

Ethnographic Peace Research: The Underappreciated Benefits of Long-Term Fieldwork

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Abstract:

While Peace Studies (PS) has always incorporated different research methodologies, large-N quantitative methods and state-level findings have dominated the literature and had most influence on policy and practice. Today however, the limitations of peace interventions are commonly identified with the institutional, state-centric, and technocratic approaches associated with such limited understandings and their resultant policies. This paper argues, therefore, that the inability of these methods to examine local experiences of conflict, transition, and peace in diverse sociocultural settings contributes to inadequate policy formation and, thus, to problematic interventions. Indeed, the recent “local turn” and its focus on the everyday, resistance, hybridity, and friction demands research that can better interpret local *experiences* of conflict, transition, and peace and, thereby, discover more locally salient practice. While this paper argues that an Ethnographic Peace Research (EPR) agenda must be central to such efforts, it also argues against applying the ethnographic label to work that is more suitably described as qualitative (site visits, interviews, focus groups, etc.). The paper argues that long-term fieldwork and close engagement with the subjects of peacebuilding must be required within any EPR agenda. The underappreciated benefits of such fieldwork are illustrated with examples from research in northern Sierra Leone.

Keywords:

Peace Studies; Peace Research; Ethnography; Fieldwork; Methodology

Introduction

Peace Studies (PS) has experienced expansive growth in the post-Cold War period, which has paralleled the explosion of peace interventions (peace-making, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding) in conflict affected and post-conflict societies.¹ Over this time peace intervention by the UN and other supranational organizations gained impetus, garnered support and funding from states and their bilateral development agencies, and became one of the primary purposes of international society.² In turn, this influx of resources – today amounting to billions of dollars per year – led to strident demands for the evaluation of peace interventions and their impacts; new demands, in short, to evidence the beneficial effects of peace intervention.³

However, as supranational and civil society organizations developed guidelines for Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E),⁴ and scholars studied the impacts of peace interventions, such assessment has become dominated by quantitative approaches and state-level research based on metrics, questionnaires, and national level statistics.⁵ The very drive for simplified, standardized, technocratic, and institutional solutions have pervaded the methods used to understand intervention.⁶ This paper instead emphasizes the importance of Ethnographic Peace Research (EPR) for understanding ‘local experiences’, or how ‘beneficiaries’ of peace interventions feel about, respond to, and deal with specific interventionary mechanisms. This approach defines ‘the local’ variably, depending on the individuals and communities targeted by the intervention, and recognizes that the expectations of local actors prior to the intervention, and the experiences of that intervention once it has begun, may be diverse, complex, and highly contingent.

Such an approach is consistent with the critiques of peace interventions and their failure to recognize the complex sociocultural, political and economic environments into which they intervene.⁷ Such critiques note the hybrid results of peace interventions and some argue, in fact, that

¹ Jakobson, “Transformation of United Nations”.

² Paris, “International Peacebuilding”; Tschirgi and de Coning, “Ensuring Sustainable Peace”.

³ Paffenholz and Spurk, “Civil Society, Civil Engagement”; Blum, “Improving Peacebuilding Evaluation”.

⁴ Catholic Relief Services, “GAIN Peacebuilding Indicators”; UN, “Monitoring Peace Consolidation”; OECD, “Evaluating Peacebuilding Activities”.

⁵ Millar, *Ethnographic Approach*, 15.

⁶ Mac Ginty, “Peacekeeping and Data”.

⁷ Mac Ginty and Richmond, “Local Turn”.

such interventions will inherently have unpredictable impacts.⁸ As such, recent scholarship on ‘friction’ argues that such interventions stimulate processes of adoption, adaptation, cooptation, resistance or rejection on the part of local actors,⁹ and the impacts of intervention must, therefore, be recognized as emergent; generated in the articulation of global, national, and local institutions and actors with a range of incentives and motivations, both well-meaning and otherwise.

However, quantitative methodologies analyzing state level data cannot assess such emergent outcomes, and it is for this reason that an EPR approach, which can provide a more locally grounded perspective, is necessary. More specifically, this article will argue that EPR must assess the local experiences of peace interventions and whether and to what extent those experiences diverge from the impacts expected by international intervenors. As this article will illustrate with examples from fieldwork in Sierra Leone, such an understanding requires more than qualitative methods as often used in PS today; it requires long-term fieldwork which can provide a nuanced understanding of the sociocultural context. It is only with sufficient time in the setting that a researcher can come to understand the situated concepts which underpin experiences of conflict, transition and peace in post-conflict societies, and it is only by understanding these concepts that we can assess both local expectations for and the local experiences of peace intervention.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first reviews the growth of the peacebuilding field, its dominant liberal model of intervention, common methods of evaluation, and recent critiques which have focused our attention on local experiences of peace interventions. The second section explores the relationship between ethnographic fieldwork within Anthropology and an EPR agenda requiring long-term fieldwork which necessarily borrows from but cannot imitate directly the Anthropological approach. The third section discusses three key benefits of long-term fieldwork which I believe are largely underappreciated in PS scholarship. These are labelled simply as *time*, *chance*, and *change*, and the benefits of each are illustrated with examples from fieldwork in northern Sierra Leone. The conclusion summarizes the argument and reaffirms the key points.

⁸ Chandler, “Peacebuilding and Politics”; Millar, “Respecting Complexity”.

⁹ Björkdahl and Höglund, “Precarious Peacebuilding”, 294.

The Rise and Critique of Liberal Peacebuilding

The initial post-Cold War period witnessed an incredible expansion in peace-making, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding activity as the proxy wars became more open to international intervention and the end of the veto based neutering of the Security Council allowed the UN a more robust role in peace interventions.¹⁰ The end of the Cold War also meant that tensions previously held in check by the balance of power flamed into outright conflict when this balance failed.¹¹ This was the case in the former Yugoslavia, for example, and in the former Soviet territories in the Caucasus. Similarly, new conflicts sparked in West Africa and the Great Lakes region, driven by the new economic incentives of globalization and open markets.¹² UN peace activity expanded in turn, from limited peacekeeping missions to incorporate new and more proactive elements of peacemaking and peacebuilding which later developed into more robust peace enforcement capabilities.¹³

In short, in both the termination of the proxy wars and the rise of more forceful peace interventions, we witness the new peace activism of the UN.¹⁴ But in addition to the UN, many other supranational organizations – the EU, NATO, OECD, World Bank, IMF, and AU – incorporated the goals of peacebuilding into their agendas. This expanding peace activity inspired a surge in bi-lateral donor support for such activity (from actors such as USAID, DfiD, GIZ, and FMO),¹⁵ and increasing funding spurred a surge in the number of peace related Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), operating both at the international and national levels.¹⁶ Over time these non-governmental actors have become central to peace interventions in conflict affected and post-conflict societies and today they function as implementation partners for global institutions which form policy and set the agenda.

¹⁰ Goldstein, “Winning the War on War”, Chapter 2.

¹¹ Wallerstein and Sollenberg, “After the Cold War”.

¹² Sawyer, “Violent Conflicts and Governance Challenges”; Young, “African Conflict Zone”; Pugh, Cooper and Goodhand, *War Economies*.

¹³ Tardy, “Critique of Robust Peacebuilding”.

¹⁴ Stedman, “New Interventionists”.

¹⁵ Paris, “Peacebuilding and the Limits”; de Soto and del Castillo, “Obstacles to Peacebuilding”; Richmond, Björkdahl and Kapler, “Emerging EU Peacebuilding”; Williams, “Peace and Security Council”; Gheci, “Divided Partners”.

¹⁶ van Tongeren et al, *People Building Peace II*; Pouligny, “Civil Society and Post-Conflict”; van Leeuwen, *Partners in Peace*; Edwards, Hulme and Wallace, “NGOs in a Global Future”; Adejumbi, “Conflict and Peace Building”; Cubitt, *Local and Global Dynamics*; Paffenholz and Spurk, “Civil Society, Civil Engagement”.

This expansion of activities led, inexorably, to an increasing number of people hoping to work on peace processes and to the establishment of ever more university and professional development programs designed to prepare students to pursue careers in peace intervention. Unsurprisingly, this expansion in programs and professional training has also led to the professionalization of international peace intervention as a field of practice,¹⁷ and its domination by bureaucratic organizations which develop “best practices” and “tool-kits” for use in post-conflict states.¹⁸ As critics have argued, peace has largely come to be seen as something that can be built and maintained via the “technocratic ministrations” of cadres of professionalized practitioners.¹⁹

As such, the “telos” of peacebuilding – the ideal peaceful society – is rarely debated or considered.²⁰ It is assumed to replicate the “Wilsonian” liberal peace,²¹ embodied in institutions of democracy, free-markets, and the rule of law,²² which the dominant quantitative literature claims to have proven are key for long-term sustainable peace,²³ and which has thus had significant influence on policy and funding decisions regarding peace interventions. But, as recent literature has made clear, it is highly problematic to assume linear relationships between establishing institutions (electoral commissions, open markets, or courts) and local *experiences* of those institutions.²⁴ Critics of the liberal peace, therefore, recognize these institutions as important less for peace than for the “peace industry,”²⁵ and as driven more by the concerns of technocrats than by those living in post-conflict societies.²⁶

Recent publications regarding both hybridity and friction has illustrated how experiences of such interventions are more nuanced and unpredictable than once thought.²⁷ They recognize that interventions introduce new structures and norms into already complicated social, cultural, political

¹⁷ Sending, *Why Peacebuilders Fail*, 3.

¹⁸ Shaw, “Rethinking Truth and Reconciliation”; Donais, “Empowerment or Imposition”, 23.

¹⁹ Mac Ginty, “Hybrid Peace”, 408.

²⁰ Denskus, “Challenging the International”, 151.

²¹ Paris, *At War’s End*, 6.

²² Doyle, “Three Pillars”; Paris, “Saving Liberal Peacebuilding”.

²³ O’Neal et al, “The Liberal Peace”; Souva and Prins, “Liberal Peace Revisited”.

²⁴ Millar, “Disaggregated Hybridity”

²⁵ Mac Ginty, “Routine Peace”, 289; Denskus, “Challenging the International”, 151.

²⁶ Autesserre, *Trouble with Congo*, 25-26.

²⁷ Mac Ginty, “Hybrid Peace”; Jarstad and Belloni, “Hybrid Peace Governance”; Millar, “Disaggregated Hybridity”; Björkdahl and Höglund, “Precarious Peacebuilding”; Millar, van der Lijn and Verkoren, “Peacebuilding Plans”; Millar, “Expectations and Experiences”.

and economic environments and that the resulting ‘hybrid peace’ outcomes involve the “mixing and melding of institutions, practices, rituals, and concepts generated through the interaction of coexisting, competing or complementary structures and norms”.²⁸ As a result, such outcomes are inherently unpredictable and emergent, and may aggravate old or even generate new conflict dynamics instead of promoting peace.²⁹

Unfortunately however, while increasing demand has spurred the development of new methods to assess the impacts of peace interventions,³⁰ those methods have been dominated by standardized processes based on “tick-box” evaluations counting *outputs* as opposed to *outcomes* and national level variables used as proxies for more subtle impacts.³¹ At the individual and community level, for example, we see the assessment of subtle phenomena such as ‘engagement’ via crude metrics such as attendance figures, and at a national level we see complex concepts such as ‘justice’ measured by the number of ‘trial years’ administered by a tribunal.³² Even though the limitations of such quantification have been clearly articulated,³³ evaluation via such limited metrics is one of the primary skills required for young peace professionals and are seen as marketable skills that can be applied in diverse settings. The standardization of peace interventions, therefore, is mirrored in that of evaluation skills among both practitioner and academics, which only reproduces inadequate policy formation.³⁴

Defining Ethnographic Peace Research

Leading PS scholars have recently noted an “ethnographic turn” within the field.³⁵ Problematically, however, this includes many studies in which the term ‘ethnographic’ is applied to studies more appropriately labeled as ‘qualitative’. The questions to ask are, therefore: How should PS distinguish

²⁸ Millar, “Disaggregated Hybridity”, 503.

²⁹ Millar, “Performative Memory”.

³⁰ Paffenholz and Spurk, “Civil Society, Civil Engagement”; Blum, “Improving Peacebuilding Evaluation”; Duggan, “Transitional Justice on Trial”; Paffenholz, Abu-Nimer and McCandless, “Peacebuilding and Development”; Bush and Duggan, “Evaluation in Divided Societies”.

³¹ Mac Ginty and Richmond, “Local Turn”, 778.

³² Sikkink & Booth Walling, “Impact of Human Rights”; Olsen, Payne, and Reiter, *Transitional Justice in Balance*.

³³ Jerven, *Poor Numbers*; Engle Merry & Wood, “Quantification and the Paradox”.

³⁴ Müller & Bashar, “UNAMID”.

³⁵ Mac Ginty and Richmond, “The Fallacy”.

between ethnographic and qualitative research? And what is the added value of such an approach? I argue that the term ‘ethnography’, following Ingold’s characterization, should only be applied to research which includes “long-term and open ended commitment, generous attentiveness, relational depth, and sensitivity to context”.³⁶ Research deploying the label without the substance implies the use of specific methods and the attainment of a particular form of knowledge distinct from what has been achieved. Alternatively, peace research which includes these characteristics may rightfully be described as Ethnographic as opposed to Qualitative and can provide substantively different forms of information regarding local experiences of peace intervention. But these distinctive characteristics are related to the time committed to, and subsequently the nature of, fieldwork.

Unlike Sociology, which incorporates some ethnographic research regarding domestic norms and institutions, Anthropology is the field most associated with international “fieldwork.” “Ethnographic fieldwork” is regularly recognized as one of the hallmarks of the discipline,³⁷ and it is via extended fieldwork that the researcher conducts participant observation; often considered the central practice of the discipline.³⁸ It is participant observation which embodies ethnography’s generative tension by requiring the researcher to be at once the subjective participant and the objective observer, to “step in and out” of another’s perspective.³⁹ It is via such “practical, personal and participatory experience in the field” that the Anthropologist comes to form knowledge.⁴⁰ But participant observation is not the only way Anthropologists collect data. Other classic methods include informal interviews, community mapping, and household censuses, for example. But, all of these processes share the aim of developing a contextualized interpretation – a “translation from one cultural idiom or language to another”⁴¹ – and this is a process which has always been understood to require extended periods of fieldwork.

Anthropology has developed its approach to this “translation” substantially and recent scholarship has presented more nuanced interpretations of what counts as a ‘field’ and as

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Bubandt and Otto, “Predicaments of Holism”, 1.

³⁸ Robben and Sluka, “Fieldwork in Cultural Anthropology”, 2.

³⁹ Powdermaker cited in Robben and Sluka, “Fieldwork in Cultural Anthropology”, 13.

⁴⁰ Jackson, “Paths toward a Clearing”, 3.

⁴¹ Marcus, “Ethnography in/of the World”, 100.

‘ethnography’, with contemporary scholars addressing multi-sited or mobile fields and reframing ethnography as the study of chains, flows, circulations, frictions, and culture as process.⁴² In such contemporary conceptions, however, long-term engagement with the fields or processes under study – even when multi-sited, mobile, and flexible – remains central.⁴³ Similarly, the “Writing Culture” debate of the 70s and 80s led to further changes and a new emphasis on reflexivity;⁴⁴ the “need to be critically conscious of what one is doing as one does it”;⁴⁵ an idea often echoed.⁴⁶ Such research recognizes that the reality to be interpreted and presented in text is constructed collaboratively with research subjects and over time. Critical self-reflection is therefore required for ethnographic research. A reflection that itself demands long-term engagement with subjects in the field.

But to what extent should EPR mirror the contemporary approach to ethnography as conducted in Anthropology? There are many fruitful Anthropological works exploring the dynamics of war and peace,⁴⁷ and others which examine local or community experiences of conflict, transition, and peace.⁴⁸ It is partially the impact of such work that has inspired the use of ethnographic methodologies as alternative means for evaluating peace interventions within PS.⁴⁹ However, while much can be learned from these studies – and the difference between these influential Anthropological studies and ethnographically inspired work within PS is one of degree and not of kind – the different assumptions and expectations of the two fields do demand recognition of important differences between ethnography within contemporary Anthropology and the deployment of ethnographic methods as a means to provide *contextualized evaluations* within PS.

For example, the subject matter of Anthropology is qualitatively different to that in Peace Research. Anthropology is, in its broadest sense, “a sustained and disciplined inquiry into the

⁴² Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*; Tsing, *Friction*; Mosse, “Anthropology of International Development”; Carse, “2013 in Sociocultural Anthropology”; see also contributions to Millar, *Ethnographic Peace Research*.

⁴³ Gupta and Ferguson, “Beyond Culture”; Hannerz, “Being There”; Marcus, “Ethnography in/of the World”.

⁴⁴ Clifford and Marcus, “Writing Culture”; Davies, “Introduction”, 10.

⁴⁵ Crapanzano, “Heat of the Discipline”, 56.

⁴⁶ Diphorn, “Emotionality of Participation”; Davis and Spencer, *Emotions in the Field*.

⁴⁷ Richards, *Fighting*; Vigh, *Navigating Terrains*; Coulter, *Bush Wives*; Lombard, *State of Rebellion*.

⁴⁸ Shaw, “Memory Frictions”; Theidon, *Intimate Enemies*; Park, *Reappeared*; Bräuchler, *Cultural Dimensions*; Honwana, *Child Soldiers*. Nordstrom, *Shadows of War*; Nordstrom and Robben, *Fieldwork under Fire*; Das, *Life and Words*; Hinton and Hinton, *Genocide and Mass Violence*.

⁴⁹ Denskus, “Challenging the International”; Denskus, “Peacebuilding Does Not”; Millar, *Ethnographic Approach*.

conditions and potentials of human life”.⁵⁰ Anthropological studies primarily examine a group, a sub-group, a dynamic, or a particular phenomenon, all of which will build to this broader understanding of human life. In addition, as a result of its association with colonialism,⁵¹ and its instrumentalization during wartime,⁵² Anthropology has developed a deep ambivalence towards policy and practice. PS, on the other hand, is both more focused and more applied. It is the study of the multi-disciplinary dynamics undergirding two very specific phenomena – conflict and peace – and is an avowedly normative field, with the explicit purpose of impacting policy and practice. It seeks to gain knowledge for use, to ‘transfer’ that knowledge to policymakers and practitioners, and to influence conflict resolution and peacebuilding.⁵³

Quite distinct from Anthropology, therefore, the benefits of long-term fieldwork for PS are partially instrumental in nature and what I propose here is a pragmatic approach to deploying ethnographic methods for assessment purposes. It is exactly such a positivist or instrumental approach that Ingold is responding to when he argues against the application of the ‘ethnographic’ label to methods more appropriately described as qualitative. He questions whether ethnography can or should be deployed instrumentally, or if ethnography innately requires an epistemology that negates a positivist or instrumentalist stance.⁵⁴ While I sympathize with these concerns, this paper does not engage in this debate, instead proposing that PS can learn from the substantial insight provided by Anthropological studies, including those of conflict and peace, and incorporate these lessons into the potentially controversial use of ethnography as a pragmatic means of assessment.

This is necessary because policymakers have not been as receptive to Anthropological findings from conflict-affected or post-conflict settings as they have been to the claims of other disciplines (such as Economics, Political Science, and Law). Peace scholars, therefore, must incorporate research methodologies that allow more sensitivity to issues of diversity and culture, while still retaining the ability to speak to, and (importantly) to be heard by, policymakers and

⁵⁰ Ingold, *Being Alive*, 3.

⁵¹ Lewis, “Anthropology and Colonialism”; Pels, “What has Anthropology Learned”.

⁵² Chambers, “Applied Anthropology”; Robben “Anthropology and the Iraq War”.

⁵³ Boulding, “Future Direction”, 343-344.

⁵⁴ Ingold, *Being Alive*.

practitioners. EPR seeks to do this by conducting studies that *aspire* to the qualities Ingold described but which are not ethnography in the Anthropological tradition.⁵⁵ It is my argument that while this research differs from Anthropological ethnography, it still requires extended periods of fieldwork, and it is for this reason that the benefits of such fieldwork must be clearly described and evidenced.

Key Benefits of Long-Term Fieldwork: Time, Chance, and Change

The goal of this section is to evidence the added value that is gained from living within and witnessing the many challenges of a post-conflict setting. As will be illustrated, an understanding of everyday life in post-conflict contexts cannot be gleaned from interviews, focus groups, or observations alone (even when conducted among non-elite locals). Indeed, it is the broader context of people's lives that shapes their ideas and opinions, their expectations and experiences.⁵⁶ As such, only familiarity with that context allows the researcher to interpret how people understand and represent their world. In what follows, I describe three benefits of long-term fieldwork: time, chance, and change. I will illustrate why each is so important to an EPR approach with examples of the added value of such research from my past work in rural Sierra Leone.

This research spanned a total of 19 months in-country. This includes two months in 2007 and ten months in 2008/2009 during which I conducted an evaluation of the local experiences of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in and around the city of Makeni in Northern Sierra Leone, as well as six months in 2012 and one month in 2013 during which I evaluated the impacts of a large Bio-energy project in 12 villages within the project's 40,000 hectare land-lease area. Both of these studies involved long-term engagement with these communities, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews designed to assess understandings and experiences of the interventions. I have since published more than a dozen peer reviewed articles presenting this data, as well as a couple of papers describing the benefits of such ethnographic assessments as a means to understand how and why interventions are experienced as they are in local settings. However, I have never before written specifically of the substantial added value of long-term fieldwork above and beyond

⁵⁵ Ingold, "That's enough about Ethnography", 384.

⁵⁶ Mac Ginty, "Peacekeeping and Data", 701.

what could be gathered by the same methods (interviews, observations, site visits), if they had been carried out over weeks instead of months. This will be my task here.

Time

Obviously more time on the ground produces more formal ‘data’ (more interviews, more observations, additional site visits, etc.), and in this sense its value would be clear to most researchers, even those not conducting ethnographic studies but want to collect more surveys, include more cases, or extend a longitudinal study. But while additional data is *valuable* for almost all research, in ethnography time in the field is *required* for accurate interpretation of that data. Most of my formal ‘data’ during my first period of research regarding the TRC (between 2007 and 2009), for example, was collected over a 10 month period. This included more than 60 semi-structured interviews and participant observation with people living both in the Northern town of Makeni and in a small village outside Makeni. While it would have been perfectly possible to collect exactly that number of interviews and visit those two sites in a matter of weeks instead of 10 months, a clear and accurate understanding of that data required an extended period of fieldwork.

Additional time in country, for example, allowed me to more fully and intimately engage with the two communities. It allowed me to develop relationships with individuals and families, to participate in community events, and simply to engage in informal conversations about everyday life. Such informal conversations occurred on friend’s front porches or on walks through town, at the small college campus in Makeni or while watching sporting events, and the topics could roam from the weather to witches, from football to religion, and from politics to culture. Such informal interactions provide for a contextual perspective that multiplies many fold the substantive understanding of the formal ‘data’. It allows the researcher to understand the context from within which actors understand their own lifeworld and view the interventions of external agencies. This is the added value of long-term fieldwork, which would be clear to Ethnographers working within Anthropology, but is often overlooked or considered only tangentially by Peace Researchers who rarely spend extended time with the “beneficiaries” of peace interventions.

For example, it was only by getting to know, working alongside, and speaking regularly with

locals of different faiths that I could fully grasp the importance of religion and the belief in unseen powers in rural Sierra Leone. Intellectually it is easy to conceive of individuals believing in the everyday presence and agency of spirits, devils, and their own ancestors; and Anthropological literature regarding Sierra Leone can impress this upon the reader.⁵⁷ But coming to a full appreciation of the deeper force and implications of this took time in the setting, speaking to people about the power of society magic, seeing the deep fear of being witched, and discussing also my own faith. Such experiences struck home the reality of these forces for Sierra Leoneans; forces which, as I have described elsewhere in more ethnographic fashion, impacted on local experiences of the TRC.⁵⁸ Without extended time in this setting, engaging with local people, this more grounded interpretation of my formal data would never have been possible.

However, there are also other benefits to long-term fieldwork. Additional time allowed me to conduct a very useful second translation of all of my interviews, for example, during which I sat side-by-side with a second translator and asked questions when his interpretations of interviewee's words differed from the original translation. This process took an inordinate amount of time, but it also provided insight into the meaning of the language used by local people which, first, would not be obvious to a non-native, and second, was not obvious from the initial translation. As a result, quite a lot of important data from the interviews themselves was only recognized due to the extended time I spent participating in this second translation process and developing additional contextual understanding. Indeed, the time spent on this process proved just as important as that spent on collecting the interviews in the first place.

In addition, having this time on the ground, and my developing awareness of the culturally situated concerns and expectations of local actors, allowed the evolution of my research methodology from a flawed initial approach to one which would eventually produce quite unique findings. Following earlier research indicating that ritual and symbolism were important elements of healing and reconciliation in Truth Commissions,⁵⁹ I had originally planned to examine this aspect of the

⁵⁷ Bledsoe and Robey, "Arabic Literacy and Secrecy"; Murphy, "Sublime Dance"; Shaw, "Memory Frictions".

⁵⁸ Millar, "Between Western Theory"; Millar, "*Lef ma Case*".

⁵⁹ Bozzoli, "Public Ritual"; Kelsall, "Truth, Lies, Ritual".

TRC's work in Makeni. However, after four months in the country it became clear that this approach was not really applicable as almost nobody in Makeni remembered or cared about symbolic, ritual, or ceremonial aspects of the TRC's public hearing process. Quite to the contrary, people in Makeni, as I have written elsewhere, were more interested in employment, educational opportunities, restarting farms and rebuilding homes than they were with symbolism or even forgiveness.⁶⁰ While the literature at the time argued that ritual would be central to success, spending time with local individuals and in local communities made it clear that priorities lay elsewhere.

Without long-term fieldwork this might have been disastrous, however, as it was this realization - after about four months in the field – did not prove fatal to my research because over those first months I was also coming to understand what was important to people in Makeni. As a result, I was able to reconsider the topics I wanted to explore in my research and identify a more important research question. This was only possible, however, because I had time; because I both had the initial four months of interaction and observation to realize what other questions might be pertinent to local people, and, of course, because I still had six months left to answer them.

Chance

The second key benefit of conducting long-term fieldwork is chance, or the unanticipated communications, interactions, and events that occur when you are somewhere for an extended period and must, therefore, live your life as opposed to only conducting research. As others have noted,⁶¹ during long-term fieldwork chance encounters, weird miscommunications, and serendipitous calamities provide just as much insight about a setting as the formal research itself, and, more importantly, they provide substantive knowledge of the context within which formal data is nested. I will illustrate this through the quite simple example of institutional decay.

On the face of it this problem is easily measured and quantified. Scholars and governments regularly claim to assess the quality of institutions via national level metrics. We can think here of infant mortality rates as a measure of healthcare, graduation rates for education, crime rates for

⁶⁰ Millar, "Evaluations of Justice"; Millar, "Evaluations of Truth"; Millar, "Investing in Peace".

⁶¹ Okely, *Anthropological Practice*; Crapanzano, "At the Heart", 60.

security, or Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for economic development. However, long-term fieldwork provides the researcher a greater understanding of the lived reality – or unreality – of such national figures. Take, for example, the healthcare system. Until 2013 the Sierra Leonean healthcare system was regularly lauded as a success of the post-conflict period for its provision of free healthcare to women, infants, and children,⁶² and an increase in life expectancy by 5 years between 2000 and 2008.⁶³ However, as the Ebola epidemic made clear, and as anyone who had spent substantial time there well knew, healthcare in Sierra Leone was neither successfully rebuilt nor sufficiently resourced. Much like the bloating of the national registers due to non-existent ghost nurses,⁶⁴ the improvements in healthcare and the affordability and accessibility of the system were largely figments of political imagination. Anyone visiting a hospital or clinic in rural Sierra Leone for actual treatment in the past decade knew this.

And this is where chance comes in. If a researcher spends three weeks in-country, staying at nice clean hotels, eating at air-conditioned restaurants, and being driven around in a large SUV, they may never actually have to visit a hospital, a pharmacy, or a clinic except on a guided tour by exactly those actors who are selling the image of a functional system. Over three or four carefully sanitized weeks they may never get malaria or typhoid, pick up a Tumbu fly infection, or get into an accident. But when you live without power or air conditioning, drink the water, get bitten by the mosquitos, and travel around by Okada (motorcycle taxi), you will eventually have all of these experiences. It is only then that you might see the healthcare system in action; or perhaps inaction.

I have had many such experiences during my periods of fieldwork. I have required treatment for malaria three times, typhoid once, and both I and a number of friends and acquaintances have experienced various injuries requiring medical assistance. While none of these experiences were pleasurable of course, and I am not trying to romanticize the dangers of fieldwork or promote unsafe practice to young colleagues, I also know that these experiences provided invaluable insight into how local people experience healthcare institutions in the country. If I had reviewed national

⁶² Donnelly, “How did Sierra Leone”.

⁶³ WHO, *World Health Statistics 2010*.

⁶⁴ Witter, Wurie and Bertone, “Free Health Care Initiative”, 9.

healthcare statistics and been shown around a hospital by its director, a doctor, or a politician, I would have been shown the cleanest wards, the most capable nurses, and the brightest theatres. It was only by experiencing the system first hand – visiting my research assistant’s mother after her heart attack or a friend who had had a motorcycle accident (and later died) – that I came close to seeing it through the eyes of the patients. In other words, it was only because I was there long enough to need to interact with the health system that I had those experiences.

The same applies to the security institutions. The police, for example, have seen an enormous amount of reform and investment over the past 15 years.⁶⁵ Millions have been spent retraining police leadership and officers throughout the country, reequipping the force with vehicles and weapons, and rewriting rules and regulations. While few consider these efforts fully successful, studies have been somewhat optimistic about the process, recognizing the substantial challenges of complete reform.⁶⁶ However, much like the health-sector, having engaged with the police services on various occasions, I completely understand why the formal legal institutions are the second best option for the average Sierra Leonean, who is still much more likely to rely on the chiefly courts or the traditional diviners.⁶⁷

Shortly after my 2012 fieldwork, for example, my research assistant was arrested and held by the police in a town on the highway to Freetown, who then demanded the equivalent of £100 for his release. I was informed that this was because he was known to work for me, a white European, and so he should have access to the money. He was held for weeks in a concrete prison cell filled with other offenders, sleeping on the floor, and relying on friends and family from Makeni for food each day. He was told that if he did not produce the money he would be sent directly to Pademba Road prison, the central prison in Freetown at which the most dangerous and violent prisoners are incarcerated. This is not particularly remarkable in the Sierra Leone penal system where, indeed, there is a long history of detention without trial.⁶⁸

It is because of such experiences that few locals in rural Sierra Leone choose to engage the

⁶⁵ Gbla, “Security Sector Reform”; Krogstad, “Security, Development, and Force”.

⁶⁶ Horn, Olonisakin and Peake, “United Kingdom-led Security”.

⁶⁷ Sawyer, “Remove or Reform”.

⁶⁸ US State Department, “Sierra Leone 2015”; Kamara, “Discharged Inmates”.

police. Just as with teachers, nurses and other civil servants, police often go long periods without their salaries and, partially as a result of this, often take advantage of their position of authority to acquire much needed resources. Instead, local communities in rural Sierra Leone primarily rely on diviners to identify criminals and on Chiefly Courts to adjudicate conflicts. These examples regarding both the healthcare system and the police forces in rural Sierra Leone illustrate the value of the communications, interactions, and events that occur during research not due to meticulous planning, but due to chance. However, such experiences will not occur to researchers visiting a setting for only a few weeks. Chance itself requires time.

Change

This brings us to the final key benefit of long-term fieldwork; the opportunity to experience, observe, and investigate change. It is clear of course that change can best be observed through time and the less time one spends examining any given phenomena the less change can be observed. This is why longitudinal studies are appropriate for examining change in quantitative research, but the same principle applies in ethnographic studies.⁶⁹ During my own periods of extended fieldwork this has been most apparent in the differences within Makeni between research conducted in 2008/2009 and that carried out four years later, in 2012/2013.

The first example of this change is the incredible increase in food, housing and land prices between these two periods. This rise in costs is related to two primary dynamics, one global and one more local. Globally the credit crunch after 2008/2009 and new bio-energy projects throughout the world led to an increase in the global prices for both fuel and food,⁷⁰ which led to substantial rises in the cost of living throughout Sierra Leone. More locally, the influx of workers from other areas of Sierra Leone into Makeni as a result of the Bio-energy project I was studying in 2012/2013, put additional pressure on the labor, housing and food markets. This occurred both because expatriate employees and educated Sierra Leonean workers relocating to Makeni drove up the price of housing within the town itself, and because the substantial influx of less educated laborers from other regions

⁶⁹ Rosaldo, "Grief"; Diphorn, "Emotionality of Participation", 208-209.

⁷⁰ Zoomers, "Globalization and the Foreignisation";

of the country into the villages within the land-lease area of the project (located some miles West of Makeni) drove up the prices of both food and housing for people in the villages.

These changes were substantial and particularly important because interventions that may have been assessed positively in 2008/2009 because they could provide minimal material or economic benefits, were less likely to be experienced positively in 2012/2013 when the value of those benefits had depreciated. As I have reported elsewhere,⁷¹ in 2012 laborers working for the bio-energy company were making approximately \$75 per month. This was commensurate with the salaries of local NGO workers I volunteered with in 2008 and at that time would have been substantial money for village residents. However, by 2012 this income was less than half of what villagers estimated they would need to support a family. Women in the villages in 2012, for example, described being unable to save as they once had for their children's school fees because all of their money was spent on food, while many people complained of eating only one meal per day. Perhaps most difficult were the experiences of those local youth from the villages who had been unable to gain permanent employment with the company; squeezed out by the more educated and urban new arrivals, they found themselves now both landless and without a salary to compensate.

The second change I observed over this time would almost certainly only be noted by a researcher spending enough time in country to interact with local youth, and particularly young men in Makeni. This was a distinct increase in aggressive responses to or expressions of hostility towards expatriates. Indeed, during my first period of extended fieldwork in 2008/2009 I never had one such experience in Makeni, nor did anyone I spoke with show animosity towards or fear of expatriates. Indeed, local people regularly expressed their thanks to the UK and other actors for their role in ending the conflict and praised the work of the few expatriates who were in Makeni at the time (usually less than 20 throughout my 2008/2009 fieldwork).

However, by the time of my 2012 fieldwork this had changed substantially. The numbers of expatriates had multiplied ten-fold, to more than 200, and the kind of work they were doing had also changed significantly. Whereas four years earlier the primary fields of intervention were healthcare

⁷¹ Millar, "Investing in Peace"; Millar, "Coopting Authority".

(doctors and nurses) and development (NGO volunteers), by 2012 the average expatriate was working for the bio-energy company, one of the nearby mining companies, or the companies building infrastructure for these industries. From the initial groups of nurses, doctors, and volunteers in 2008/2009, Makeni was now hosting industrial farmers, engineers, and miners. The social environments in which these expatriates interacted with locals had changed accordingly, from local bars in which the handful of expatriates were a small minority, to expatriate hang-outs where most locals in attendance were either working behind the bar, serving food, or, in the worst cases, providing ‘comfort’ for the now male dominated clientele.

Not surprisingly the response from young Sierra Leonean men to this new dynamic was negative and during my second period of extended fieldwork in 2012 there were regular expressions of hostility towards expatriates. Some Okada drivers would refuse to pick up white passengers at all, while I often received hostile stares in the streets. One evening, food was thrown in my face as I passed a group of young men on an Okada. This new dynamic mirrored the bunker mentality among many of the expatriates working for the companies who were working in the region.⁷² Unlike the expatriates in 2008/2009, who engaged with local communities to shop for food or have a drink, by 2012 there was no reason to enter the local market, drink at a local bar or eat at a local restaurant as two supermarkets and various bars had appeared to cater exclusively to expatriates. Positive interaction between the two communities was, as a result, quite rare.

But, again, this change would be invisible to a researcher who had not been engaged over this relatively long period. A researcher staying in Makeni for a month in 2008 or in 2012 might not have interacted enough with local people to assess their feelings towards expatriates. If they had reached such an assessment in one of these periods, it would either be that people in Makeni are quite friendly to expats or that people in Makeni (and particularly young men) are quite hostile towards expats. But it is more likely that no change would have been noted as the hostile acts themselves are occurrences of chance that simply may not have happened during a quick site visit or if traveling by SUV instead of Okada and staying in hotels instead of local housing. In this way, this

⁷² Millar, “Coopting Authority”.

example makes clear the relationship between time, chance, and change.

As I have discussed elsewhere,⁷³ this hostility is concerning both because it highlights the very real frustrations towards international interventions among local young men, and because it is a sign of the failure of the peacebuilding process to provide the economic opportunities required in a state where the conflict itself was rooted in economic inequalities.⁷⁴ As such, interpreting the nature and drivers of this dynamic – and others like it – are key to assessing post-conflict intervention and providing nuanced suggestions for post-conflict policy formation in this and other cases. But such assessment requires not bounded research questions, short-term field-visits, and reliance on a limited sample of respondents. It requires long-term fieldwork and the substantively different forms of information such research provides.

Conclusion

This article presents a relatively simple argument. As support and funding for international peace interventions grew in the post-Cold War period, so the standardization of what came to be labelled the “peace industry” developed apace, producing cadres of peacebuilding professionals armed with best-practices and technocratic skills. At the same time, and in response to the increased funding for and prominence of peace intervention, funders demanded more assessment of peace interventions and so M&E skills also came to be a sought after within the peace industry. However, these skills too have become technocratic and standardized, producing tick-box assessment mechanisms collecting quantitative data on *outputs* and rarely more substantive evaluations of local experiences. Such approaches to M&E are today accepted as best-practice among peacebuilding organizations, much as quantitative large-N studies of state level data came much earlier to dominate Peace Research and have the most influence on policy.

However, a great amount of recent literature argues against a simplified and linear interpretation that links new or reformed institutions inherently with a more sustainable peace. The local turn literature in critical peacebuilding, with its emphases on the everyday, hybridity, and

⁷³ Millar, “Coopting Authority”.

⁷⁴ Peters and Richards, “Why We Fight”; Humphreys and Weinstein, “Who Fights?”, 439.

resistance, describes a much more agonistic process by which post-conflict peace is constructed,⁷⁵ and the turn to non-linearity, friction, and complexity emphasizes the unpredictable nature of peace intervention effects. This has paralleled an ethnographic turn within IR which this paper certainly contributes to.⁷⁶ However, what I hope to discourage is the easy appropriation of the ethnographic label for research which is more appropriately called qualitative. That is, for research which collects qualitative data in the post-conflict setting, but without *aspiring* to “long-term and open ended commitment, generous attentiveness, relational depth, and sensitivity to context”.⁷⁷

The key purpose of this paper, therefore, has been to articulate how ethnography differs from qualitative work and to illustrate the significant added value of long-term fieldwork for an EPR approach. I emphasized three key added benefits of long-term fieldwork – *time*, *chance*, and *change* – and argued that each provides the researcher additional understanding of the sociocultural context within which data must be understood. Long-term fieldwork may not be necessary to collect qualitative data, but the substantive understanding of what that data means – particularly when collected in sociocultural settings foreign to the researcher – requires the researcher to conduct extended fieldwork within the context of the study. In my own case the added time such fieldwork provided for getting to know the context and the people, for conducting a secondary transcription and analysis of my data, for the evolution of my research question and approach, for the chance encounters, weird miscommunications, and serendipitous calamities that gave unexpected insights to how Sierra Leonean society functions, and for the recognition, observation, and analysis of change, were invaluable and greatly enhanced the substance of my findings.

I do not claim that all research must incorporate long-term fieldwork, nor argue that the approach to EPR I am proposing must be the only or the final approach. Some anthropologists would surely suggest that my approach does not go far enough, that the instrumental or positivist approach I have taken harkens back to an era of positivist Anthropology long since rejected in that discipline. Others may argue that long-term fieldwork is helpful, but not required, that short periods

⁷⁵ Richmond, “Resistance and the Post-Liberal”, 676.

⁷⁶ Vraști, “Strange Case of Ethnography”.

⁷⁷ Ingold, “That’s enough about Ethnography”, 384.

of fieldwork with more focused research questions can be even more valuable. My intention here is to spur exactly those methodological debates which must be had in response to the ongoing ‘ethnographic turn’ within IR and PS. All I sought to do here is respond to the increasing tendency to present qualitative research as ethnographic research without a real engagement with what the term means. By focusing on the added benefits of long-term fieldwork – of time, chance, and change – for understanding post-conflict dynamics, I hope that this article can be taken not as disparaging purely qualitative work, but as highlighting the distinction between the two.

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