacking but urgently needed. Studies reveal that some local grievance-driven conflicts tend to strengthen local definitions of violent extremism in their communities (Badurdeen et al., 2022). The concept of Islamist extremism and terrorism in Kenya has led to the construction of suspect communities, mainly Muslim communities, particularly around the coast and the northeast, affecting their daily lives (Badurdeen, 2018b).

To this day, Kenya is considered by the international community to be a successful model for PCVE interventions in the East African regions and a template for the developing south (Badurdeen, 2023). Many countries in the East African region are looking toward the Kenyan experience to create their national strategies in PCVE. Nevertheless, the 2016 Kenyan National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism (NSCVE) has its own flaws, and is presently being reviewed to reflect contemporary trends in violent extremism. It triggers critical discussions on what constitutes "violent extremism" (Badurdeen et al., 2022). It also necessitates the need for robust empirical data to support policy and practice on PCVE. There is a continued need for critically reflecting on the knowledge co-production on "violent extremism," and "PCVE" based on trust, values, and ethics. This entails responding to the question of, how these gradual and often long-term relationships in the field account for our ethical responsibility to others, understand our values, and build trust, enabling us to be part of their stories that influence knowledge constructions.

Methodology

This article uses reflections from the "Trust-Building, Gendered Nuances, and Decoloniality in Researching Violent Extremism" workshop in Kenya. The views and experiences of the workshop participants were summarized and then collaboratively reflected on and analyzed by the authors to produce this article. Workshops are rarely utilized as a research methodology to generate research findings (Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017); nevertheless, workshops can foster engagement through collaborative discussions between the participants and the facilitator or the researcher (Lain, 2017). This engagement can be key to establishing credible qualitative research findings (Pandey & Patnaik, 2003) and building relationships.

Our two-day workshop, carried out on November 15 and 16, 2022, utilized a purposive sampling strategy to select participants from specific categories of individuals (Robinson, 2014) to explore values, trust-building, and positionality in research. The workshops included twenty-five participants who were either researchers working on the topic of violent extremism, and "the researched," who were commonly participants in research studies on the topic. Criteria for the inclusion of researchers were based on their experiences working on the topic of violent extremism in Kenya, including their outreach work at the community, local, and international levels. Eight researchers (two males and six females) and 17 (10 males and seven females) "the researched" with a history of involvement in violent extremism-related research, were selected to participate in the workshop. The "researched" participants include reformed extremist members, family members of violent extremist members, or those deemed to be "at risk" or categorized as from "suspect communities" for violent extremism. The safety and security of the participants were considered key for the workshop. Careful selection of participants was needed and meant relying on the lead author's previous research relationships built on relationships of trust with the "researched" participants. The workshop was conducted at the Technical University of Mombasa and was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK, for the project 'Values, Ethics and Trust in Peacebuilding Network. The research workshop gained ethical approval from Coventry University.

The lead author organized and facilitated the workshop and ensured the creation of a safe space for participants to engage in critical discussions surrounding research on violent extremism. The workshop commenced with an ice-breaker session, individual exercises, and group discussions and activities. The researchers and "the researched" participants contributed to six separate group discussions: two groups comprised of researchers only, explored issues about positionality and building trust. Four other groups comprising the "researched" participants focused on sharing their experiences of being part of the research process. In addition, five mixed groups of the researchers and "the researched" participants collaboratively reflected on topics of trust-building, values, and fieldwork ethics and practices. The discussions and reflections that emerged were recorded but anonymised to maintain confidentiality. They were then analyzed thematically to develop this article. The themes were divided into two sections. The first section includes the foundations of trust in the co-production of knowledge during fieldwork, which looks at the conceptual framing of the term violent extremism in research as well as the impact of different positionalities in violent extremism fieldwork. The second section looks at the process of trust-building between the researcher and the research participants in the research on violent extremism.

Foundations of Trust in the Co-Production of Knowledge During Fieldwork

Trust-building in violent extremism research is tied to the existing conceptualization of the term violent extremism. National and international definitions of violent extremism are connected to ideas of Islamist extremism associated with the Global War on Terror (GWOT) agenda. The construction of the term "violent extremism" is political and can label and stigmatize communities (Vermeulen, 2014). Reflections from the workshop highlighted that the term can create animosity in some communities, stigmatize particular communities, or label particular communities as extremists. The ability for a researcher to build trust with people in such localities becomes difficult due to the inherent nature of the construction of the term violent extremism.

With locals in their respective communities having their own definitions and conceptualizations of violent extremism, fieldwork embeds the need to focus on trust in the co-production of knowledge, as contention and mistrust run deep among many affected or stigmatized local communities (United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute [UNICRI], 2020). Knowledge production has also lost credibility because the term has evolved drastically with the international impetus on the Global War on Terror agenda and its softer approach, the global Countering Violent Extremism agenda, with less concern for local realities and perspectives (Aronson, 2011). Distrust prevails in these communities because research projects are viewed as a band-aid solution to Islamist terrorism, always viewed from a Western lens, promoting Western ethics and values, and seen not to be interested in addressing the root causes of the issue (Lind & Howell, 2010). The fear entails whether the politics of knowledge production on violent extremism would further push individuals and communities to be labeled as violent extremists, moderates

(Devlin-Foltz, 2010; Mandaville & Nozell, 2017), suspect communities (Vermeulen, 2014), or at-risk individuals or communities (Building Resilience in Civil Society [BRICS], 2018; Mercy Corps, 2022). In such a milieu, the term violent extremism is a loaded term and distrust among communities is rife. Let us now turn to our findings.

Researchers at the workshop highlighted the importance of researcher positionalities associated with their institutional affiliations in building trust in violent extremism fieldwork. Researchers often are conflated with values and ethics surrounding their research concerning the organizations or universities they represent or the ethics of professional associations they adhere to. A breach of ethics will affect their reputation (researcher and affiliated institutions) and the validity of their study. For researchers, layered positionalities involved personal identity markers as well as their associated organizations such as the university or the research institution they represent, the approvals from recognized ethic committees and national institutions, as well as the gatekeeper organizations assisting their studies.[1] The positionality of the researchers, or who they are seen to be, is crucial to the privacy and safety concerns of the researched participants and communities, thereby influencing the trust relationships.

Community members often scrutinize "who" the researchers are and their associated institutions. A researcher participant explained that credentials did not always assist in building trust with the researched communities where there was a heightened level of distrust for strangers (Sluka, 2007), specifically researchers working on violent extremism or radicalization. Reflections from the workshop explained that, often, community members perceive researchers as spies working for government authorities or external security organizations (Chakravarty, 2012; Ryen, 2007). There was a belief that documents and profiles could be forged by the police or other security interrogators to pose as researchers to gather information.[2] In such environments, researchers struggle to build trust with the local communities as they are viewed with suspicion from the start. It may take months of work to build trust by reiterating that "I am a researcher, with the sole intention of carrying out a research project and these are my research objectives."[3] A researcher highlighted that the prolonged time spent in the community is key to building trust.[4]

Nevertheless, distrust can be heightened in localities when community members have a bias toward western institutions. This complicates trust building when the researcher is associated with Western institutions, attributed to real or perceived historical grievances or based on existing policy frameworks negatively impacting Muslim countries (Yaworsky et al., 2022). A researcher shared the concern that due caution should be taken when discussing topics related to violent extremism, as many Muslim communities feel stigmatized because of the perception of bias against Muslims in the global and national PCVE policies of non-Muslim countries, particularly the West. Due to the stigmatization and labeling, these communities often harbor resentment or antagonism toward the West or Western-affiliated institutions.[5] In such contexts, workshop participants highlighted the importance of the values of honesty, being truthful right from the start, and acknowledging the researcher's positionality. It is also important to inform participants of the funder's and the researcher's positionalities as a starting point for a discussion. They suggested that the values of genuine apology and a recognition of the way terms like violent extremism or PCVE have evolved globally can open space for mutual discussions where communities can minimize distrust in the researcher.[6]

Like any other field of research, identity markers of researchers such as gender, race, religion, and nationality impact the trust-building processes in violent extremism research (Badurdeen, 2018a). Similarly, researchers, whether outsiders or community members, struggle with their positionalities in the field and grapple with relationality in their ethical responsibility to protect the individuals they engage with (Chirambwi, 2023). Researchers who are insiders need to move beyond the procedural and institutional ethics that they have to abide by and consider existing relationships with the community in determining ethics.[7] A researcher from the workshop reflected on the experiences of fieldwork, where the researcher wanted to understand communal relationships when situating their research and wanted to understand why people joined extremist networks such as the Al-Shabaab. The researcher had to grapple with crucial concerns of empathy (Shesterinina, 2019) related to the disappearances of boys and girls who were related to the researcher via kinship.[8] Understanding the pain and emotions attached to the research and balancing values[9] as an individual in the community often makes researchers face the ethical dilemma of the possibility of being biased (Parashar, 2019). While simultaneously being privy to inside information that the research may have access to, shedding light on complex topics such as radicalization or recruitment into labeled extremist networks.

From the above, in co-creating knowledge, the researcher's actions are not just their own but a process of local interactions in the community based on relationships. For an outsider, it is easy to look at the causes of violent extremism or radicalization, which can be viewed as "poverty," "lack of opportunities," "the existing of terrorist networks and their recruiters," or "perceived marginalization." However, as an insider, the researcher had to view it as something within the community, from the community perspective, along with the community values that are also the researcher's values as part of the community. For example, the researcher in a group exercise explained. We can get a narrative like,

> X's brother disappeared in 2019. You know "X" the small boy that came to your house for lunch those days. He used to hang around with your son. He lost his mother and had bad friends. After all, it's our boy. Just being misguided does not mean he is a criminal. We need to assist this boy.[10]

In such contexts, the researcher, as an "insider" grapples with the communal values of assisting the boy as a relative or with kinship ties, while also looking at the causes for joining the extremist network. The community's expectations are also evident in such contexts, as recruitment to the extremist network is viewed as 'a deviated boy needing assistance.'[11] The relational worldviews between the researcher and the researched construct knowledge based on their relational experiences and have implications for the individual and the community. The researcher's values and ethics in the research process and actions extend to the entire community as an obligation beyond the scope of the research, culminating in the creation of trust in the researcher.

Most importantly, research on violent extremism includes the foundations for trust in the researcher regardless of the researcher's positionality as an insider or outsider status in the community, which include KBT and IBT (Lewicki, 2006). The workshop reflections characterized the following as KBT of researchers: the credibility of the researcher is based on the competency of the researcher perceived by the participant or the community; the gradual accumulation of knowledge of the researcher's background during interactions in the fieldwork; decisions are based on the participant's judgment of the researcher's values displayed during the fieldwork interactions; and personal justification and rationality in creating trust based on decisions of the researcher's ethical conduct and personal shared values.

The workshop reflections characterized the following as IBT of researchers: trust developed as a result of the recognition of the researcher and previous relationships between the researcher and the participant; the researcher is familiar with the participant or the community; commonly shared culture, religion, kinships, gender, and other markers attributed to the positionalities of the researcher; the researcher having the sense of belonging to the same group or having the same identification with the research participant. For example, the researcher and researched participants are both mothers or are from the same community or religion. Reciprocity of shared emotions with the researcher during fieldwork, such as the loss of a spouse as a wife or fatherhood.[12] The researcher or the participant cannot stipulate an ideal shared value standard based on each other's evaluation of what an ideal value system is. Shared values between the researcher and the researched may or may not be universal and are greatly dependent on the context, thereby influencing research processes in knowledge production.

Identities are strengthened when relational trust develops over time between the researcher and the researched. This strengthens rapport building in fieldwork. The relationship between the researcher and the researched creates a shared understanding of norms and values and knowledge sharing (Cranston, 2011), which develops the research findings. Relational trust supports key findings during fieldwork based on genuine relationships formed in fieldwork, where participants learn to trust the researcher. Nevertheless, relational trust may also mean researchers critically evaluating their closeness to participants and the resultant biases. For example, a researcher from the workshop explained how the researcher contributed to paying a participant's hospital bills, as the participant had been a good friend during the fieldwork.

Some other researchers explained that buying food for the participant's family before an interview or giving food items as gifts were due to the nature of the poverty-stricken households of their interviewees. A researcher stated,

> You feel ungrateful if you can not at least buy food for the family. This can even mean buying food for a household where the participant is suspected or alleged to be a member of an extremist group or is the wife of a member of an extremist group.[13]

On one end, the researcher needs to assess his or her gifts or assistance to the participant in terms of whether they affect their decision to voluntarily take part in the research. On the other end, such assistance to the participants helps strengthen relational trust, which develops over time.[14] Another significant finding of the workshop is the use of wording or phrases, which we will discuss in the following section.

Reflection on Trust-Building Processes in Violent Extremism Research

The trust-building process depends on how well we communicate with the research participants. Effective communication with communities to build mutual trust and improve the buy-in that will sustain the research project is important. This entails our ability to express the benefits of the study to the community. Trust-building processes remain often constrained in environments where people distrust the government or even "outsiders" of the community. Distrust of government authorities or outsider development interventions may be seen as suspicious or may even be seen by some local communities as a cause for cycles of violence attributable to violent extremism in their communities. In environments where community distrust of government authorities, law enforcement, or developmental interventions is high, researchers find it difficult to convince the communities of their projects on violent extremism.

Selecting the Right Word or Phrase in Fieldwork Enhances Trust

The significance of avoiding specific terms and expressions in ensuring the safety of the researched communities was highlighted during the workshop. Words, phrases, and topics used in research and their political connotations can hamper trust-building in the field (Konig & Jucks, 2019). Specific topics or words used unintentionally in research focused on violent extremism can hamper the underpinning values of human emotions, affecting relationship-building in communities. For instance, as explained above, concepts such as violent extremism, extremists, and radicalization create an offensive milieu in an already stigmatized community, such as in peripheral communities in Kenya such as Kwale, Lamu, Garissa, or Isiolo (Badurdeen, 2018b)

The pain of constantly asking for these words or terms associated with violent extremism research creates the feeling that the researcher is constantly labeling or relabeling the community based on national or external framings of violent extremism. Becoming familiar with how certain terminologies are used to avoid offending specific individuals and communities is essential. For example, researchers at the workshop reflected on how they framed the term recruitment to violent extremism networks in their studies to enable them to access the community. Instead of asking how individuals are recruited into violent extremist networks, the researcher used questions such as "How do individuals join bad company? Alternatively, 'How do individuals go astray in this community?" These questions encapsulated how locals used the term in Swahili, "going astray" or "joining gangs," to explain individuals joining violent extremist networks or organizations in their communities. Due to security reasons, community members refrained from naming violent extremist groups and instead used words like gangs, thugs, or going astray.[15]

There was also resentment among the researched communities to use the term violent extremism, as locals rarely viewed their youth as "violent extremists." Reflections from the workshop revealed that, for local communities, these youth were "boys who had gone astray and needed assistance to reform." The clashing of the term "violent extremism" by an outsider interrogating the word with the local values and reasonings does impact how they view the researcher as already biased in the research framing.[16] An overall broad question with local meaning-making makes the participant come up with various reasons to explain individuals joining networks, which *they* classify as violent extremism. The reasons why such terminologies or concepts as violent extremism, extremists, terrorists, disappearances, or extrajudicial killings are accepted or rejected are critical to explore when attempting to frame words or concepts in fieldwork. In such contexts, exploring the history of a concept is essential. For instance, how are terms like violent extremism associated with the community? How has the word evolved in the community? How has the term been linked to the perceived marginalization of the communities during colonial and post-colonial times? In using the term "violent extremism," how do the community members situate the state in the violent extremism framings or jargon? What are researcher values and funder values in understanding how the term violent extremism influences the research project? Does the clash of values between the researcher and the research participant make the entire research encounter a lopsided process?

In communities deemed suspicious, stigmatized, or conflict-affected, the concept of informed consent is rather difficult to administer. In such cases, working along 'negotiated consent processes' between the researcher and the researched can be worthwhile (Lake & Wendland, 2018:30). Difficulties arise in particular words or terms we use in the consent forms, which could raise fear in an already stigmatized community (Malthaner, 2014). A researcher reflected on the experience of how difficult it was to convince some participants, who were considered as "at risk," to participate in a violent extremism research, where the participants viewed the consent sheet when caution. They reviewed the consent form on the "overseas transfer of data." The term ensured the data protocols foe transferring data to another country for analysis. It specified that the transcribed interviews would remain in the 'data management system for more than 5 years. For some, the consent form's word "overseas transfer of data" appeared like data taken for interrogation. It is kept in data management systems where the data would be held to interrogate or be kept for surveillance. These terms inculcated fear, and the entire project was viewed with suspicion by some individuals deemed to be "at risk" or those who perceived themselves as susceptible to extrajudicial killings.[17] In these contexts, verbal consent becomes the only option, with more time spent in explaining the entire research project to the participant or his or her community.

Trustbuilding in such contexts involves explaining not only the present research project but also sharing insights from the researchers' previous research experiences doing similar research and convincing participants that there has never been harm in the process, which is mainly associated with information leakages. Participants from the workshop reflected that constantly convincing participants using previous research experiences gives experienced researchers a pivotal edge in specific localities, where participants feel safe with the researcher.[18] Building trust with the gatekeepers may be the first step forward for novice researchers in sensitive settings (Lata, 2020). This is also dependent on the positionality of the gatekeeper. Who is the gatekeeper? What is the gatekeeper's acceptance in the community? How do the state authorities view the gatekeeper? The researcher has to navigate within the confines of the

gatekeeper and be aware of the gatekeeper's position in the fieldwork process (Kalina & Scott, 2023).

Unintentional Harm Unknowing the Context

"Do No Harm" is vital in research ethics, where issues such as "privacy and safety," 'anonymity,' and "confidentiality" are considered in violent extremism or conflict research (Goodhand, 2000). This became apparent during the workshop as several participants reflected on privacy as the core of violent extremism-related research ethics. They highlighted that privacy is based on their sense of security because discussions on violent extremism-related issues generate curiosity in their communities and label those who participated in violent extremism research as snitches or moles. Generally, participants preferred to meet researchers in spaces away from their homes or communities. One participant, after attending research interviews near her home, experienced suspicious looks and discussions from neighbors and community members wondering who she had spoken to. Fear loomed in the community of whether she reported any local or specific community members to the researcher. According to this participant, "an interview can cost their lives," as no one in the community would trust them if they were seen talking to a researcher who was an outsider. Alternatively, if any community member "disappears" after the interview, the community would blame or threaten the participant.[19] Many of these communities are closed communities where violent extremism research was conducted.

A similar reflection was echoed by another researcher on disappearances. They described how researchers must be cautious because they can be blamed for a killing or disappearance in the community during or after their field research encounter. Researchers are often perceived as suspicious, as a community member might have shared sensitive information, or there might be a "fresh case" of recruitment to extremist networks, which the researcher might have been privy to. Unfortunately, if an arrest were made immediately after a researcher exited, the researcher would be seen as having leaked the information. The researcher may be unable to revisit the community as he or she has lost the community's trust or is blamed for the family's unfortunate plight.[20]

The above highlights a prevalent question researchers face in fieldwork when they stumble upon information about potential criminal or security-related acts: How do researchers balance their values between upholding institutional ethics processes, protecting citizens and national security, and protecting research participants? A researcher explained how they used various means to express significant trends to authorities without disclosing the specific individuals or communities to continue their research, while others considered proportionality, weighing the seriousness of the case with the community's concerns and values.[21] One researcher stressed the internal struggle to balance different values, especially when the community widely trusts the researcher due to the close long-term relationships with respective families within the community.[22]

Anonymity in fieldwork, such as the use of pseudonyms for people and places or not recording identifiers in fieldnotes or research outputs, is critical to ensuring anonymity, specifically in fields considered dangerous for the participant. Anonymity is far-reaching beyond the research process, and its impact can be felt even in the research dissemination phase (Ford et al., 2009; Sriram, 2009). The research participants highlighted different facets concerning anonymity, which raises concerns about ethics, values, and trust. One participant pointed out that anonymity should not be limited to withholding names and locations. The participant gave an example of when a researcher used the complete story of an individual's recruitment into a violent extremist network. Even though the names and locations of the individual were withheld, community members and the individual's relatives could identify the individual because the story was well-known in the community. The participant highlighted this as negligent and a breach of trust by the researcher as not being able to withhold specific facts about the individual, as well as the need to use stories only if deemed necessary for the prevention or mitigation of vice rather than constantly using stories to validate the researcher's findings[23] (Spagat, 2010; Thomson, 2009). In isolated communities with few members, specific details can be traced to an individual without the researchers' intention jeopardizing the safety of the participants.

Reflections during the workshop also alluded to the fact that narratives or case stories used carelessly by researchers may compromise the lives of individuals (Zwi et al., 2006), specifically "Al-Shabaab returnees" who had returned to reintegrate with their families and communities. Using case stories where specifics are easily traced compromises the security of the individual and hinders the individual from reforming, reintegrating, or starting a new life.[24] The ethical responsibility to protect the individual lies in the value of assisting individuals in their newly found lives by preventing harm.

Values and ethics to protect research participants should avoid further marginalizing individuals from their community and prevent vulnerability and victimization in violent extremism contexts (Goodhand, 2000). The value of safeguarding human dignity remains even after research is published in academic journals, as researchers remain connected to individuals and communities. Their writings, analyses, or actions may have the potential to endanger the research participants that they are ethically bound to protect. Workshop reflections alluded to the fact that researching sensitive

subjects such as sexual violence in Al-Shabaab camps, famously referred to as “sex slaves,” can place individuals in a derogatory position where some research participants can be traced by their stories[25] (see Jackson, 2021) or used to attribute the term “sex slaves” to all female returnees. Such terms are belittling and can jeopardize their new lives after being settled or remarried. Sexual violence in violent extremist contexts, such as terrorist camps, is often sensationalized and attracts attention.

Understanding Emotions in Violent Extremism Research

Researchers need to be aware of the participants’ unspoken words, emotions, or actions to understand participants’ motives to build trust and to explore how they can reach different participants (Halperin & Tagar, 2017). Trusting the researcher influences how locals engage in communicating with the researcher. Some participants at the workshop explained that questions are repeatedly asked in the same format by different researchers, traumatizing the participants. In research-fatigued environments, participants have to narrate their personal stories to many researchers who come to study their lives and the participant gets nothing in return. Often, in these environments, there is distrust of the researcher or the research process, as the participants do not envisage any positive outcome.

Distrust occurs as both the researcher and the researched participant have different expectations of the research process. For the researcher, the intention is to get findings that will finally make it to the policy cycles and later influence positive interventions. This is a long-term process. Usually, for the researched participant, the outcomes of the research process should be visible and tangible as seen as soon as the research process is concluded. This again is pegged to the participant’s daily or survival needs, as most participants living in these dangerous zones coupled with impoverishment look for immediate relief such as solving his or her immediate issues concerning personal or family safety or “to have even ugali on their table for one day” [in Swahili terms, it means having your daily bread].[26] Consensus on the short-term goals of the participant and the long-term goals envisioned in the researcher’s project as research outcomes for societal change may not always be in harmony. Participants may not be in a position to await long-term goals envisioned in research projects due to their immediate needs to be met. When participant–researcher goals rarely match, their values in the research process differ, affecting the trust-building process. Hence, the participation of community members may be voluntary, but they may not really participate voluntarily due to the different values they have for the research goals or objectives. The researcher or gatekeeper often selects participants (Malejacq & Mukhopadhyay, 2016), and some participants felt it was rude to say “no” to the researcher, the gatekeeper, or the representing institutions. For others, the “travel or time reimbursement” is a reason for participation. Hence, participants may consent but engage with a partial feeling for the interviews despite distrust toward the researcher.[27]

In environments marked by distrust toward the researcher, the participants reflected on navigating techniques during the interview process, often locally referred to as “survival strategies during tough interviews.” When they distrust the researcher some may remain silent; some may be untruthful or give half answers; some give hostile reactions to the questions, use conspicuous narratives, or may ask the question back to the researcher. Some may even start to cry, so the researcher would stop questioning. Discontentment emerges when participants lose hope in the research process or the outcomes for positive interventions related to their safety or welfare. They do not want to waste time or energy or distrust the researcher.[28] However, it should be noted that not all who remain silent or cry do such acts to navigate the interview process due to distrust.[29] In such contexts, it is important to understand why they distrust the researcher and what makes them trust (Celestina, 2018). However, these navigating acts by participants may also be attributed to retraumatizing participants linked to their witnessing, listening, or constant recounting of traumatic events or atrocities associated with violence or violent extremism environments, of which researchers need to be aware and competent to deal with[30] (Howe, 2022; Musisi & Kinyanda, 2020; Nyarko & Punamäki, 2021).

Conclusion

This article highlighted the challenges researchers and the research participants encountered during fieldwork in studying concepts such as violent extremism. Trying to internalize and navigate externally driven concepts in local communities comes with its political nuances in the knowledge co-production processes involved in understanding violent extremism. To progress, we must face the uncomfortable realities of unequal power dynamics in framing and designing research projects on violent extremism. This needs a complete paradigm shift toward our understanding of “violent extremism” as a top-down process dictated by those who have power over those who do not. The epistemic agency of the researched subjects in the community as co-producers in knowledge production must be emphasized.

Research designs should be participatory, opening space for deconstructing concepts rather than creating established ideas from outside or externally driven to strengthen the status quo. The voices of the marginalized should not solely be seen as the causes or consequences of violent extremism.

Research should enable a space for participants to voice their grievances and to be viewed as potential solutions for violent extremism. These grieving voices remain sidelined if concepts are automatically designed along worldviews that label specific individuals "violent extremists" or Islamist extremists rather than individuals with a space to voice their concerns per their worldview.

Relationality and context are vital to politically sensitive topics such as violent extremism, where our values, ethics, and trust-building intersect in knowledge-building. This is important in co-creating knowledge with other researched subjects, particularly localities where knowledge is situated in their day-to-day lives. There is a need to move beyond focusing on institutional research ethical clearances only, and also acknowledge the importance of socio-cultural permits in entry into diverse and complex environments. The workshop reflections elicited a few questions on violent extremism-related research projects which can assist future researchers. First, is it possible to understand whether "violent extremism" is relevant in the community studied? How do the researcher's local values intersect when defining the term "violent extremism"? What do we learn about violent extremism from the field beyond the dominant Western constructions? What contextual findings do we consider in co-creating the knowledge-building process in violent extremism? How have our fieldwork practices constructed the relationship between knowledge of violent extremism and the knowledge producers in the respective communities? How much has the researcher deconstructed himself or herself from the original framing of the term violent extremism in their research after the fieldwork?

Our analysis revealed that trust-building incorporates local knowledge production in three ways: One, by placing the issue of local violent extremism knowledge as the most important question which serves to counter violent extremism and better the lives of people on the margins of society. Second, it reflects the relationship between already existing knowledge of what violent extremism is within the local context and how it is defined and understood by the participants versus the external knowledge and perceptions of the researcher. By doing so, we enable the potential to learn from each other even when there are differences. Third, we attempt to offer a critical perspective on the structures of power within these knowledge systems—the profound social inequalities that most of these communities and individuals embody. With these three perspectives, the issue of building trust within the politics of knowledge will be grounded in each other's—the researcher's and the research participant's—values and ethics.

Finally, in understanding power in the co-production of knowledge, it is vital to recognize the potential power of research to deconstruct the phenomenon and offer explanations for the phenomenon studied to enable change in communities. Conflicting values based on subjectivities, moral values, and judgments between the researcher, the donors, the state, or the communities involved are possible. However, it is essential to recognize and work with universal values such as respecting human needs and values of love, respect, and dignity to effect change in violent extremism research. This is particularly potent in areas labeled as hotspots for violent extremism, where anger toward the "other," perceived marginalization, hatred toward the state or state institutions, false information or propaganda, and disinformation may thrive. In such environments, the power of knowledge construction is vital in the trajectories of sustainable prevention or countering violent extremism, conflict transformation, and peacebuilding initiatives. Researching relationships in such environments becomes a risky political exercise, especially where specific individuals or groups may want to prevent certain information from being communicated. Understanding these risks and the politics behind the phenomenon of violent extremism provides the true potential of research, making meaning of the context to enable a better understanding of the terms and concepts attributed to the phenomenon studied.

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Notes

1. Group 2 exercise reflections, researchers-only group.
2. Participant reflections, P8, Male, "researched participant"

3. Participant reflections, P12, Female, a "researcher."
4. Participant reflections, P4, Female, a "researcher."
5. Participant reflections, P12, Female, a "researcher."
6. Group 3 exercise reflections, "researched participant-only" group.
7. Participant reflections, P9, Female, a "researcher."
8. Participant reflections, P9, Female, a "researcher."
9. Group 2 exercise reflections, researchers-only group.
10. A participant sharing reflections during Group 8 work presentations, "researcher-researched" group.
11. Group 8 exercise reflections, "researcher-researched" group.
12. Group 10 exercise reflections, "researcher-researched" group.
13. A participant sharing reflections during Group 2 work presentations, researchers-only group.
14. Group 2 exercise reflections, researchers-only group.
15. Group 1 exercise reflections, "researchers-only" group.
16. Group 2 exercise reflections, "researchers-only" group.
17. Participant reflections, P9, Female, a "researcher."
18. Participant reflections, P12, Female, a "researcher."
19. Participant reflections, P22, Male, "researched participant."
20. Participant reflections, P12, Female, a "researcher."
21. Participant reflections, P2, Female, a "researcher."
22. A participant sharing reflections during Group 2 work presentations, researchers-only group.
23. Participant reflections, P18, Male, "researched participant."
24. Participant reflections, P13, Male, "researched participant."
25. Participant reflections, P6, Female, a "researcher."
26. Participant reflections, P6, Female, a "researcher."
27. Participant reflections, P13, Male, "researched participant."
28. Group 3 exercise, "researched participant group."
29. Group 4 exercise, "researchers only group."
30. Participant reflections, P11, Female, "researched participant. "

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