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Putting It on the Line: Social Justice Frameworks for Human Rights Fieldwork (abstract)

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The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy

2015 Conference of the University of Dayton Human Rights Center

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Research Panel: Case Studies in Human Rights Activism

Presenter: Michael Loadenthal

Title: “Putting it on the line: Social Justice Frameworks for Human Rights Fieldwork”

Abstract: Research methodology is often understood as a dry, sterile arena of IRB forms and transcription. While this is a common portrayal, things get a fair bit livelier when our field work runs amuck of extrajudicial assassinations, police infiltration and academic isolationism. Investigating social movements and individual respondents who are actively engaged in criminality presents challenging dilemmas to researchers attempting to gain respondent trust while simultaneously avoid repressive State security forces. In this discussion, I will examine two venues in which this difficult navigation surfaced: ethnographically investigating Palestinian armed fighters (Nablus: 2006-2007), and interviewing clandestine Animal Liberation Front (ALF) activists (UK: 2009- 2010).

In both situations, respondents sought to remain “underground” while simultaneously providing rich analytical data. While the Palestinian fieldwork involved incidents of direct violence with military, police, and intelligence forces (including my eventual deportation), complexities emerged when Israeli ‘terrorist amnesty’ policies changed the State’s recognition of respondents—allowing yesterday’s terrorist to become tomorrow’s civil servant. For the UK, the challenge was different, as international efforts to produce arrests within the ALF network has forced numerous academics engaged in such inquiries to appear on Grand Juries or face jail time. These two research projects have presented divergent, yet intersectional concerns regarding not only the safety of the researcher, but also of the respondents.

To this end we will examine two central questions: 1.) What is the role of the human rights researcher in protecting respondents’ anonymity, and 2.) To what degree can we oppose State repression whilst remaining academically viable?

Keywords: research ethics, activist academic, social movements, non-state actors, methodology

Biography: Michael Loadenthal is a doctoral candidate at the School for Conflict Analysis & Resolution, George Mason University (Arlington, VA), and a multi-school adjunct professor focusing on terrorism, social movements and other forms of political violence. He is a Practitioner in Residence at Georgetown University’s Center for Social Justice where he has also taught courses for the last five years. He also works as a Social Justice Fellow at the Center for the Study of Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems. His work has been published in *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, the *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, *Journal of Radical Criminology*, *Journal of Applied Security Research* and many others. Michael has actively organized alongside a variety of social movements around the world, and currently resides in Cincinnati, Ohio. He freely publishes his work at: <https://gmu.academia.edu/MichaelLoadenthal>