



## On Data, Methods & Methodology: An Interview with Elke Evrard

*By Robin Mattheeuws*

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To introduce the subject, Data, Methods, and Methodology, I am joined by Elke Evrard. She is a researcher at the UGent Human Rights Centre. There, she contributes to 'Justice Visions', a project focused on better modelling the effects of victim participation in transitional justice. Elke specializes in the use of mixed methods and bridging the gap between qualitative and quantitative data analysis.

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*So Elke, unlike in the other thematic streams, the link between data, methods & methodology and human rights does not seem as clear to me. How do methodological and epistemological approaches and choices affect human rights research? In other words, why do methods matter?*

Thank you, Robin, for introducing me and for this first question. What stands out to me and why I'm so interested in this thematic is that our epistemological and our methodological choices, research choices, what we sometimes call methods, they significantly impact or shape the way that we measure, interpret, and understand human rights issues. It's typically said that the qualitative approaches, that they provide a deeper and more contextualized insight into individuals' or groups' experiences, while the quantitative approaches offer statistical insights into patterns and trends.

But the implications and also the differences do run much deeper than this. There's a very interesting review article by Hafner-Burton and Ron, who've written on this topic. They asked: "What does the research evidence tell us about the positive impact of international human rights instruments across the world?" What they found, interestingly, was that the answer was actually very much connected to the choice of research methodology and that those working in the more established case study research, for example, were more optimistic, while those who were working in the quantitative tradition were much more sceptical on the impact of human rights instruments and norms.

Those authors also elaborated on a range of reasons for what they call this double vision. They found that these reasons are connected to differing worldviews, to different logics, to different notions of causality, to different sampling techniques, and so on. Perhaps not so surprisingly, they argued that human rights research and impact research in particular, would substantially advance if researchers working in these different

methodological traditions engage in productive conversation, if they draw on the strengths and tools that they each has to offer. Of course, mixed method research is the culmination of that conversation.

*Very well. One of the more hard sciences is statistical analysis. How does is it incorporated in human rights research?*

I think that statistical analysis plays a very crucial role in human rights research because it provides a quantitative framework for analysing patterns, trends, and correlations within large data sets. By doing so, it can help to establish the prevalence of human rights violations and also disparities across different groups or regions. In my particular field of work, in the field of transitional justice, it's incredibly important for mechanisms like a truth commission, for example, to uncover the systematic nature and the scope of different types of rights violations and for producing a more comprehensive understanding of what happened, to who did this happen, and by whom?

You often see that these kinds of mechanisms will develop very sophisticated databases and statistical analyses for processing and interpreting the thousands of statements or testimonies that they collect, which can also serve a very important purpose for the prosecution of perpetrators, for example. And more generally as well, in the domain of human rights, statistical analysis contributes to evidence-based advocacy and policymaking.

That being said, there is, of course, great value and also a necessity to complement this big picture with a rich and deeply contextual understanding of the ways in which individuals and groups experience and interpret these violations of their rights, how they see and feel the impact thereof in their lives, and their priorities and their different modes of agency in addressing the consequences and in striving for different measures of justice or defence.

*'Justice Visions' brings together a variety of different researchers, all from different fields. How has this interdisciplinarity affected your view of human rights research, and vice versa, how has your expertise in the field of data analysis influenced the approach of your colleagues?*

I think the interdisciplinary of the team has created opportunities for collaboration that expanded the kinds of questions we could ask, that broadened the ways we went about gathering data and insights, and also the diversity of the results that emerged. Our team involves legal scholars who are very knowledgeable in doctrinal analysis, in reading the law, analysing the mandates of legal mechanisms - while other team members like myself, are rather trained as social and political scientists, and have this background in empirical research, in collecting data with people for understanding how law functions in society. We even have a colleague, who – she could not join us today, but she shared some insights for some of the questions later on in the interview – she's actually trained in arts as a designer.

This, of course, opened up completely new perspectives for the way in which we think about gathering data in empirical research. I think generally the interdisciplinary of the team, it really encouraged a more holistic approach to what are very complex societal problems. An approach that fostered curiosity, plurality, and also innovation in research methodologies that were adopted. That's not to say that working with an interdisciplinary team is not without challenges.

We did see that sometimes we lack a common knowledge base or even a common language to talk about certain concepts, certain ideas, certain things that we saw or witnessed in the field. We were at times also a bit sceptical or even critical of each other's approach and how it fits within our own worldviews, with our assumptions, sometimes even with our values. In that sense, there's also a very critical component to interdisciplinary work where we challenge dominant approaches to knowledge creation and to knowledge sharing. I consider that a very valuable, though not always easy process.

*As you touched upon earlier, a couple of minutes ago, choosing a different method can result in a very different end result. How do you decide what methodology suits best for a certain group of people? Is, for example, quantitative research, always necessary?*

That's an interesting question, and I'll start by saying that the choice of methodology depends on many parameters. I think in the first place, it depends on the research question. Are we looking to describe? Are we looking to prove some causal link and so on? But of course, it's also influenced by the context and it's influenced by the people involved in the study.

Certainly, I think working in post-conflict settings or in other settings where we've seen widespread rights violations with groups who are potentially vulnerable or historically marginalized, this raises a lot of important ethical questions that also shape the methodological choices of the research. It can lead, for example, to choose for a qualitative and participatory research approach that recognizes the agency and the voice of victims and seeks to align the research much more closely with their needs and their priorities.

On the other hand, it can also be difficult, dangerous, sometimes even impossible to access certain research settings, which can prompt other solutions like desk-based research, like the use of secondary or publicly available data or archives, and those may lend themselves very well to quantitative data mining approaches, just to give an example. On the condition, of course, that the ethical risks and the risk mitigation strategies are very carefully considered when using such approaches.

In summary, the decision should be context specific. It should consider ethical risks and risk mitigation strategies. It should be culturally sensitive, but it's certainly and maybe in the first place, also shaped by the particular questions and goals of research.

*When you are combining this quantitative information with qualitative insights, how do you unite possible inconsistencies between the two streams of information?*

So in that sense, when we're looking at mixed methods work, different research designs propose different approaches to integrating the data, i.e. when data is integrated, how it's integrated, what approach is used for combining those findings from qualitative and quantitative streams.

A very typical, or perhaps the most common approach is through triangulation, where the purpose is to compare the findings from the different methods to look for complementarity and convergence. How can findings help to explain the larger phenomenon? So how can this combination or integration of qual and quant insights explain the larger phenomena that we're looking at? But the process can actually also lay bare contradictions and tensions that mark the domain of human rights. And it's not always possible, or not even the objective *per se*, to unite or to reconcile, but also to reflect on what these inconsistencies can tell us about the field, what the reasons are for those inconsistencies and what they tell us in terms of the holistic responses that are needed to respond to human rights issues and questions.

*Since the 1990s, there's been a growing popularity in emancipatory and participatory research methods. Why and how has this transformed the practice of field work?*

So what is very typical for these more emancipatory or participatory research methods is how they prioritize the involvement of the research communities in the research process. And I think this shift or this trend, it reflects a desire to contribute to empowering what are often marginalized groups rather than them just being, let's say, objects of the study, rather than being people who are studied in contexts that researchers go to for collecting or sometimes even extracting data. The idea is to allow these communities instead to really shape the research agenda. In addition to sharing their perspectives, they should actively participate in the decision-making that shapes the contours of how the research takes place. And it is hoped that this kind of transformation, that it fosters a more ethical and inclusive way of doing research and that it can ensure that the outcomes are not just scientifically valid and useful and sound, but that they're also relevant and beneficial to the community involved.

*The performative approach gives an implicit signal to people that they may not be suited for a full, verbally conducted study. This, in turn, can come over as condescending behaviour from the researcher's part. How do you prevent this feeling from developing or how do you deal with it if it has manifested itself?*

That's a very relevant question that also challenges, maybe, some of these more participatory or performative approaches. But I think talking with Sofie, my colleague, who's used this approach of performative ethnography in her work together with her research participants, that for her, it's actually a bit the other way around. In the

sense that it can be quite condescending to impose our ways of thinking, our ways of gathering data on the people who participate in our research.

And the reason to also resort to more nonverbal ways is not because research participants are limited or are not deemed capable of this verbal communication. But rather that the performative aspect enables possibilities to express in different ways. For example, ways that also encompass emotion and less linear ways of thinking and being, that engender a slower reflection and more indirect form of communication. And this can also reduce somewhat the distance between the 'outsider' researcher and the 'insider' participant by building on a common interest or a common talent and a common practice, a common performance that gives rise to much less stark power differences between the researcher and the researcher participant.

Also, we don't necessarily separate the verbal from the nonverbal. At the same time, this performative way of doing research – in the case of my colleague, this practice of embroidering together – also invites verbal reactions, verbal comments, verbal communication... so it's a bit of an interplay of the verbal and the nonverbal. And this creates much more natural or spontaneous ways of conversing that allow for different insights, often more bottom-up, everyday or lived insights to emerge which are much more difficult to access through our classic or typical way of interviewing or gathering data.

*The next question might be one you've gotten asked many times as a data scientist. Can artificial intelligence, by being able to analyse large swaths of data or even oral meetings, can that play a prominent factor in the future of quantitative research?*

As we see in any field of research today, artificial intelligence has the potential to really revolutionize quantitative research by adding much efficiency, for analysing very large data sets and for extracting meaningful patterns in ways that haven't been possible up until now.

It can enhance the speed or accuracy of data analysis, the complexity of the relationships that we're able to identify and contribute to that idea that I talked about before – of evidence based decision-making in human rights research. That being said, AI introduces a complex web of ethical considerations, questions about transparency, questions on whether this is compatible with a human rights approach to research, questions on the role of the researcher in that process, which are going to be crucial in order to understand how we can responsibly use artificial intelligence.

It can also be a dangerous development. In the sense that not only scholars and certainly not only human rights scholars now have access to these methods. Also, authoritarian regimes, for example, can very well use AI, for example, for widespread surveillance. It's a question that throws up so many dilemma's both on the possibilities but also on the dangers and limitations of what AI will mean for our fields. And we do have actually an entire team of researchers here at the Human Rights Centre, who work on this notion of human rights and digital technologies and who have much more expertise on this topic.

*If the future of conducting fieldwork lies in partially using skilled methods or artistic methods like theatre, pottery making or embroidery... does that automatically mean that the researcher has to upgrade their skill set?*

So I was giving the example of my colleague, who indeed studied design herself, who is quite talented when it comes to embroidery and who used this practice of embroidery as a way of doing research together with her research participants. And I do think that it's maybe the essence of interdisciplinarity that we are open to learning new skills, that we are open to new ways of working, and in fact that this is part of the process and that there is value in learning from your research participants... learning as part or throughout the performative research practice.

And that offers very interesting opportunities for a complete reversal of positionality in terms of who knows and who is the expert. So Sofie often said that she was learning as much from the women she was doing research with, as she was creating new knowledge through these practices. And it can give entirely new dynamics to the research. At the same time, it adds a whole new layer of complexity, this notion of the performative or the artistic skill.

It requires time, it requires resources, it requires being present. Sometimes it can also limit the scope and size of the research, like the number of people that you can involve in the research and this very deep contextual reality of the practices that you're engaging in. So it opens up, I think, new horizons, but it also comes with an added layer of complexity that makes it time- and resource-intensive as a way of doing research.

*So I'd like to thank you for your time and good luck with the conference.*

Thank you so much.