

Going Micro: Emerging and Future Peacekeeping Research

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In the past 15 years, scholars have started studying the local and micro-level dimensions of peacekeeping. They have investigated the nature and effectiveness of bottom-up peacebuilding, assessed the local versus national impacts of peacekeeping interventions and studied the decentralized actions of international peacebuilders on the ground. This commentary shows that, despite the approach's limitations, delving into these three topics opens up fruitful areas for further research, in particular analysing micro-to-macro linkages, evaluating peacekeeping's subnational impacts across cases, explaining peacebuilding successes and understanding the causes of peace itself.

Studies of local and micro-level dynamics are relatively new in peacekeeping research. With few exceptions, up to the early 2000s, researchers focused on the national and international dimensions of peace efforts. This macro-level approach is still dominant today, to such a point that, in most analyses, 'local' means 'national'. In the past 15 years, however, a new focus on subnational dimensions has emerged. The resulting body of literature is very diverse – in terms of methodology, epistemology and substantive areas of concern. But the authors in this movement share a commitment to look at peacekeeping processes beyond international, national or capital-based dynamics.

Three themes motivate most of the research in this milieu. First is an attention to bottom-up peacekeeping and peacebuilding, whether by local populations or by international interveners. Second is an interest in the local effects of intervention, and the reasons why peacebuilding outcomes may differ at the micro- and macro-levels. Third is a consideration of the decentralized actions of international peacebuilders on the ground, focusing on the foreigners' diverse cultures and the everyday dimensions of their work. This article will discuss each of these themes in turn, emphasizing the main contributions that the authors have made to the broader research on peacekeeping, flagging the potential pitfalls and limitations, and identifying avenues for further research.¹

Throughout, this essay uses a broad definition of peacekeeping, which reflects the definition prevalent in the literature under consideration. As explained in the introduction to this series of commentaries, a large majority of authors have moved away from the traditional, military-oriented definition of peacekeeping as peace operations conducted by the United Nations, specific states or other international organizations. Most researchers now include in their analyses a wider range of actors and activities, including non-governmental organizations,

civil society groups and diplomats, as well as peacemaking and peacebuilding initiatives. As the rest of this essay illustrates, analysing these broader efforts is indispensable to grasp the bottom-up, local and micro-level dynamics of peacekeeping.

Bottom-Up Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding

The research on bottom-up peacekeeping emerged from a rejection of two assumptions prevalent in the literature: that micro-level conflict dynamics mirror those on the macro level, and that peace achieved on the national and international stages will automatically trickle down to the local spheres.² Instead, Stathis Kalyvas, his students and his colleagues have demonstrated that local and subnational conflicts often motivate large parts of civil war violence.³ As a result, the intensity of violence regularly varies within the same country, and so do peacekeeping outcomes.⁴

This observation has inspired an evolution in the research on international peacekeeping. Various scholars have investigated the work that international actors do – or fail to do – to assuage local tensions and the reasons why attention to local rather than national conflicts remains so rare.⁵ There is also an emerging body of literature on how international actors can contribute to bottom-up peacebuilding, and the benefits, dilemmas and pitfalls involved in doing so.⁶ In addition, numerous researchers have studied peacekeeping and peacebuilding initiatives undertaken by local communities in the aftermath of conflict.⁷

These authors often draw the conclusion that only a combination of bottom-up and top-down efforts can build a sustainable peace.⁸ This suggests a potential pitfall: studying local and bottom-up dynamics in isolation from their broader contexts. At the same time, it highlights an important area for further research: systematic analyses of the interactions between bottom-up and top-down peacekeeping are necessary to understand better how, why and under what conditions bottom-up efforts contribute to macro-level peace, and how top-down initiatives can boost or undermine the bottom-up efforts.

Local Dimensions of International Interventions

Authors whose research is oriented to the local and micro level point to another major issue with the existing literature: The dominant approach focuses on country-level (or mission-level) analyses, yet the subnational impacts of international efforts are often distinct from these macro, aggregated outcomes. It is therefore crucial to study the local dimensions of international interventions, in particular the actual impact of peacekeeping efforts on the ground and the responses of local populations.

Local Impacts

The overall findings of the local impact analyses are disheartening. Admittedly, natural experiments demonstrate that external intervention can help promote reconciliation.⁹ However, ethnographic studies show that international efforts

are regularly counterproductive. Among other perverse effects, foreign peace interventions have increased the number and severity of human rights violations,¹⁰ hampered democracy,¹¹ amplified gender disparities and sexual abuse,¹² disrupted local economies¹³ and fuelled violence.¹⁴ Quantitative analyses are similarly pessimistic: despite some positive outcomes, peacekeeping deployment at the municipal level does not reduce subsequent violence, nor does it promote security or help restore local authority.¹⁵ Likewise, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes and community-driven reconstruction projects regularly fail to reach many of their intended goals.¹⁶

Thus far, this research has only focused on a few cases of intervention. Additional studies are necessary, on many other cases, to assess the generalizability of these findings. When undertaking this research, authors should keep in mind three potential pitfalls, which Stathis Kalyvas identified when he reviewed the emerging literature on bottom-up dynamics of violence, and which similarly mar many of the studies on the local impacts of international interventions. There is a widespread tendency to exclude 'those macro processes that cannot be analyzed at the micro level', a 'pronounced lack of clarity on scope conditions' and a 'tendency, sometimes, toward reckless extrapolation from the micro to the macro level'.¹⁷ These shortcomings are particularly common in quantitative and experimental research designs, suggesting a need for mixed methods approaches that incorporate qualitative research to enhance the findings of the growing quantitative and lab-in-the-field literature.

Another important drawback of the quantitative and lab-in-the-field experiments is that they tend to equate micro-level factors with individuals' behaviour and attitudes, excluding potentially important variables such as local contexts and community dynamics.¹⁸ This is misleading because peaceful individuals do not necessarily make peaceful societies.¹⁹

Local Responses

The research on relationships between international interveners and host populations – just like the micro-level studies of international peacebuilders mentioned in the next section – helps explain many of the disappointing peacekeeping outcomes on the ground. Oliver Richmond and other scholars have demonstrated the contrast between the foreign interveners' conceptions of violence, peace, peacekeeping and peacebuilding and those of host populations.²⁰ There is also a significant body of work on 'local ownership': what it is, why it is essential for successful peacebuilding, how it can be achieved and why it still eludes most international efforts.²¹

A relative consensus has emerged among these authors. Foreign interveners use a standard, universal conflict-management technique that overlooks the local specificities of the host communities.²² As a result, peacekeepers often employ unproductive approaches, become unpopular and, at times, end up in conflict with local populations or armed groups. In response, local authorities and populations regularly contest, adapt, transform or reject international programmes.²³

This research faces two potential shortcomings. The first is the romanticization of 'local, indigenous, customary, and traditional approaches to peacebuilding'.²⁴ Several authors emphasize that such practices are often exclusionary, oppressive, authoritarian or discriminatory.²⁵ The challenge for the analyst is to acknowledge the importance of bottom-up dynamics without idealizing them, and for the practitioner it is to build on local practices while avoiding their most unsavoury aspects. The second pitfall is treating 'the local' as a unified phenomenon. Residents of a host country, or a given village, do not form a homogenous community, and there is no such thing as one local viewpoint. Instead, any local population includes a multitude of political, economic, social and religious groups, which each has its own goals, beliefs, customs and attitudes.²⁶ As a result, 'the local' is always highly fragmented.²⁷

Micro-Level Studies of International Peacebuilders

The research on local and micro-level dynamics has made a third major contribution to the literature on peacekeeping. It has shifted the empirical focus from macro-level foreign policy – such as resources, vested interests, liberal values and the politics of United Nations mandates – to what international interveners actually do in the field.²⁸

Most analyses of international peacekeepers on the ground demonstrate that their national, organizational, professional and gender cultures orient the choice of specific intervention strategies and affect their relationships with local populations.²⁹ A more recent line of research emphasizes the importance of studying the foreign interveners' everyday lives and work in accounting for the characteristics and effectiveness of development and humanitarian programmes,³⁰ democratization initiatives,³¹ securitization efforts³² and peacebuilding projects.³³ This research on the everyday adds to the growing body of memoirs by former peacekeepers and peacebuilders deployed on the ground³⁴ – some of which make a conscious effort to draw broader lessons for peacekeeping practice.³⁵

All of the existing research on this topic is ethnographic and qualitative. As such, it presents little statistical evidence linking daily practice to peacebuilding outcomes. The work also tends to be very site specific. Thus, for many, it can appear anecdotal, overly personal or not rigorous enough, and lacking generalizability. All of the authors also come from anthropological or interpretive traditions, making it more difficult for the findings to travel to mainstream positivist research in political science and international relations. Quantitative and experimental inquiries could help to overcome these limitations by evaluating the strength and exportability of the qualitative findings.

Ways Ahead

Contributing to an emerging body of research presents both serious challenges and enticing opportunities. On the one hand, the authors face many pitfalls, which we are just starting to identify (and the most important of which are discussed above). On the other hand, each of the studies mentioned in this essay

fills major gaps in our understanding of peacekeeping. While certain topics (notably the cultures and impacts of military peacekeepers) and cases (in particular Liberia and Bosnia-Herzegovina) have now been extensively examined, numerous other issues and countries remain under-investigated. In fact, many analyses of bottom-up peacekeeping, local impacts of non-military intervention and everyday dimensions of international peacebuilding on the ground are explicitly exploratory. The authors emphasize that their publications constitute first steps in opening what they hope will be new lines of inquiry, and that further research on their topics is crucial.

This commentary has offered several suggestions so that further research can avoid the shortcomings of previous analyses. The next studies of bottom-up peacekeeping should carefully unpack the interactions between micro-level and macro-level dynamics and examine the mechanisms through which bottom-up initiatives can (or cannot) contribute to national and international peace. Future examinations of local impacts should use qualitative inquiries to complement the findings of quantitative and experimental approaches, and consider multiple local-level factors besides individuals (such as grassroots institutions, community dynamics or degrees of rebel control). Moving forward, inquiries on local responses should better reflect the fragmentation of 'the local' and the potential unsavoury aspects of customary and traditional practices. Finally, future micro-level investigations of international peacebuilders on the ground would be strengthened through complementary quantitative or experimental approaches.

The overall literature on micro-level and local orientations presents three other important limitations, which suggests three more fruitful avenues for further investigation. To start, virtually all of the texts mentioned in this commentary focus on one specific subnational area or on various local places within one country. The resulting publications are convincing and insightful, but they have little potential for generalization. Comparative analyses across countries would help qualitative studies become more broadly applicable, as would databases gathering micro-level information across all conflict zones for quantitative investigations.³⁶

In addition, thus far, micro-level studies of international interveners, as well as investigations on the local dimensions of intervention, have overwhelmingly focused on failure. This mirrors the broader research on peacekeeping, which, as Page Fortna and Lise Morje Howard have demonstrated, largely concentrates on problematic cases, ignoring successful experiences.³⁷ However, as Fortna and Howard note, the obstacles to peacekeeping and peacebuilding are such that the most puzzling question is not why international efforts fail but rather why they sometimes succeed. A focus on instances where interventions have achieved either negative or positive peace, as perceived by both interveners and host populations, would greatly contribute to our understanding of local and micro-level dynamics. Three recent publications have proved particularly insightful and could provide inspiration for future research. The first two have conducted paired in-depth comparisons of two Bosnian cities that present similar characteristics, except that one is violent and the other surprisingly peaceful, in order to

identify factors that explain peacebuilding success.³⁸ The last study presents a thorough evaluation of intervention efforts in Aceh (Indonesia) in 2005 and 2006 to identify the ‘key practical attributes’ shared by the international agencies that did usefully contribute to the peace process.³⁹

A last, related area of fruitful inquiry would be to focus on peace itself. Most studies assume that the causes of peace are the opposite of the causes of war. Yet, this is not necessarily true. Comparative anthropological research on peaceful societies around the world shows that elements such as avoidance of alcohol consumption and child-rearing practices that emphasize self-control – elements whose absence has never been identified as the cause of organized violence – seem, in fact, to promote peace.⁴⁰ This suggests the importance of delving into questions like: what are the sources of peace? A potential way to inquire into this topic would be to investigate why certain places (such as the province of Maniema in Congo) experience surprisingly little violence despite exhibiting all the characteristics that, according to existing research, exacerbate conflict.

All of this further research can have enormous policy implications. Since I started working on international peacebuilding 15 years ago, I have heard a constant refrain: policy-makers and practitioners continually deplore that while they know many of the standard peacebuilding models, templates and techniques that they use are ineffective, they nevertheless have to keep using these models and techniques because no one has yet offered a convincing alternative. The suggestions for future inquiry presented in this series of commentaries will hopefully contribute to building the credible alternatives that are so sorely needed, and studies of local, micro-level and bottom-up dynamics can play a key role in this process.

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NOTES

1. This commentary builds on, refines and expands analyses developed in Séverine Autesserre, ‘Construire la Paix: Conceptions Collectives de son Établissement, de son Maintien, et de sa Consolidation’, *Critique Internationale*, Vol.51, 2011, pp.153–67; and Séverine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, introduction, ch.1 and conclusion.
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 18. Thanks to Stephanie Schwartz for flagging this point.
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