Engaging Ethnographic Peace Research: Exploring an Approach

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As has been thoroughly rehearsed in the literature, the failures of the liberal peace model of post-conflict intervention have given rise to a "local turn" in peace research.[1] This in turn has refocused attention away from the motivations and practices of international actors towards local ownership and 'buy-in', and the importance of culture, context, and 'the Everyday'. There is a mismatch, however, between the methodological skills among peace researchers today, and the new imperative to explore local and everyday understandings, perceptions, and experiences of conflict, transition, and peace. For this reason a number of scholars have recently emphasized the importance of incorporating ethnographic methods and an anthropological imagination into peace research. However, at this point, and as evidenced in the contributions to this special issue, there are many challenges to such incorporation which must be acknowledge and addressed if the ethnographic approach is to fulfil its early promise to add empirical substance to the local turn. The contributing authors each address different challenges to conducting Ethnographic Peace Research (EPR) in post-conflict contexts and, as this introduction argues, they evidence clearly the variety of questions yet to be answered while suggesting different ways ethnographic approaches can be incorporated into peace research.

Introduction

There are few today who doubt the failures of the "peace industry" to successfully establish sustainable peace in a variety of post-conflict contexts.[2] The "liberal peace" model has been roundly criticised as overly technocratic and disconnected from the needs of local people in post-conflict settings.[3] There is little doubt today that post-conflict interventions for the purpose of building peace require some engagement with "the local". Most scholars recognize therefore that, at a bare minimum, knowledge of the sub-national context is necessary for the design, planning, and eventual implementation of peace interventions. However, going beyond this minimum, others would argue that successful peacebuilding will require engaging with, consulting, incorporating, or even empowering local actors and institutions within that context,[4] while still others may call for international actors to actually withdraw to a great degree from such processes, serving more as

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[1] Paffenholz, "Unpacking the Local"; Hughes, Öjendal and Schierenbeck, "Struggle".
[2] Mac Ginty, "Routine Peace," 289.
[3] Mac Ginty, "Hybrid Peace"; Millar, "Local Experiences of Justice"; Autesserre, *Peaceland*.
[4] Mac Ginty and Richmond, "Local Turn," 770.

supporters and facilitators of a locally driven peace.[5] This turn to the local has inspired substantial reflection in the field and how we should define, research, and engage with the local are still open questions.[6] One suggestion, however, has been that a turn to ethnographic methods can provide some leverage on these questions.[7]

As I describe in my contribution to this Special Issue, such an approach has substantial precedent in the field of Anthropology. Many anthropologists have examined the dynamics of conflict and violence,[8] as well as local and community experiences of post-conflict transition and peace.[9] Such work has illustrated the value of ethnographic methods in understanding the everyday experiences of conflict and post-conflict dynamics and, perhaps more importantly, the diversity and intricacy of those experiences across contexts and cultures. However, as Bräuchler notes, what she terms the "cultural turn" in peace and conflict studies has so far been dominated by scholars of political science, international relations, and legal studies who are largely unaware of the theoretical depth and conceptual nuance of either "culture" or "the local" as they have developed within the field of Anthropology.[10] She argues, in short, that scholars working within these disciplines are unprepared theoretically to engage in ethnographic research. I have further noted in earlier work that these same disciplines (to which I would add also the discipline of economics), are also those in which "extended fieldwork has not traditionally been considered necessary in order to understand a problem even if that problem is located in societies and cultures wholly unlike those of the researcher".[11] Together, therefore, these contributions highlighted the conceptual and methodological unpreparedness to engage with "the local" via ethnographic methods among the great majority of peace researchers today.

It was partly in response to this challenge that I initiated the Ethnographic Peace Research (EPR) project in late 2015, and encouraged active peace scholars to submit papers which would illustrate, promote, or question the use of ethnographic methods in Peace Research. The goal was to solicit contributions from scholars from across the disciplinary spectrum who self-identified as already engaged in EPR and who could, therefore, address questions regarding the strengths, challenges, and ethics of the 'ethnographic turn'. The articles included in this Special Issue, as well as chapters already published in a recent edited volume,[12] were submitted in response to this initial call and certainly do take some tentative initial steps towards answering these question. However, addressing the strengths, challenges, and ethics of an EPR approach has turned out to be more

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[5] Ali and Matthews, "Durable Peace," 408.
[6] Paffenholz, "Unpacking the Local"; Hughes, Öjendal and Schierenbeck, "Struggle"; Randazzo, "Paradoxes of the Everyday".
[7] Mac Ginty and Richmond, "Fallacy," 5.
[8] Richards, *Fighting*; Nordstrom, *Shadows*; de Waal, *Real Politics*.
[9] Das, *Life and Words*; Honwana, *Child Soldiers*; Theidon, *Intimate Enemies*.
[10] Bräuchler, *Cultural Dimension*.
[11] Millar, *Ethnographic Approach*, 135.
[12] Millar, *Ethnographic Peace Research*.

difficult than initially considered. Indeed, the sub-title of the edited volume slowly morphed from "Strengths, Challenges, and Ethics" to "Approaches and Tensions" as it became clear that thinking about, designing and deploying ethnographic methods for peace research proved to be a contentious undertaking, sparking tensions between Anthropologists and non-Anthropologists involved in the project.[13] The contributions to this Special Issue evidence some similar tensions, while also unearthing others. However, I argue here that it is exactly the work of uncovering and exploring these tensions which will help develop and consolidate a robust EPR agenda.

Engaging Ethnographic Peace Research

I use the term "engaging" in the title of this introduction specifically because it can have two meanings. It can refer to the manner in which the contributing scholars engaged in the practice of ethnographic research (how they each collected their data), as well as to the manner in which they engage with the ideas which underpin the approach (how they then think about how they collected their data). The five articles evince some diversity of practice, which contributes, in turn, to varied reflections on the strengths and limitations of the approach. My own contribution to this special issue was initiated by the need I felt to more fully examine the difference between the way I have been thinking about EPR (which to me has always demanded long-term engagement with the local context and people) and the kind of processes I often see labelled as "ethnographic" (which often consists of interviews conducted during a few short weeks of "fieldwork"). The problem with the latter, I argue in my article, is that the researcher does not gain a deep enough knowledge of the local sociocultural context during such short trips, which, in turn, hinders their ability to ask appropriate questions or interpret the answers they receive. I argue that it is "only with sufficient time in the setting that the researcher can come to understand the situated concepts which underpin experiences of conflict, transition, and peace in post-conflict societies" and an understanding of exactly these concepts is necessary to "assess both local expectations for and the local experiences of peace intervention". The article first provides a brief discussion of the local turn in peace research, and then a short review of Anthropological contributions regarding the dynamics of conflict, post-conflict recovery and peace. It then then turns to a discussion of the three key benefits of long-term fieldwork, which set EPR as I define it (as requiring such long-term engagement) apart from purely short-term "field-trip" based interview research. Based on reflections from more than 19 months of fieldwork over two projects,[14] I describe these varied benefits under the headings of time, chance and change.

Each of these benefits is illustrated with a few examples. The benefits of time are illustrated with examples of the greater amount of knowledge regarding and engagement with the people and communities I was studying, as well as the methodological value gained via second translations of my

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[13] Ibid, 261-265.
[14] Millar, "Between Western Theory"; Millar, "Expectations and Experiences"; Millar, "Investing in Peace"; Millar, "Local Experiences of Liberal".

interviews which revealed new and important data but would have been impossible without sufficient time, and of the evolution of my research methodology generally over the course of my fieldwork. The benefits of serendipity, or chance, are also clearly related to additional time in the field, I argue, and can be seen in the increasing likelihood that anyone spending substantial time in a setting will be more likely to interact with a more varied array of actors and institutions, and to experience all of the good and the bad that might befall one in that society; from medical emergencies to security problems. As I argue in the article, those in country for only a few weeks and staying in high-end hotels, travelling in air-conditioned vehicles, and interviewing fellow elites will have little chance to experience the serendipitous events that provide so much insight into the daily struggles of average people in transitional societies. Finally, the benefits of change are illustrated both by the added insight into local socioeconomic and political dynamics evidenced by the changes between my first period of fieldwork in 2008/2009 and my return for a second project in 2012. Over this time the economic and social situation in and around the northern Sierra Leonean town of Makeni where I conduct my research – and the engagement by external actors in this setting – changed substantially and altered the local understandings, perceptions, and experiences of international interventions. I argue in my contribution, therefore, that there are insights to be gained by long-term EPR which are not accessible by those utilizing more short-term interview based methodologies.

As reported in their respective contributions, both Williams and Hennings conducted such long-term projects in the post-conflict context of Cambodia, and both even sampled from and interviewed former members of the Khmer Rouge during their fieldwork. However, the actual methodological processes they followed were quite distinct. The focus of their studies led them to sample their interlocutors in different ways, from different regions, and for the purpose of asking quite different questions. Williams was specifically focusing on the motivations which lead actors to participate in genocide, and sought to collect data among former Khmer Rouge cadres to test a framework for understanding such motivations which he calls the "complexity of evil" model. Hennings' study, on the other hand, was more focused on the present and the "micro-politics of contestation against land grabbing in post-conflict settings and its potential repercussions on conflict transformation". As such, while both studies examine sensitive topics, they required different methodologies of data collection and generated different forms of tension.

Williams' research question required him to focus particularly on non-elite former perpetrators and their understandings of and their motivations for supporting Democratic Kampuchea (the name given to Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge at the time). As his article outlines, his research process, while distinct from traditional notions of Anthropological fieldwork, nonetheless sought to uncover the deeply contextualized motivations of non-elite actors for participation in collective violence. As such, he faced a number of substantial challenges, including: 1) the difficulty of identifying former cadres to speak to, as in some areas of the country there are few social networks of such former combatants; 2) the problem of overcoming the tendency for former combatants to "avoid honest

responses" in order to "dissociate themselves" from their previous actions; 3) the potential stigmatization of participants who might be identified by their new communities due to their participation in the research; 4) ethical concerns about what to do with any potentially incriminating evidence that might be uncovered during the research, and; 5) the problem of framing former combatants inherently as perpetrators within the context of the project while they predominantly saw themselves as victims.

Given these specific challenges, the principle argument forwarded by Williams' in his article is that more traditionally Anthropological fieldwork based on long-term residence and embeddedness within a single community would have been less useful than the less embedded process of repeat visits to various communities and interviews with specific individuals which he chose to deploy. While Williams recognizes that the traditional embeddedness of long-term fieldwork can provide for rich insights into the local context, he also argues that it would contribute to the risk of exposing his interviewees to stigmatization within the community. As his interviewees were not all located in "stronghold" communities where most people were supporters of the Khmer Rouge, but in more diverse communities, long-term embeddedness would mean that many more people would know the purpose of his research and therefore that his interlocutors were former low-level Khmer Rouge cadres. Williams argues, therefore, that while a less embedded process certainly has some weaknesses – it does not, for example, allow a researcher "to trace specific networks in one location or build up one local history" – it did allow him to explore his research question with a diverse array of former perpetrators over his six months of fieldwork while avoiding the challenges of exposure and self-incrimination that might have faced interlocutors during a more embedded process.

Although set in the same country and engaging with members of the same former armed group, Hennings study is quite different in that it focuses not on motivations for past membership and violence, but on the potential repercussions for the post-conflict stability of a very contemporary problem. Specifically, her study sought to explore the opinions about and reactions to land-grabbing among former Khmer Rouge cadres (both low and high level) and thus to use this "emphasis on ex-combatants" … "as a lens to uncover potential risks of land grabbing for peace and stability in post-conflict environments". As a result, this research focus led to a more methodologically diverse approach to ethnography. Hennings describes her "methods repertoire" as including non-structured interviews, dialogues, informal discussions, and participatory observation with staff of specific non-governmental organizations and the UN as well as monks, officials, activists, and communities affected by land grabbing. While Williams largely conducted life-history interviews with his interlocutors to explore their motivations for past actions, Hennings was using this more diverse array of methods to focus on the "motivations and strategies of everyday resistance, overt advocacy politics, and official resistance", which reminds us that all such methodological choices must reflect the phenomena under study. Like Williams, however, Hennings also notes the challenges inherent in such research and her article echoes his concern with the micro-social context of identifying and

approaching interlocutors. However, to Hennings, who focused more of her time and effort over 12 months of fieldwork in the "stronghold" communities, spending substantial time in the communities to develop trust and rapport was "pivotal both to identify and access ex-combatants"; the direct inverse of Williams' response.

While a substantial contribution of her article focuses on the importance of focusing on these micro-dynamics of building trust in post-conflict research, including reflections on her own positionality as a young, white, female scholar, Hennings also discusses the more practical challenges of researching a sensitive political topic in a post-conflict environment. She describes the travel times associated with avoiding exclusion zones due to mines or military checkpoints, having to change plans at the last minute due to the security concerns of her interlocutors, and the problematic dynamics of doing research "under-the-radar" which led her to sometimes feel rushed and threatened. In addition, she provides an extremely interesting discussion of the role of and the trials faced by her research assistants during this process, who, she argues, proved pivotal in overcoming barriers to access and trust, but may also face daunting personal challenges related to the research question or their personal experiences of the past violence. In short, this article outlines the challenges to EPR within still-sensitive, increasingly restrictive post-conflict countries, and particularly among former combatants when their engagement with politics is still a key fear of the new government. Her findings point to the importance of both "intuition and ethics" as well as careful reflection on the part of the researcher regarding their status, role, privilege and identity, in all of the steps of the research process.

Coming from a completely different angle, case, and question, Macaspac's contribution nonetheless takes up Hennings' call for careful reflection in its focus on the experience of local ethnographers studying conflict dynamics in their country of origin. Specifically, in this article Macaspac examines the role "suspicion" can play as a lens to understand the distinct challenges such researchers face, arguing that the ways in which locals conducting research become objects of (and face consequences from) suspicion during fieldwork sets their research process and experience apart from that of researchers from outside the context. These reflections emerge from his experiences as a Filipino researcher conducting an ethnographic study of how communities make peace "beyond the purview of the state" in the Philippines and within the context of an ongoing Maoist rebellion. As he argues, local researchers examining such sensitive issues face quite daunting challenges international researchers rarely face. Because they are locals, for example, such researchers are subject to national and local laws from which international researchers may enjoy protections. They cannot rely on their passports, on embassies and consulates, or simply on their white skin to rescue them from state surveillance, harassment and intimidation. Further, their deeper roots in the community means that their families and friends can also be targeted by such measures and of course their "current or future professional careers can be jeopardized". As Macaspac describes, in various contexts (including the

Philippines) researchers have been killed and disappeared and regularly face harassment "through overt forms of surveillance that are meant to intimidate".

But local researchers are actually further disadvantaged in this dynamic as they face what Macaspac describes as "double suspicion". Not only do they face the consequences of suspicion in their research site – which impacts on how they engage and build trust with local individuals and institutions who are often "ambivalent towards the role of Western education" – but they also face suspicion from the wider academic community. Western scholars, he argues, "suspect the intellectual contributions of local researchers" who are expected to "demonstrate scholarly distance and defamiliarize their knowledge of their own countries and communities". In many scholarly traditions, he argues, ignorance or "cultural blindness" is seen as necessary for true discovery and important insights. Being too familiar, in such a tradition, means that local researchers will "be less attentive to the banal and taken-for-granted features of the culture itself", which is thought to be central to uncovering new knowledge. The attempt by local ethnographers, however, to embody the values of the objective, neutral or disengaged researcher when studying violence and conflict in their countries of origin, is ironically, "what renders local researchers objects of suspicion among the civilian communities they study". This contribution, therefore, describes both the strengths and challenges of conducting EPR as a local ethnographer, while also highlighting the privileges enjoyed by international researchers and how discourses regarding 'good' research "often conceal white normativity and Western-centric discourses behind a set of universal claims over objective scholarship".

Although focusing on different problems, Macaspac's critique complements that from Lottholtz, whose article presents a forceful indictment of "the reception and conceptualization of ethnography" in the field of peace research. To Lottholtz ethnographic work within peace research has been dominated by an "empiricist positivism and a preference of [sic] theory building and testing over in-depth research". While I would contest this generalization of the use of ethnography in the field more broadly, Lottholtz's identification of a positivist tendency within EPR as I have presented it in the past,[15] when combined with the "peace prerogative" – or the normative aspect of peace studies as a discipline seeking to contribute to the building of peaceful societies – may indeed render it, as he describes, "complicit in the instantiation of negative and imperial forms of peace". This argument, which takes up a substantial part of Lottholtz's contribution, is generally that the presentation of ethnographic methods as a tool by which the researcher can approximate "the 'real' empirical situation" on the ground in order to "enable the best possible understanding of the effects (and shortcomings) of peacebuilding interventions" … "forecloses discussion about how peacebuilding is embedded in, extends and re-produces a global web of power relations" and potentially provides evidence to support and facilitate new forms of power. To Lottholtz this evidences the disinterest

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[15] Millar, *Ethnographic Approach*.

among local turn and ethnographic scholars in the actual dynamics of local societies and shows the claim to provide voice and agency to local actors to be little more than a scholarly conceit.

He argues, in response, that those writing on the "local turn" and claiming to use ethnographic approaches must take more seriously the central lessons of the Writing Culture and Third World Feminism debates in order to truly incorporate a contemporary Anthropological perspective. To Lottholtz this necessitates a "re-negotiation and transgression of the traditional boundaries between scholarship, practice and activism" and, as he proposes and describes with reflections from his own fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan, it demands that peace scholars develop research which fully incorporates local actors as equal partners in a process of "collaborative knowledge production". He further claims that such research must focus not on everyday forms of peace, as many local turn scholars would encourage,[16] but on everyday forms of conflict which, he argues "are often more present in and impeding on people's lives". In Lottholtz' perception, EPR cannot make a real contribution to the study of peace and conflict if it excludes "voices and events" which depart from an idealized picture of a peaceful society. He argues, therefore, in his article, that this is what much peace scholarship does, excluding, silencing, downplaying, or actually denying alternative narratives "out of a longing for peace". Lottholtz therefore argues that his own approach to collaborative research overcomes the extractive nature of such positivist ethnographic work by working with partners, thus having the potential to "forge a dialogue with practitioners".

Conclusion: Defining Ethnographic Peace Research

The contributions in this Special Issue, therefore, evidence the tensions that arise when different scholars deploy diverse methods in distinct contexts to answer varying questions regarding conflict, transition, and peace. From the positive portrayals of Williams and Hennings, to the more problematizing work of my own paper and that of Macaspac, and then the heavily critical piece from Lottholtz, we see a range of different ideas regarding the strengths, challenges and ethics of EPR. But perhaps more importantly, we see very different approaches to even assessing these characteristics. This diversity of perspectives echoes a similar diversity and tension which emerged in the related edited volume, which, over 10 chapters, presented more than a dozen EPR studies.[17] In that case the most substantial tension was apparent between a number of the non-Anthropologist contributors who were proposing that EPR can best be deployed as an actively collaborative or activist process,[18] and the participating Anthropologists who saw ethnographic work as an inherently collaborative

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[16] Williams, "Reproducing Everyday Peace"; Mac Ginty, "Everyday Peace".
[17] Millar, *Ethnographic Peace Research*.
[18] Klein, "Institutional Ethnography"; Collins and Watson, "Impetus for Peace Studies"; Close, "Researching Peace Peacefully".

production of knowledge between the researcher and their interlocutors but generally resisted this activist role for EPR.[19]

Interestingly this seems to directly call into question Lottholtz's contention that a more up-to-date or contemporary approach to EPR must be an "activist" form of research as it was the Anthropologists most in tune with ethnography in its post-Writing Culture, post-Third World Feminism form who resisted such conceptions of EPR. There are tensions, therefore, between the idea of EPR as an empirical, evaluative or analytic process (which is certainly how I would define my own approach to date), and EPR as an activist project. But while Lottholtz seems to want to see the former as open to instrumentalization by powerful forces and the latter not, I would argue that neither should be considered free of this danger. Indeed, the inequality of power and diversity of motivations among national, sub-national and local actors and institutions should make it apparent that even collaborative work alongside local actors and within local institutions can be turned to the purpose of power and the marginalization of sub-groups. It is for this reason that conducting rigorous and nuanced ethnographic research must involve a constant awareness of the operation of power and attention not to *either* everyday peace or everyday conflict, but to the manner in which these interact among and between different actors and institutions.

In the already completed edited volume I concluded with a definition of EPR which proposed that it be defined by two required characteristics which I described as *thick description* and an attempt to *understand how and why* in addition to simply what one is observing. I then proposed that there are also two facilitative characteristics which are not strictly necessary but greatly enhance the rigour and nuance of EPR, which were *reflexivity* and a *diversity of potential data collection methods*.[20] It is clear, at this point, that all five of the articles included here provide further evidence for the importance of these four characteristics, and, indeed, the articles by Macaspac and Hennings would both seem to indicate that reflexivity and a diversity of potential data collection methods (what Hennings discussed as her "methods repertoire") may be quite important indeed. The final characteristic, however, was described not as required, nor as facilitative, but as a potential; as something that should be considered as one way that peace scholars might engage in EPR, but certainly not as the only way that they may do so. This is the inclusion of *collaborative or emancipatory* goals and processes. This echoes the way that such research has been incorporated into Anthropology. While many have promoted Action Research or Applied Anthropology, it has certainly not been taken as the only or even the primary way to conduct research in that field.[21] Many in Anthropology have always felt quite ambivalent towards such an approach,[22] and this is true also in peace studies, as evidenced by the tension described above.

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[19] Bräuchler, "Contextualizing"; Sakti and Reynaud, "Understanding Reconciliation".
[20] Millar, *Ethnographic Peace Research*, 258-260.
[21] Tax, "Action Anthropology"; Schensul et al, "Core Elements".
[22] Rubinstein, "Reflections on Action Anthropology".

The path forward for EPR, therefore, is not quite clear, but perhaps we can say that while the first four characteristics are clearly important for the design and application of rigorous EPR projects, this fifth requires substantive consideration and perhaps application only to specific cases and contexts. There are as many negative potentials with action research as there are positive, and quite a lot depends on the motivations and intentions of actors and institutions which scholars are often only coming to know when they enter the field. At the very least, the vagaries of such a form of EPR would require substantially more investigation and planning before fieldwork begins as well as constant reflection and critical appraisal of the dynamics of power while in the field. Deciding what cases and contexts are appropriate for such studies, and what actors and institutions are or are not appropriate partners for such projects, must be the task of individual scholars engaging in their own EPR adventures. Certainly we are not at a point where it is responsible to say that all EPR must be activist EPR. Quite to the contrary, we have barely begun to discuss and examine the potential strengths, challenges and ethics of EPR and much remains to be done.

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