Studying Conflict and Practicing Peacebuilding

What can one say about the academic study of violent conflict and its implications for the practice of peacebuilding? There is no reason to assume a necessary relationship between these two spheres of activity; the study of armed conflict may or may not have any practical significance for peacebuilding. Of course many scholars in this field are motivated in part by the hope and expectation that their findings will make a contribution, however slight, to the building and maintenance of peace. The editors of *Journal of Peace Research* articulated this same expectation when, in the inaugural issue of the journal some 50 years ago, they expressed the view that '[p]eace research should … concern itself with [the] reduction of violence and [the] promotion of integration.…and should, preferably, have relevance for peace policy' (Editorial 1964, 2,4). There are two aspects to this question: one is the relationship between the study of war and the study of peace, which other scholars have addressed (Gledhill and Bright 2017); the other is the relationship between the study of war and the *practice* of peacebuilding. This essay is concerned with the latter aspect and, more specifically, with how the academic study of armed conflict may be able to further enrich the practice of peacebuilding.

To suggest that there is scope for 'further' enrichment of peacebuilding practice implies that the academic study of armed conflict informs practice already. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that this may be the case, to a limited degree at least. US President Bill Clinton invoked the Democratic Peace Theory in his 1994 State of the Union address (Clinton 1994) and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan made reference to Paul Collier's theory of the 'conflict trap' in inaugurating the UN Peacebuilding Commission in 2006 (United Nations 2006), to cite just two examples. To date, however, there has been no systematic assessment of how and to what extent national and international policymakers use conflict studies to inform their analysis and decision-making. From Blinder we know that politicians tend to draw on the research findings of economists largely when it suits their purposes—notably, in support of policy positions that they have already adopted (Blinder 2014). From Avey and Desch we know that senior national security policymakers find little of practical value in much social science research (Avey and Desch 2014). There is no reason to expect that the pattern is very different for the sub-field of International Relations that conflict studies represent.

The reasons for the theory-policy divide in relation to the social sciences are many, and much has been written about the factors that account for that divide (Walt 2005; Byman and Kroenig 2016). This article is concerned with features specific to the academic study of violent conflict that generate difficulties of their own for informing public policy. What are some of the obstacles to the reception of academic research on armed conflict by policy analysts and policymakers and how can these obstacles be overcome?

Two Approaches to the Study of Conflict

Broadly speaking, there are two approaches to the academic study of violent conflict. There is an approach, and a corresponding literature, that seeks to derive generalizable claims about the causes and dynamics of violent conflict from analysing the now quite considerable data that have been amassed by, among others, the Correlates of War Project (CoW) and the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). There is another approach, and corresponding literature, that seeks to understand the causes and dynamics of specific conflicts. Within each approach a variety of different research methods are employed. These include, but are not limited to, quantitative analysis commonly using logit and probit models, Cox proportional models, and survival analysis; qualitative analysis using discourse analysis, historical archives, and comparative case study; and mixed methods using a combination of quantitative and

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qualitative analysis.

Each approach to the study of violent conflict has a certain utility—potentially if not actually—for the practice of peacebuilding. Take the first approach. Based on large-N studies of armed conflicts, scholars have a great deal to say about civil war onset. Scholars have identified a wide range of factors that, using various research methods, are used to explain why civil wars occur. Many of these factors can be grouped in terms of their primary emphasis in three categories: on the *motivation* of combatants and their supporters, on the *feasibility* of rebellion, and on the *resilience* of national institutions. Motivation encompasses a wide range of often grievance-based sub-factors, including 'relative deprivation' (Gurr 1970) and 'horizontal inequalities' (Stewart 2008); ethnic insecurity (Posen 1993; Walter and Snyder 1999); and political, social, and economic discrimination (Brown 1996). Feasibility stresses the importance of opportunity over motivation. Rebellion is more likely to occur where material conditions favour it, notably where the terrain is mountainous, allowing rebels to hide; where valuable natural resources are plentiful, allowing rebels to finance their activities from trade; and where external security commitments to governments are weak, allowing rebels to challenge governments more easily (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Collier and Hoeffler 2007). Resilience emphasises the vulnerability of the state to various internal and external pressures (e.g., rising food prices; deforestation) and the capacity of states and their institutions to cope effectively with these pressures (Zartman 1995; World Bank 2011).

How is this research relevant to the practice of peacebuilding? If one can identify the factors that give rise to civil wars, it seems reasonable to assume, then the basis for building peace will arguably reside in being able to manipulate those factors effectively—by eliminating discrimination, for instance, or by establishing more representative institutions, or by strengthening state capacity—bearing in mind the enormous difficulty of bringing about many of these changes.

There are a number of problems with this reasoning, however. The first problem is that scholars are not of one mind on these matters. To varying degrees scholarship in this area is marked by tensions and a lack of consensus. As Charles Call, a leading political scientist who has surveyed the literature, has observed, there is 'tremendous disparity among scholars about whether certain factors are important or not, and about the degree to which they are important' (Call 2012, 30). Faced with conflicting findings that have disparate implications for policymaking, policymakers often find academic scholarship less than helpful for their particular purposes.

The second problem is that for peacebuilding purposes, the attention to the causes of violent conflict may be misplaced. As Susan Woodward observes, 'Wars are transformative,' and the factors that give rise to them may no longer pertain as a consequence of changes that the conflict may have generated—changes such as major population displacements as a result of forced migration or the emergence of new political or military elites. 'Creating a sustainable peace [therefore] requires addressing the reality created by that war—the outcomes, not the causes' (Woodward 2007, 155).

Another potentially fruitful line of inquiry, then, is to focus not on the causes of civil war but on the causes of peace. What measures have been successful in establishing and maintaining peace after violent conflict? This line of inquiry would appear to be more promising insofar as it draws its analysis from experiences of success. Again, however, the range of possibilities—and the differences among scholars—is considerable. Scholars have stressed the importance of the nature of civil war terminations (Licklider 1993), third-party security guarantees (Fortna 2004), security-sector reform (Toft 2009), and inclusive political settlements (Call 2012), among various other measures.

The identification of critical factors alone, moreover, is not sufficient to account for why conflict occurs; there needs also to be a credible and verifiable explanation of why they matter—what the causal pathways are—and scholars disagree about these too. That is the third problem. For instance, scholars who agree that peacekeeping makes a positive contribution to peacebuilding maintain variously that it succeeds because it mitigates the security dilemma among warring parties (Fortna 2004); or it succeeds because it reinforces negotiated settlements (Caplan and Hoeffler 2017); or it succeeds because it constitutes a projection of power (Howard forthcoming). These differences matter for peacebuilding strategies.

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Perhaps the biggest problem with the large-N approach is that it is extremely difficult to produce generalizable conclusions with high levels of confidence—although scholars do it all the time—because the phenomenon in question (civil wars) is extremely complex, and because the data that are being analysed are often poor or even non-existent (Roll and Swenson). The complexity means that there will always be idiosyncratic features of a conflict that may need to be born in mind to understand it. And the scarcity of (reliable) data means that scholars often have to rely on various proxies that may or may not represent the factors in question well or well enough. Moreover, often the data are national aggregate data when what is needed, especially for very large states, are data for the conflict-affected region(s) of the states in question.

The Merits of Qualitative Analysis

This is what is appealing about the second approach to the study of conflict, which focuses on specific conflicts and the dynamics of those conflicts in much the same way that an ethnographer approaches the specific characteristics and dynamics of an alien society. The advantage to case studies is that they provide thick description of the nuts and bolts of successful peacebuilding. They allow a researcher to take into consideration all conceivably relevant factors without having to worry about lack of comparability with other cases because s/he is not necessarily seeking to derive a theory or explanation about all peacebuilding but, rather, an account of peacebuilding in one case. There is much we have learned from the successes of building sustainable peace in Mozambique, Sierra Leone, East Timor, Guatemala, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, to name but a few of the well-studied cases—lessons that arguably have implications for peacebuilding more generally. Of course this approach may be no more likely to yield a consensus among scholars than the first approach. The wars in the former Yugoslavia, for example, have produced numerous competing explanations for their occurrence, and corresponding assessments of 'post-conflict' peacebuilding, by scholars with impeccable credentials (Ramet 2005). Again, with such complex social phenomena as civil wars, this will often be the case.

The inherent limitation of case studies is their external validity. To what extent are the factors of success in one case necessary conditions for enduring peace in other cases? For instance, a lot of the evidence drawn from large-N studies points toward political exclusion as a significant factor that explains civil unrest (Call 2012). A peacebuilding strategy based on political inclusion, often power sharing of some kind, is thought therefore to be key to sustaining peace. Numerous examples—from Mozambique to El Salvador to Macedonia and Liberia—bear this out. However, power sharing is not a panacea; and it is not applicable everywhere. The limitations of power sharing is something that only deep knowledge of specific contexts can tell us. Details also matter a great deal here: for instance, if we agree that inclusiveness matters, how broadly inclusive does a political settlement have to be to be successful? And is there ever a case for exclusion or delayed inclusion of potential spoilers—as with the Taliban in Afghanistan? The point is simply that there are no formulas for success; no templates that can be applied indiscriminately.

These two approaches—large-N studies and case study analysis—are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the most fruitful approach, for peacebuilding purposes, often lies with a combination of these two approaches. Large-N studies point towards particular factors that are deserving of consideration in thinking about what could be an effective strategy for building peace in a specific conflict situation. Deep knowledge of the specific conflict, in turn, can tell us how likely it is that a peacebuilding strategy designed to address these factors will contribute to the consolidation of peace. Recognition of the value of a dual approach is reflected in the work of the many scholars who increasingly employ both of them in their research (Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Call 2012; Caplan and Hoeffler 2017).

Even armed with deep knowledge we can never know with any precision, with any certainty, how sustainable a peace may be. When Kosovo erupted in violence in 2004 it was widely known that the frustration within the Kosovo Albanian community was mounting and that continued irresolution of the status question—whether Kosovo would become independent of Serbia or not—could not go on indefinitely. But even deep knowledge of Kosovo arguably could not establish that Kosovo was at the breaking point at that particular time (King and Mason 2006). What we need are stress tests so that we can know whether the peace that has been established in the wake of violent conflict is a stable peace. Effective stress tests have been devised for banks. Can such tests be devised for peace? What would they look like? These are key questions for peacebuilding and this is where scholarship and practice are both deficient.

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The problem at the core of these difficulties points to the 'epistemological gap' that reflects the limits of our current knowledge. Unless this gap also reflects the limits of knowledge full stop—and there is no reason to believe that it does—then it is imperative for scholars interested in understanding the nature of peace to persist in overcoming it. That cannot be achieved by studying war; that cannot be achieved by studying peace; that can only be achieved by studying war and peace together.

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