
PART A

**ETHICAL CHALLENGES OF
EMPIRICALLY GROUNDED
RESEARCH ON JIHADISM**

1

ON SPEAKING, REMAINING SILENT AND BEING HEARD: FRAMING RESEARCH, POSITIONALITY AND PUBLICS IN THE JIHADI FIELD

Martijn de Koning, Annelies Moors and Aysha Navest

In April 2016, we published our article ‘Chatting about marriage with female migrants to Syria’ in the peer-reviewed journal *Anthropology Today* (Navest et al. 2016).¹ This was a short explorative piece based on an experimental method of private chatting that focused on how Dutch-speaking women who had travelled to jihadi-held areas in Syria entered into marriages. Our article, which criticised the often-imposed label ‘jihadi brides’, offered new insights into how and where such women entered into marriages and how the proclamation of the caliphate affected the conclusion of marriages. Our last paragraph commented briefly on the prevalent framing of these women as either victims of unscrupulous jihadi men or as militants in their own right. Neither notion fitted well with how most of the women presented themselves to us in the private chats.

Nine months later, a journalist of an upscale Dutch daily, the *NRC Handelsblad* (hereafter *NRC*), authored a three-page article about our publication, which he presented as ‘Cyberjihadism’ at the University of Amsterdam. He accused the junior researcher, Navest, of jihadist sympathies, and the

¹ This research project is funded by the ERC advanced grant ‘Problematizing “Muslim Marriages”: Ambiguities and Contestations’ (Grant number: 2013-AdG-324180).

seniors, de Koning and Moors, of a lack of transparency – because we had kept our interlocutors anonymous. He also expressed concern that the study could potentially hinder the work of the security services, as it could be used by lawyers defending female migrants to Syria in terrorism trials.² This not only led to a huge public outcry in the media, but also sparked twenty-two parliamentary questions, and resulted in the university announcing a reflection audit.

In this contribution, we discuss how these events can help us to understand the effects of the politicisation of a research field (Wright 1998).³ The main challenge we faced was how to respond when a variety of actors reframed our research project, from a contribution to academic debate on controversial marriages to an instantiation of jihadism in academia. The case we present here highlights the polemics that come about in and through public debate when conducting ethnographic research in the jihadi field, working with interlocutors considered ‘repugnant’ (Harding 1991). Such processes of politicisation also need to be seen in the context of growing ethno-nationalism, which has targeted Muslims in particular (Bracke 2013; Moors 2014; Fadil et al. 2019; Van Es 2019).

In discussing the formats that such responses to being targeted may take, we build on insights from writers who have engaged with similar issues in other fields (Butler 2009). Those addressed may take over the terms by which they are interpellated, or they may, depending on the positions they find themselves in and the discursive space available to them, reject or ignore the terms of address. Such styles of responding not only vary between individuals or collectives; even a single person may simultaneously draw on different elements of these various formats.⁴ Sarah Bracke (2011), who analysed how women involved with ‘political Islam’ in The Netherlands ‘talk back’ to the dominant national discourse on women, Islam and emancipation, shows how those who reject the terms by which they are addressed may accept the broader frame of address, while those

² For a more extensive analysis of the *NRC* article and its aftermath see Moors (2019a).

³ See also de Koning et al. (2010) and Schmidt (2017).

⁴ Similarly, in his analysis of how minorities respond to racialised ascriptions, Didier Fassin (2011: 424) points to the various positions that subjects may take in response to being interpellated.

who embrace the terms by which they are addressed may simultaneously resignify them. In our case, the notions both of remaining silent and speaking up also need further qualification. Brian Larkin (2014), who discussed how the use of loudspeakers by competing Muslim and Christian groups in northern Nigeria engendered violence, analysed how people may cultivate inattention as ‘a conscious, willful act and not simply an inability to attend’ (2014: 1006). Remaining silent may, then, have different meanings, varying from an inability to speak because one is silenced to a conscious act of refusing to engage. Turning from silence to speaking up, bell hooks (1986), reflecting on her experiences of growing up in a black community in the US South, highlights the difference between speaking and being heard. Defining ‘talking back’ as ‘speaking as an equal to an authority figure’ (1986: 123), she emphasises that it is not simply a matter of emerging from silence to speech, but of making ‘a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard’ (1986: 124).

This contribution focuses on how we, as authors, have positioned ourselves in the field and how we have responded, both individually and collectively, to the various ways in which we have been addressed. Up until now, our publications have been authored by the senior researchers, although draft versions were always shared among the three of us to ascertain that we all agreed to the content (Moors 2019a/b; Moors and de Koning 2018). In this multi-vocal contribution, we use a different format in order to focus on the particular ways in which each of us has been interpellated. We are positioned differently in academia as well as in society, in terms of professional seniority and visible markers of gender, religion and generation, which has strongly affected our interactions with particular publics. With different, and sometimes overlapping, circles of friends, family and colleagues, each of us not only had to take into consideration and engage with different individuals and publics, but we were also addressed in different ways – sometimes by the very same individuals and publics.

In order to present our multiple voices, we draw on a wider range of sources and use a different style of writing from in our previous publications. Rather than using publicly available sources only, we also draw on e-mails that we wrote and received, field notes we kept in the course of the process and, especially, posts from our three-person WhatsApp group. This enables

us to provide a ‘real-time’ narrative, to enhance the multivocality of this article and to include affective elements (ranging from joy to indignation) and coping mechanisms, such as humour, which may enable readers to better understand why we responded in the ways we did.

In order to make our different voices discernible in the text, we cite both the WhatsApp conversations and e-mails, which we have translated from Dutch into English. When one of us is speaking in the text, we use the term ‘I’. When we use ‘we’ to refer to just two of us, the names are mentioned; otherwise ‘we’ refers to all three authors. In the following, we present how the affair unfolded, the ways in which we were addressed, individually and collectively, how we responded, and how voice, positionality and publics emerged in different configurations for each of us.

Act I: Happiness and Excitement: Cool Research!

We start our tale with the publication of our article in *Anthropology Today*, in April 2016:

05-04-16, 18:44 – Martijn de Koning: In case you did not yet see it, our article is online with Anthropology Today.

05-04-16, 18:48 – Aysha: oh is it already done 😊? Cool, I am going to look right now

06-04-16, 21:50 – Aysha: [. . .] Received today a message from our research field, will include it in my profile document. Do you have a link to the full article? I have a lot of fans (my parents 😊), they cannot wait to read it

We were very pleased that our article had been published in *Anthropology Today*. It was the perfect slot for a brief exploratory text, as it was both peer-reviewed and quickly published. The latter was important to us, because our field was changing so rapidly.

Aysha: For me this was even more special, as it was my first publication.

As Dutch academia strongly encourages researchers to share their findings with the wider public, something we also value. Martijn had contacted some journalists to see whether they would be interested in reporting on the publication in Dutch.

Martijn: I had established a good working relationship with several journalists while doing research on Salafism and militant activism. Soon a

journalist from *NRC*, Andreas Kouwenhoven, expressed an interest in our research. I sent him the article and he seemed to like it.

14 July 2016: E-mail Kouwenhoven: Hi Martijn, here is the text. It will be in the newspaper tomorrow, otherwise Saturday or Monday. It would be great if you could have a look at it. Cool research!

In the draft article, he summarised some of our findings and related them to the trial of a female returnee from Syria, Laura H. But that article was never published. *NRC*'s editorial team did not consider it sufficiently newsworthy. We began to look for another outlet, yet before we had found one, something else happened.

Act II: Supporting the Violent Jihad? Seriously?

Martijn: In early October 2016, out of the blue, I was contacted by the same journalist. He enquired whether a post he had found on an online forum, that dismissed certain stories about sexual slavery of foreign women who travel to IS-held areas in Syria as untrue, was evidence that Aysha was biased in favour of jihadists. He also asked who she was married to – he suspected that her husband might have jihadi sympathies – as well as requesting other personal information about her:

06-10-16, 18:23 – Martijn de Koning: I have sent you an email from Andreas Kouwenhoven (*NRC*). He has all kinds of questions about Aysha ... [.]

06-10-16, 23:08 – Martijn de Koning: to be honest, in my interactions with journalists I am used to a lot, but I almost fell off my chair in surprise [.]

06-10-16, 23:09 – Aysha: Yeah, honestly, I was also shocked.

06-10-16, 23:09 – Aysha: But that is not at all relevant for the substance of the research project

Annelies: I quickly began to have doubts about this journalist, who seemed to have changed his position quite dramatically regarding an article he had described as cool research just a few months earlier. Following the advice of a senior colleague specialised in research ethics, I decided, as the project leader, to become the spokesperson for our project. I only answered the question related to the content of the article, the story about sexual slavery, which

had already been investigated and found to be a hoax before Aysha allegedly referred to it.⁵ But I refused to answer any questions that invaded Aysha's privacy. The journalist then complained to the public relations department of our university about my refusal to engage in discussions about the family relations of a member of our team. The head of public relations called me and advised me to go and have coffee with the journalist to defuse the situation. So I did.

Annelies and Martijn: We were, to put it mildly, astonished by the accusations of 'jihadist sympathies', which seemed so far-fetched. We were, of course, aware that Aysha had known some women before they had left for Syria, which had been one of the reasons we wanted to have her in our team. Working very closely together in the course of the research project, we had never witnessed any indication of a 'pro-IS bias'. On the contrary.

Annelies: On 18 October, I met the journalist over coffee and spoke with him for at least an hour and a half. He appeared nervous; all the more so when I said I wanted to record our conversation, which in the end he agreed to. Within the first five minutes, it became evident that 'the beginnings' of the affair preceded the publication of our article. He explained that he was not really interested in Aysha, but in someone else close to her, with whom he had a long-standing issue. He was not interested in the other two authors of the article, Martijn and me. I explained that it was common in our field not to record or even ask for the official names of interlocutors, and that this was also stipulated by the ethics committee of our funding body. We agreed to have another conversation after I had consulted Martijn and Aysha. More specifically, the journalist asked me to ask Aysha directly whether she supported the violent jihad.

Annelies and Martijn: Odd as it may seem, in the end we agreed to do as he asked. It seemed the only way to avoid a publication that we feared could have very harmful consequences for Aysha, who was then on pregnancy leave. We were all too aware that in the political climate of the time, if an upscale newspaper claimed that a junior Muslim researcher had expressed a

⁵ Reuter, C. (2013), 'Sex jihad' and other lies: Assad's elaborate disinformation campaign. *Der Spiegel*, 7 October 2013. Available at <<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/assad-regime-wages-pr-campaign-to-discredit-rebels-a-926479.html>> (last accessed 7 October 2019).

pro-jihadist position online, her – and our – refutation of that claim would not undo the harm to her.

Aysha: My excitement about the publication of the article rapidly turned into astonishment and frustration when the journalist only asked questions about my private life and not about our research. It even came to the point that Annelies and Martijn had to question me about my stance towards the violent jihad (which I do not support in any way). This was a very unpleasant situation for all three of us.

Annelies and Martijn: On 17 November, we went together for a second conversation with the journalist. He acknowledged that publishing his accusations could have ‘fatal consequences’ for Aysha. Yet our faith in her seemed only to fuel his suspicions. Why would we believe her when she said that she did not support IS? And our arguments for maintaining anonymity seemed to him only further evidence of our complicity; he simply refused to believe that that could be common practice in our field.

Annelies: On 15 December, I received the journalist’s draft article and a list of on-the-record questions. I answered the questions about the content of our article, our research ethics and methodology, but again I refused to answer those that concerned private information. I did, however, after consulting Aysha, give him her e-mail address so that he could pose those questions directly. Guided by our public relations department, I also advised her that it might be wise to provide brief answers in order to avoid selective quotations:

15-12-16, 12:06 – Aysha: Jihadists amongst family and acquaintances 😬?

15-12-16, 12:07 – Annelies Moors: He very often uses the word jihadists

...

15-12-16, 12:08 – Aysha: Yeah, am curious who all those jihadists in my circle are supposed to be . . .

Aysha: I decided only to answer that I do not support the violent jihad in any way.

Annelies and Martijn: While we found it difficult to take the whole affair seriously, we were also becoming increasingly concerned for Aysha’s safety. We were well aware that an *NRC* article would immediately be picked up by shockblogs, and its often aggressive publics. The journalist

sent his draft article to the PR department and our university's upper hierarchy became involved: Annelies was invited to visit the Rector. Perhaps this invitation should have alarmed us more than it did at the time. We were, however, far more concerned about the potential consequences for Aysha than about our employer. And we still simply could not believe that our carefully-worded three-page article could actually be read as a pro-jihadist text: . . .

15-12-16, 12:57 – Annelies Moors: so, now I am going to see the rector this afternoon . . .

15-12-16, 13:01 – Martijn de Koning: The rector??? Next, we will be invited for an audience with the pope . . .

15-12-16, 13:01 – Annelies Moors: Well, in this way you get to meet people

15-12-16, 13:08 – Aysha: Hahaha! In spite of my irritation, I have to laugh [. . .]

15-12-16, 13:11 – Aysha: I am flattered that he thinks that I am capable of misleading you both without any effort

15-12-16, 13:12 – Annelies Moors: We feel less flattered of course . . . 😊

15-12-16, 13:12 – Aysha: Yes, that is understandable 😊

15-12-16, 13:12 – Annelies Moors: We are depicted as a bunch of fools

15-12-16, 13:13 – Aysha: Yes that is a bit nasty of him 😊 I am really wondering which societal purpose is served by this

Annelies: So, I went to see the rector after having replied to the journalist. She had also invited the Dean. It was a very civil, friendly conversation. The Rector expressed her full confidence in me, and, just as importantly, appeared to understand and sympathise with my concerns about Aysha. She made a vague reference to the possibility of doing an audit if things got out of hand, which I had no problem with as long as it would be undertaken by auditors familiar with our field. The Dean seemed slightly less at ease and stressed that he would like to be kept informed about any developments in what had become 'our case', including my correspondence with the *NRC*. In the meantime, the journalist's attempt to disqualify our article with the editor of *Anthropology Today* failed. The editor simply pointed out that Aysha had stated that she did not support the violent jihad, that the article had been

peer-reviewed, and that maintaining interlocutors' anonymity is common practice in anthropological research.

Shortly before Christmas, we were informed that the *NRC* had postponed publication of the article, and Aysha gave birth to a son.

The whole episode had not yet reached the public eye, but the ways in which positionality was at stake had already become evident. From the start of the affair, the journalist had only focused on the private life of the junior researcher. He had consistently tried to push the seniors to distance themselves from the junior researcher. The seniors were at most collateral damage. Our university officials were very supportive, yet they were also concerned about reputation management. What would happen when this became a public affair?

Act III: Doing Serious Harm

In mid-January 2017, the journalist announced that his article would be published and, on 17 January, the *NRC* article was indeed published. With the headline 'Sister Aicha: Cyberjihadist and UvA-scientist' and pre-announced the day before as 'How cyberjihadists got to influence an academic study of IS', the three-page report with colour illustrations immediately sparked a huge amount of negative publicity. On the same day, the university issued our extensive response to the article online, adding at the bottom: 'To stimulate scientific debate about the methodology used in this research, the University of Amsterdam will invite external experts to reflect on this case'.⁶

18-01-17, 14:41 – Aysha: I am very shocked by his article, especially because he presents me as some kind of jihad recruiter and also tries to destroy you both completely [. . .]

18-01-17, 14:50 – Aysha: I find his statement very scary . . . Next thing, I will have youth services at the door . . .

18-01-17, 14:52 – Aysha: Or do I exaggerate a bit.⁷

⁶ Reactie UvA-onderzoeker op artikel 'NRC' (Reaction UvA-researcher on article 'NRC'), 17 January 2017. Available at <<https://www.uva.nl/content/nieuws/nieuwsberichten/2017/01/reactie-uva-op-artikel-nrc-handelsblad.html>> (last accessed 5 November 2019).

⁷ Aysha's concerns were by no means unfounded. Not long before, a couple from a nearby town had been accused of planning to travel to Syria, and their children had immediately been removed from their care. When it soon became clear that the suspicions were

As we had predicted, shockblogs such as *GeenStijl* attacked us as well as the university, while its English-language counterparts, such as Jihadwatch and Breitbart, also picked it up. We received personal hateemail.

Aysa: Most of my direct relatives did not read Kouwenhoven's article, because they read the regional newspaper and not the *NRC*. Many of them only knew about the publication when I told them about it. Their reaction was that these accusations could not possibly be true. Although my conversion to Islam had caused mixed feelings within my family, my relatives had immediately recognised that it did not change me as a person. Consequently, they were certain that I did not support the violent jihad. Unlike my mother, most of my relatives did not realise that the publication could have a hugely negative impact on my future career and, even worse, endanger my personal safety. They just regarded it as a tedious event. My mother was keenly aware of these effects and hence very worried about my well-being. Her concerns were all the more intense as I had given birth just one month before the publication.

Meanwhile, a host of parliamentary questions had been posed, raising aspects ranging from the validity of the research method, our interlocutors' presence in Syria and the potential use of our article in court cases to the name of one of our interlocutors and whether the response of the university had been adequate.⁸

We were still confident that once the focus shifted to the actual content of our article it would be evident to all that there simply was no case:

19-01-17, 01:45 – *Aysa:* I am really curious, the uva was also going to investigate the affair, right? That is, the research process

19-01-17, 01:46 – *Annelies Moors:* Yes, but it is still not clear how they will do that. It is very good that from the start we paid a lot of attention to ethical issues.

19-01-17, 01:47 – *Annelies Moors:* Is Ubaydah not asleep?

groundless, the children were returned. Available at <<https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/het-kalifaatgezin-uit-huizen-b27f8362/>> (last accessed 5 November 2019).

⁸ Rijksoverheid. Available at <<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2017/02/22/antwoorden-3-sets-kamervragen-inzake-jihadonderzoeker-uva>> (last accessed 5 November 2019).

19-01-17, 01:50 – Aysha: yes, he is.

No, eating 🍽️. But with closed eyes, so good hope that he will fall asleep quickly

What keeps you awake at this time?

19-01-17, 01:51 – Annelies Moors: Updating my email, all this stuff with the NRC takes a lot of time . . .

20-01-17, 17:20 – Annelies Moors: Hi Aysha, the NRC will not publish my letter to the editor . . . grgrgr

20-01-17, 17:32 – Aysha: Does not really surprise me

Annelies and Martijn: To our surprise, the *NRC* refused to publish our response to the article. The newspaper also completely disregarded the letter to the editor that Professor Thijl Sunier, who was completely misquoted in the article, had sent. There was no possibility of a rebuttal.

By then, the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR) had issued an official statement about the affair on its website, which ended as follows:

The AISSR, aiming to stimulate exploration of the quality, integrity and ethics of research, is organizing a ‘reflection-audit’ by external experts to broaden the discussion of the scientific integrity of this research project specifically, and on this kind of difficult-to-research topics in general. This specific case and the results of the reflection-audit will form the basis of a workshop on issues of transparency, personal bias, and ethics regarding anonymity and openness.⁹

The tremendous media attention and the large number of parliamentary questions had made a difference, as this was a substantial shift from the announcement of a few days earlier: the terms ‘audit’ and ‘integrity’ now replaced the ‘discussion’ about methodology.

Then, on 26 January 2017, Pieter Duisenberg, MP for the right-wing liberal party, joined the fray. To start a debate in Parliament, using our article as ‘a source of inspiration’, he raised the issue of ‘political homogeneity

⁹ The text has been removed from the university’s website, but can still be found at Archive.org: <https://web.archive.org/web/20190529204033/https://aissr.uva.nl/content/news/2017/01/discussing-integrity-and-ethics.html> (last accessed 8 March 2020).

at university’, pointing to his concerns about a lack of ‘diversity of views’: ‘Research such as about those ladies who are with IS and liked it very much there, that is all allowed.’ In one sentence, he both misrepresented the content of our article and argued that allowing such research was problematic, rather ironically packaging his complaints as a call to uphold the ‘diversity of views’:¹⁰

31-01-17, 16:52 – Aysha: Hallo both, how are you doing?

Sorry have not yet been able to view the documents to see if anything is missing. I am planning to do this . . .

Unfortunately things are not going so great at the moment. [. . .]

31-01-17, 16:57 – Annelies Moors: Don’t hesitate to ask for help in time [. . .]

31-01-17, 17:01 – Aysha: Yes, [. . .] they’re on top of it. That is good. The problem is that care providers seem obsessed with antidepressants. I would rather not have that, so I have to look for an alternative. Thank you for your words ❤️

By early February we, and Aysha in particular, had been heavily targeted by the media, both offline and online, by a wide range of influential actors. We had not realised how convincing the journalist’s presentation of the case could be to those who had not read our article. And hardly anyone read it, not even after it was made freely available via Open Access. Having provided an extensive response online, and having been denied an opportunity to respond in the *NRC*, we agreed with our PR department that we should not respond to each and every accusation. It seemed better to observe how the controversy would unfold.

Act IV: Publicly Pushing Back while under Investigation

The moment we decided that we needed to act publicly came when a journalist who worked for the right-wing weekly *Elsevier* used our case as the basis of a very negative column about our anthropology department:¹¹

¹⁰ Scienceguide: VVD wil onderzoek politieke voorkeur wetenschappers. Available at <<https://www.scienceguide.nl/2017/01/vvd-wil-onderzoek-politieke-voorkeur-wetenschappers/>> (last accessed 8 March 2020).

¹¹ Sterkenburg, N., Onder antropologen, *Elsevier*, 28 January 2017.

13 February 2017. E-mail Annelies to *Elsevier*, '[This journalist] wrote an excellent article on the Alt Right in the same issue. But how could she write such an abysmal text 'Amongst anthropologists'? [. . .] Copy-paste, no sources, pretending to have talked to people in person, a long list of inaccuracies . . . I attach our article as the author obviously did not read it'

Annelies: To my surprise it worked. The next issue of the magazine included both a rectification and my long letter to the editor, and it offered to do a 1,500-word interview about my life and work:¹²

24-02-17, 21:38 – Aysha: Good evening! How are you? [. . .] Annelies, good to see that your letter has been published, I think it is strong.

24-02-17, 21:41 – Annelies Moors: True, good that it is published, but it was a bizarre bad piece . . .

It was interesting that whereas the more liberal *NRC*, generally considered a 'quality daily', gave us no opportunity to respond, the more right-wing weekly *Elsevier* did. The next months became a rollercoaster. As our 'talking back' started to take effect, we were also confronted with new surprises.

Annelies: One of my colleagues invited me to do a guest lecture for our first-year anthropology students on methodology, ethics and valorisation. I agreed to do so, because if there was one group of people entitled to discuss the case with us, it was our own students:

10-03-17, 09:06 – Annelies Moors: The students were very open and interested, a relief, they asked open questions.

10-03-17, 09:09 – Aysha: hahaha yeah that is unique nowadays.

10-03-17, 09:09 – Annelies Moors: That is why it is really more important to spend time with students than with journalists . . .

But not all went well. We inadvertently discovered that on 14 March an assistant professor at another Dutch university had written a blogpost for *SHARIASource*, in which he claimed that the *NRC* had discovered that 'the research assistant was the owner of a Twitter account that appeared to support ISIS. This claim was neither confirmed nor denied by the researchers.'¹³

¹² The letter to the editor was published on 24 February, the interview on 1 August.

¹³ Originally posted at Shariasource blog: <<https://islamiclaw.blog/2017/03/14/the-ongoing-public-debate-on-islam-in-the-netherlands/>> (last accessed 8 March 2020).

This was outrageous. Aysha had never had a Twitter account, and even the *NRC* had included Aysha's statement that she was not a supporter of IS.

Annelies: This time with the support of our research director, I wrote a strongly worded complaint to the editor-in-chief of the *SHARIAsource* blog. Within a few days, the blog post was substantially revised, 'by the editors to correct factual errors'. Talking back seemed to work, but it was hugely time- and energy-consuming.

In the meantime, the auditors had appeared on the scene.

Annelies: I had been approached for an appointment with the auditors. After repeatedly requesting the university hierarchy, on 6 March, the evening before the appointment, I finally received the terms of the audit as well as the names of the auditors: one was a professor of medical ethics, the other a professor of culture and identity in Africa. Not really 'our field'.

We were unpleasantly surprised to learn what issues the audit was to discuss. Rather than focusing on our research methodology and the content of our article, it was to focus on the need to disclose researchers' political views in publications, including those held prior to commencing employment; on the permissibility of using anonymous sources; and on obligations to make data available in the interests of Open Science.

Annelies: Together with the fact that I was notified at extremely short notice and that I was told to come alone, the procedure began to feel more like a security interrogation than an academic investigation . . . The meeting with the auditors was, however, cordial. They stated their desire to have an open discussion, reassured me that no 'crazy stuff' would happen that would make us unhappy, and said we would have a conversation before publication of the report. Nonetheless, some of the questions they asked seemed odd, such as whether I knew who the researchers in my group were married to . . . Once again, I found it hard to take the questions seriously. Afterwards, we had a good laugh in the larger research group about my new responsibility of registering the nature and quality of intimate relationships, with someone jokingly raising the spectre of making a formal complaint against me for infringing on her rights to privacy . . .

Annelies: I approached the Dean to let him know that none of the researchers in my team recorded the names of their interlocutors, and once again reiterated our contractual obligations to maintain anonymity. While he

did not seem particularly interested to hear that, my comment that the whole thing seemed like a panic reaction led him to exclaim, 'What should we have done then, it was in the *NRC*!'

This made us realise again how much positionality mattered. Whereas no one in Aysha's circle read the *NRC*, it was easy to imagine how uncomfortable our university officials must have felt about the affair, especially when they were confronted about it by people from their own social circles, their colleagues at the university, and possibly officials from the ministry of education.

Martijn and Aysha were also invited to meet the auditors. Annelies decided to accompany Aysha. Although the conversations were once again civil, we all began to feel increasingly ill at ease, sensing that the auditors were on a fishing expedition.

Aysha: At one moment they referred to me as 'part of the community' (of our interlocutors). I felt very uncomfortable and immediately pointed out that I had never been part of any community of people intending to travel to jihadi held areas . . .

Then suddenly, in late May, the auditors became very interested in our research material. Whereas they had initially only asked for a list of the kinds of material we had ('we do not need to see it, just a list to get an idea'), they now wanted to see the material itself. Although that seemed to go well beyond the ambit of an academic reflection audit, we did not object.

Annelies: I had already provided them with a very detailed account of how we had worked. Then, on 23 May, they sent the secretary of the audit commission to my room to look at our material. I had printed out examples of different kinds of material, such as chats, weekly updates and profiles. She looked at them and we chatted a bit, then she left and came back again to tell me that the auditors wanted to take the material with them. I told her that they were welcome to have a look at it in my presence, but that under no circumstances would I hand over confidential material. A few days later I received an e-mail saying that this was not necessary.¹⁴

We were puzzled. Why this sudden interest in our material to the extent that they made the highly unusual request to take it away with them? Was

¹⁴ E-mail, 29 May 2017.

this on their own initiative or had other parties become interested in a short-cut to gain access to our material? We honestly do not know and probably never will.

As it turned out, responding to specific publics, whether *Elsevier* readers, our first-year students or *SHARIAsource*, was effective, even if it cost us a lot of time and energy. Our feelings about the audit were more ambivalent. We had been eager to participate, expecting to be given a chance to engage with an ‘audience’ familiar with our field – a chance to be heard. We were then taken aback when we learned what kinds of questions were to be discussed, but we were all too well aware that refusing to participate would be interpreted as having something to hide. At the same time, we were starting to become concerned about the silence of our university officials on issues that they could easily have clarified. That we were contractually obliged to refrain from registering the names of our interlocutors was well-known to them, but they did not publicly confirm it.

Act V: The Audit Report as a Public Document – and its Afterlife

Finally, on 12 June the draft audit report was completed and sent to Annelies to share confidentially with others, with a request for a response within two days . . .

13-06-17, 14:12 – Aysha: I find the way in which they describe the research process really a bit strange, I would have been working too much by myself? [. . .]

13-06-17, 22:11 – Aysha: Their conclusions etc. really surprise me

13-06-17, 22:12 – Annelies Moors: Us too, huge waste of time

13-06-17, 22:12 – Aysha: I had emphasised that I thought that we had really intensively analysed the material together

13-06-17, 22:13 – Aysha: It sometimes sounds as if I have been making it all up sitting in the attic, and then once in a while shared a result with you

. . .

13-06-17, 22:15 – Annelies Moors: If they had been more positive about us, they could have become targeted themselves by the NRC . . .

13-06-17, 22:16 – Aysha: I am curious what our journalist will do with such a report

13-06-17, 22:17 – Annelies Moors: We will cross that bridge when we get to it

Annelies: I confidentially shared the report with a few colleagues who were familiar with our kind of research or with issues of ethics and integrity, some of whom had also been interviewed by the auditors. They were unpleasantly surprised by what they read, and some of them communicated their concern to our research director.

In our response, we carefully pointed out the many factual mistakes, omissions, instances of suggestive language use, and the virtually total absence of our lines of argumentation, which made it impossible for readers to understand our motivations for our actions. On 21 June, we received the second version, which included some corrections but still had lots of old as well as some new problems. We responded quickly, but the report had already been sent to the board of the university. There was evidently no time for the discussion that had been previously promised:

26-06-17, 20:03 – Aysha: I am still astonished about their points of view, and, as you say, why is my background relevant and yours not? I would never expect people with their academic background to act like this. My bad.

26-06-17, 20:10 – Aysha: Yes, honestly, I am really stunned [. . .] During the conversation they acted like that, very understanding . . . and then when you read this, you wonder what has been the use of all those conversations and efforts (especially by Annelies and you)
[. . .]

26-06-17, 20:11 – Aysha: And then that piece about my career and safety being endangered, and then still putting ‘the blame’ for that on our actions

Annelies: I finally decided to seek legal advice. I approached our chief scientific integrity officer, and wrote a note to all parties involved that we did not consent to the publication of the report because of its substantial bias and factual mistakes, which would be harmful for us and create an unsafe working environment for our research group. The auditors did not respond and I never heard from them again. I was invited by the Dean and the research director, who both tried to convince me that the report was not harmful and

that it simply presented a difference of opinion in an open debate. What they seemed unwilling to admit was that this supposedly open debate was not taking place on a level playing field. The auditors were presented as a higher authority, as ‘external experts’, and the Board of the university had the power to decide whether to publish their report or not.

Martijn and Annelies: Then we were invited to meet the Rector. It was obvious that no one was pleased with the report. The university Board would not endorse the text, nor its recommendations. They would put it online (because they felt they had committed themselves to doing so), but would accompany it with a statement confirming that we had worked in accordance with ethics and integrity regulations, and they would also upload our response. This might sound like a reasonable course of action and may have been well-intended, but knowing the field, we immediately realised what would happen: the report would be used to disqualify our work and the university’s positive evaluation would be ignored. We suggested postponing publication in order to make time for a discussion with the auditors first, but that possibility was not entertained.

On 11 July, the reflection audit report went online, together with our response. After thanking the auditors, the university called for a critical discussion of the report’s recommendations, and ended with the university once more expressing their confidence in us.¹⁵ For the Board of the university, this was the end of the affair.

The next day, the *NRC* (more precisely, the very same journalist who had started the affair) wrote an article about the report under the heading ‘Advice to UvA: Improve research anthropologists’, focusing on the auditors’ assertion that researchers’ personal backgrounds can have an impact on research results. That we had worked according to the ethics and integrity regulations was not mentioned in his article.

Annelies: Very early that morning I received an e-mail from our research director with a link to the *NRC* article. His e-mail started with, fair enough: ‘I know you told me so.’ He also informed me that the published article was

¹⁵ Text available at Archive.org: <<https://web.archive.org/web/20190530050709/http://aissr.uva.nl/content/news/2017/07/research-audit.html>> (last accessed 8 March 2020).

an improved version of a far worse text that the journalist had sent him for comments.

We did not hear again from either the Dean or the Rector. As far as they were concerned, the case was closed. The interview with *Elsevier* was published a few weeks later. The journalist responsible had done a great job, dealing with 'our case' in a balanced way. It was very well received, and marked another turning point in the affair.

Martijn: That's not to say that we didn't face further problems. Two examples. When I was called as an expert witness in the trial against Laura H. (coincidentally the same case that was discussed in Kouwenhoven's first article on our research in July 2016) the prosecutor cited the audit report to disqualify my statements. And in the weeks preceding an Islamophobia conference I co-organised in September, online attempts were again made to discredit my work by trying to provoke the university or our funder (Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research) to respond. When these institutions did not respond (perhaps lessons had been learned by then) the agitation died down, but we did require extra security at the meeting.

Aysha: A few months later, I was with my family in the library, when a local police officer rang my husband up and asked him whether I could tell him more about the identity of our interlocutors. My husband explained that I could not because of the rules about maintaining anonymity. The police officer then tried to persuade him to probe me nonetheless, pointing out that his intention was to help the women concerned. My husband then told him to contact Annelies.

Annelies: No one contacted me.

Although our university had issued our critical response to the audit report online, we did not feel that our lines of argumentation had been heard. With the exception of a few comments made in private, no one in a position of authority ever acknowledged that anything had gone wrong. Hence, in our response to the audit we announced that we would start a small project, 'No escape: an auto-ethnography of the securitisation of academic research'.

Discussion: on 'Talking Back', Remaining Silent and Speaking Out

From the very beginning of the affair, we were forced to take part in a struggle over the framing of our case. By actively talking back, we attempted to

circumvent the ways in which we were addressed. When the media hype centred on the allegations that our junior researcher harboured pro-jihadist sympathies, we responded, first in private to the journalist and then publicly, by redirecting attention to the content of our article, puzzled that it could possibly be read as ‘pro-jihadist’. Throughout the affair we have consistently followed this line. We have very much welcomed questions about our methodology and the content, while firmly explaining our reasons for refusing to answer questions that infringed the right to privacy of fellow researchers (Moors 2019a).

We recognise that, in speaking back, we were not fully able to escape the terms by which we were addressed. This became evident when we included a statement in our first response that none of the three authors supported the violent jihad. Such an announcement is not without its problems. Condemning only Islamic State and those who fight for it implicitly means relegating the more than 14,000 torture victims of the Assad regime to a lower position in the ranks of victimhood. Should we not also have condemned the Assad regime? We did not provide such contextualisation because we knew that it could easily have been read as apologetic for Islamic State. Furthermore, we were also taken aback when we realised how the force of security discourse was present not only in our response, but also in that of our university. In her answer to one of the parliamentary questions, the Minister of Education had stated: ‘The University of Amsterdam has indicated to the Minister of Education, Culture and Science that it explicitly renounces statements that support the violent jihad, even if these have been made by its employees.’ We are not aware of any other case where a university board has made a public statement of that kind.

Nonetheless, our assertion that none of us supported the violent jihad was not only evidence that we had submitted to the discourse of security; it also was an attempt to subvert the terms by which we had been addressed. In our responses, we have always spoken as a collective voice, since all three of us were responsible for the article in *Anthropology Today*. This was diametrically opposed to how the journalist had operated. His main strategy had been to put the blame on the junior researcher, hoping that the seniors would distance themselves from her. In a similar vein, the auditors had tried to differentiate between the junior researcher and the seniors by stating in their

report that they were only concerned about how ‘the Muslim background’ of the junior researcher might have influenced the analysis. The seniors supposedly had no relevant backgrounds worthy of scrutiny. When we raised this issue, there was a substantial divide in the ways people responded. While other researchers in our field, especially those of Muslim background, immediately recognised the discriminatory nature of the distinction made, neither the auditors nor our university administrators seemed able to understand – or willing to admit – that singling out the Muslim researcher could possibly be considered problematic.¹⁶

Our early attempts to circumvent the ways in which we were addressed had little effect. We simply were not heard. This was partly because our text was only published on the university website, and therefore only reached a limited public, while the *NRC*’s refusal to publish our letter to the editor denied us access to the domain in which we were being spoken about. At the same time, at the onset of the affair, we also fell into silence because we were simply dumbstruck. We had found it hard to believe that the public would take the journalist’s story seriously and we were overwhelmed by the often aggressive reactions.

In hindsight, however, there was also a moment when we should have remained silent but did not do so. That was when we agreed to take part in the reflection audit. We should have realised that this exercise was doomed from the outset, not only because of the lack of checks and balances and the auditors’ lack of expertise in our field, but especially because of the nature of the questions posed, which simply followed the accusations of the *NRC*. We should have done no more than issue a formal statement that investigating the political activities of co-authors is not only unethical, but within hierarchical employment relations also possibly illegal, and that registering the official names of our interlocutors would have meant a breach of contract. And we should have left it at that. But instead we participated, believing that the audit was intended to provide an opportunity for a serious discussion of our article’s content and our research methods and ethics. Moreover, we

¹⁶ Didier Fassin (2011: 420) notes a similar divide with respect to the reception of stories of racial discrimination.

feared that remaining silent could easily have been read as unwillingness to defend our research, our department and our discipline.

In short, we allowed ourselves to become part of a public performance in a theatrical setting, perhaps best described as a theatre of the absurd. In our responses, we have consistently stated the negative consequences of publicly investigating the personal backgrounds of researchers. We tried to shift the focus to the research itself, to how we had worked and to the content of the text that we had published. But neither the *NRC* nor the auditors were willing to engage in such a rational discussion about content. It was an affair in which affect ruled and in which anti-Muslim sentiments had become normalised, among many publics, including academia. We were caught in a combination of a generalised repulsion vis-à-vis our interlocutors and a strong sense of distrust vis-à-vis us as researchers, in particular the junior Muslim researcher. And we had not realised that we were up against strong institutional forces. Under pressure from growing competition from other media, especially online formats, the *NRC* was in dire need of clicks and likes. Hence its editorial board favoured a sensationalising article that framed our work as a contribution to 'Cyberjihadism' over the earlier more accurate draft article. At the same time, universities, governed according to the rules of new public management and its celebration of the market, were in competition with each other for students and funding, as a result of which they had become increasingly sensitive to external pressure and the dictates of reputation management.

In retrospect, it is hardly surprising, then, that it was hard to be heard in a setting in which the force of the discourses of security and radicalisation was so strong. Yet, gradually, through our addressing various sub-publics, our perseverance had some effect. It was helpful that a report by the Review Committee on the Intelligence and Security Services (CTIVD) criticised the AIVD and confirmed our analysis.¹⁷ The interview in *Elsevier* was the first the paper had ever conducted with an anthropologist, and it was very successful. When we published an updated version of our *Anthropology Today* article in a Dutch popular-scientific journal, including some of the chats, there was

¹⁷ De wetenschap, de NRC, en de veiligheidsdiensten, CLOSER, <<http://religionresearch.org/closer/2018/05/31/de-wetenschap-de-nrc-en-de-veiligheidsdiensten/>> (last accessed 5 November 2019).

no negative response at all (Navest et al. 2018). We have since been invited to speak at conferences and to publish about our case. We also managed to spark a highly productive discussion about ethics in anthropological research and beyond, which led to the publication of guidelines for anthropological research (de Koning et al. 2019).¹⁸ Ultimately, then, we have been able to circumvent the terms by which we were addressed, and have been able to effectively ‘turn the tables’. We still work together as a team and continue our WhatsApp group. Yet harm has been done, especially to the junior researcher, and it has become painfully clear to us that we cannot assume that our institutions will support us when needed.

References

- Bracke, Sarah (2011), ‘Subjects of Debate: Secular and Sexual Exceptionalism, and Muslim Women in the Netherlands’, *Feminist Review*, 98: 1, 28–46.
- Bracke, Sarah (2013), ‘Transformations of the Secular and the “Muslim Question”. Revisiting the Historical Coincidence of Depillarisation and the Institutionalisation of Islam in The Netherlands’, *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, 2: 2, 208–26.
- Butler, Judith (1997), *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative*, New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith (2009), *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, London: Verso.
- Crawley, Sara L. (2012), ‘Autoethnography as Feminist Self-Interview’, in Jaber F. Gubrium, James A. Holstein, Amir B. Marvasti and Karyn D. McKinney (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft*, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 143–61.
- Es, Margaretha A. van (2019), ‘Muslim Women as “Ambassadors” of Islam: Breaking Stereotypes in Everyday Life’, *Identities*, 26: 4, 375–92.
- Fadil, Nadia, Martijn de Koning and Francesco Ragazzi (2019), *Radicalization in Belgium and the Netherlands – Critical Perspectives on Violence and Security*, London: I. B. Tauris/Bloomsbury.
- Fassin, Didier (2011), ‘Racialization: How to Do Races With Bodies’, in Frances E. Mascia-Lees (ed.), *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment*, London: Wiley-Blackwell, 419–34.

¹⁸ AISSR: Discussing ethics and integrity: anthropological dilemmas. <<https://aissr.uva.nl/content/events/events/2018/01/discussing-ethics-and-integrity.html>> (last accessed 5 November 2019).

- Harding, Susan (1991), 'Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other', *Social Research*, 58: 2, 373–94.
- hooks, bell (1986), 'Talking Back', *Discourse*, 8, 123–8.
- Koning, Martijn de, Edien Bartels and Daniëlle Koning (2011), 'Claiming the Researcher's Identity: Anthropological Research and Political Religion', *Fieldwork in Religion*, 6: 2, 168–86.
- Koning, Martijn de, Birgit Meyer, Annelies Moors and Peter Pels (2019), 'Guidelines for Anthropological Research: Data Management, Ethics, and Integrity', *Ethnography*, 20: 2, 170–4.
- Larkin, Brian (2014), 'Techniques of Inattention: The Mediality of Loudspeakers in Nigeria', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 87: 4, 989–1,015.
- Moors, Annelies (2014), 'Face Veiling in the Netherlands: Public Debates and Women's Narratives', in Eva Brems (ed.), *The Experiences of Face Veil Wearers in Europe and the Law*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 19–42.
- Moors, Annelies (2019a), 'No Escape: The Force of the Security Frame in Academia and Beyond', in Nadia Fadil, Martijn de Koning and Francesco Ragazzi (eds), *Radicalization in Belgium and the Netherlands – Critical Perspectives on Violence and Security*, London: I. B. Tauris/Bloomsbury, 245–59.
- Moors, Annelies (2019b), 'The Trouble with Transparency: Reconnecting Ethics, Integrity, Epistemology, and Power', *Ethnography*, 20: 2, 149–69.
- Moors, Annelies and Martijn de Koning (2018), 'Jihadisme aan de Amstel?', *Sociologisch Magazine*, 2, 24–6.
- Navest, Ayesha, Martijn de Koning and Annelies Moors (2016), 'Chatting about Marriage with Female Migrants to Syria: Agency Beyond the Victim Versus Activist Paradigm', *Anthropology Today*, 32: 2, 22–5.
- Navest, Ayesha, Martijn de Koning and Annelies Moors (2018), 'Jihadbruiden? Hoe Nederlandstalige uitreizigsters naar Syrië trouwen', *Zemzem*, 14: 2, 148–58, <<https://www.zemzemtijdschrift.nl/node/136>> (last accessed 5 November 2019).
- Schmidt, Garbi (2017), 'Doing Research in a Politicized Field and Surviving It: Lessons Learned from the Field of Migration', in Synnøve Bendixsen and Tone Bringa (eds), *Engaged Anthropology: The Scandinavian View*, London: Palgrave, 61–77.
- Wright, Susan (1998), 'The Politicization of "Culture"', *Anthropology Today*, 14: 1, 7–15.