International Journal for Peace and Justice

MAURO INSTITUTE FOR PEACE & JUSTICE AT ST. PAUL'S COLLEGE

Researching Ethnic, Indigenous, and Strategically Undervalued Communities in Divided Societies: Some Challenges and Critical Observations

Sean Byrne

Introduction

Protracted ethnic conflicts are driven by a complex interplay of multiple internal causes that include objective and subjective factors as well as various external regional and international actors meddling in these conflicts (Byrne, 2019; Smyth & Robinson, 2001). "Chosen glories" and "chosen traumas" are passed intergenerationally causing competitive dehumanizing victimization narratives of past events that manipulate group's collective memories and escalate conflict (Volkan, 1997). Yet ethnic group's collective memories of the past can also be used as reconciliation tools for healing as cultural peacebuilding rituals, constructive stories, and practices play a crucial role in transforming historical narratives (Senehi, 2020, 2022). At the same time, however, a complex interplay of homophobia and xenophobia (othering), historical and systemic violence (colonial institutions), manipulated information (scapegoating) and lack of empathy (no support) often target both ethnic and strategically undervalued groups coexisting in divided societies (Brett, 2020; Rivas & Browne, 2019).

Hetereonormativity reinforces and prioritizes masculinist practices as strategically undervalued groups like asylum seekers; Black, Indigenous and Brown people; disabled people; ex-combatants; LGBTQI+ individuals'; newcomers; refugees; women; youth; and the very poor are violently targeted and excluded from power so that it is useful to utilize a queer lens focusing

on complexity, heterogeneity, and multiple stories while rejecting the "positive-negative peace binary" (Mizzi & Byrne, 2015). Strategically undervalued groups can be targeted by global actors like funders, international agencies, and powerful states while also being decimated by state driven "necropolitics" as the political and economic elite decide who lives and who dies among the excluded (Mbembe, 2019).

Qualitative research must, therefore, include local ethnic, Indigenous, and strategically undervalued communities in peace research that is inclusive and respects their needs, while quantitative studies can help in our understanding of interesting patterns that emerge across a myriad of cases that impact these groups (Olson Lounsberry & Pearson, 2009). Critical qualitative methodologies are important as they centre Indigenous peoples and strategically undervalued communities as subject in decolonizing research contributing to the pursuit of social change (Smith, 1999). Reflexive, transparent, and accountable researchers who bring their ideas into the research domain can partner with local, Indigenous, and strategically undervalued communities in a transformative research process that includes their epistemologies, cosmologies, and stories that analyze and deconstruct unjust structures (Senehi, 2020; Wilson, 2009). The reflexive researcher builds trust with local strategically undervalued communities and Indigenous research participants while having a nuanced comprehension of the local cultural milieu and conflict context while ensuring local research participant's confidentiality, security, and data security (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2009).

That said, ongoing intergroup conflicts and wars were affected by the recent COVID-19 global pandemic that disrupted research plans and participant recruitment, causing researchers to restructure research designs and change their studies focus which caused delays in terms of setting up virtual interviews to generate qualitative data (Archibald et al. 2019; Howlett, 2021;

Keen et al., 2021; Mwambari et al., 2021; Rivera-Holgun et al., 2024; Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021; Zagar, 2022).

Partnering with ethnic, Indigenous, and strategically undervalued communities during violent conflicts and a global pandemic often limited these groups from meaningful participation in research that necessitated a rethink of how scholars could do the research (Chirambwi, 2023) and the reimagining of utilizing new creative research methods with these groups (Kaihko, 2020; Khan & MacEachen, 2022; Maphosa, 2013; Tomas & Bidet, 2024). Researching ethnic, Indigenous, and strategically undervalued and vulnerable communities also has an ethical dimension of preventing power imbalances and doing no harm (Kostovicoa & Knott, 2020; Morgan, 2020; Owor, 2022) especially regarding gender diverse communities (Jennings, 2020) while also dealing with ethical tensions and logistical complexities in terms of virtual remote qualitative research (Ladd, 2024).

Consequently, this special issue on researching ethnic, Indigenous, and strategically undervalued communities offers some interesting observations that inform research, social justice, and peacebuilding practices. The special issue provides an important discussion exploring research with strategically undervalued communities in intergroup, Indigenous, and ethnic conflicts relative to their marginalization at the global level. The primary aim of this special issue is to generate a better apprehension of these conflicts within a Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS) research lens exploring challenges of researching ethnic, Indigenous, and strategically undervalued groups while providing some practical insights to those challenges. This special issue seeks to influence PACS research and praxis to grasp how factors ranging from cultural practices, economic resources, Indigenous epistemologies, decolonization, and peacebuilding behaviour impact ethnic, Indigenous, and strategically undervalued group's

identities and their survival that is threatened by structural inequalities, terrorism, ableism, homonationalism, homophobia, and transgenerational trauma.

Overview and Organization of the Special Issue

This special issue offers a discussion of some of the challenges of researching ethnopolitical conflicts, and Indigenous and strategically undervalued communities.

For example, Ilker Kalin, Frederic Pearson, and Marie Olsen Lounsbery explore why governments negotiate with some terror groups while not engaging with others in ongoing civil conflicts? Research often handles terror groups as a single type, omitting significant differences about how they interact with local people. The article separates rebel groups according to their public images and standing and their employment of civilian violence. The article concentrates on three structures of legitimacy-building, namely media presence, political affiliation, and public goods provision, exploring how each form interrelates with civilian targeting behavior. The authors utilize data from the Reputation of Terror Groups (RTG) and Peace Negotiations in Civil Conflicts (PNCC) datasets (1980–2011). The findings indicate that political affiliation substantially expands the possibility of negotiation, yet only when groups forgo their use of high levels of civilian violence. Public goods provision is correlated with a higher probability of negotiation irrespective of targeting behavior, while media presence indicated no congruent effect. These findings indicate the strategic importance of constituency-building in fashioning negotiation interactions during civil conflict.

Next, Chuck Thiessen, Calum Dean, and Sean Byrne explore relationship-building within the Northern Ireland peace process. Drawing on 120 interviews, conducted by the third author, with individuals including Civil Society Organizational (CSO) leaders in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Armagh, Cavan, Derry, Donegal, Fermanagh, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan,

and Tyrone which received funding from the European Union (EU) PEACE III Fund and/or the International Fund for Ireland (IFI), to support their peacebuilding efforts. This article considers the enduring concerns around building connections between Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL) and Catholic Nationalist Republican (CNR) communities, and highlights several of the positives and potential ways forward. Accomplishments within connection building across PUL and CNR communities is evident, however, of ongoing ethnocultural and political tensions that have limited the aptitude for relationship building. This was a central goal of the peace dividend; to foster improved cross-community relations. Thus, the capacity for people in Northern Ireland to experience peace has been inhibited, restricting the ability to truly move beyond the Troubles, and leaving the past and latent tensions unaddressed.

In addition, Paul N. Cormier and Sean Byrne discuss a needed critical turn in economic inequality-political conflict (EI-PC) research that will benefit from qualitative and Indigenous methodologies. Given the oppressive nature of colonial processes towards economic exploitation, and the manufactured poverty of Indigenous peoples around the globe, scholarship and research that requires moral dialogue with, and the participation of Indigenous communities, is suggested as the foundation for postcolonial transformation. This involves exploring the disciplines contested interests with the EI/PC debate as one of those conflicts (Battiste, 2009, p. xxi). Critically strategically undervalued groups including Indigenous peoples in the EI-PC debate are severely impacted by a globalized and inherently unjust global economic system. The global capitalist system has evolved to their detriment with the appropriation of traditional lands and other exploitations for economic gain. The system's violence remains largely hidden, and the struggle for the land's food, water, and natural resources required for ceremonial purposes is often disregarded in debates over inequality. By localizing research approaches to the EI-PC

debate, opportunities for bringing further clarity to these issues will open the debate and calls for action.

Peter Kulchyski notes that *Makeso Sahahikan Inninuwak* pointed out that "*Oochinehwin,*" as enunciated in the Fox Lake Cree Nation Report, is "the belief that a negative action against an animal, a person or the land could negatively impact the fate of a person, family members, or the next generation." Other practices that might end in *Oochinehwin* comprise being impudent and unkind to orphans, as well as including other variations of prejudice. "The knowledge that there are consequences for inappropriate behaviors... was an important part of the people's worldview and directly influenced the choices they made in their daily lives" (FLCN, 2012).

Following, Lucie Besken and Sean Byrne analyse the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan through the lens of the "social cubism" analytical framework (Byrne & Carter, 1996). The analysis focuses on how the six interrelated internal dimensions of demographics, economics, history, political, psychocultural, and religious factors helped to shape this intractable conflict over time to gain a deeper understanding of why this protracted conflict is so difficult to resolve and what it would take for successful and constructive intervention to deescalate the violence and build trust and reconciliation between both countries. The analysis shows how the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan cannot be understood by focussing solely on material or psychocultural factors alone. Rather it is their unique combination and interaction over time and across levels of analysis that shape the behaviour of the groups in conflict and reveal its complexity. The social cubism analytical model has been applied to understand other ethnic conflicts as well. Applying the social cubism model to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict assists in comprehending why international peacebuilding efforts in the past

have failed and illustrates how any constructive peacebuilding intervention must be multi-dimensional, multi-modal, and multi-level, including the behaviour of external regional and international actors, and be informed by a complexified understanding of the conflict to have any chance of success.

Next, Sean Byrne, Robert C. Mizzi, Nancy Hansen and T. Sheppard-Luangkhot note how the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit, culture wars and sectarianism, and exclusion continue to estrange strategically undervalued communities living in Northern Ireland as ableist, cisgender, and heterosexual white privileged men make decisions that affect their local everyday lives. Disabled people and LGBTQI+ citizens continue to bear the brunt of direct, cultural, and structural violence and the heightened siege mentality in Northern Ireland as well as exclusion from peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts. Their efforts during the pandemic to travel to Northern Ireland to complete inperson interviews with disabled people and LGBTQI+ people were marred by COVID-19 travel restrictions. They also experienced potential participants who were hesitant to participate in any research with external researchers. The purpose of this article is to reflect, as critical researchers, on the tensions of initiating a qualitative research study at a geographical and social distance. The authors discussions reveal that outside researchers seeking to work with highly vulnerable populations in protracted ethnopolitical conflict and civil war settings must be cognizant of their liminal roles as well as the psychosocial triggers that impact people living in marginalized spaces. Participant-centred research is a form of social action that can be valuable exploration.

Northern Ireland hosts a complex web of actors, including Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), government bodies, commercial enterprises, and strategically disadvantaged communities, which coexist in fragile and often unpredictable ways. Sustaining peace in this

contested space remains a significant challenge. In such a system, peacebuilding is less static, and it involves constant survival and negotiation modes. Mehmet Yavuz and Sean Byrne explore how CSOs in Northern Ireland navigate this evolving ecology of peacebuilding amid the persistent challenges to the peace process, peacebuilding projects, and shifting political and donor bureaucratic requirements. By exploring these dynamics through the lens of local CSO leaders, we gain some insight into the precarious balance CSOs must maintain to foster local people's agency, democratic accountability, and social justice in deeply polarized post-peace accord Northern Ireland.

Researchers use decolonizing research methods to amplify and tell the stories about the lived experiences of strategically undervalued and vulnerable groups in conflict milieus by building strong relationships through inclusive and participatory research that addresses their basic human needs (Douedari et al., 2021; Senehi, 2020, 2022).

Conclusion

As seen later in this special issue, the articles explore researching ethnic and Indigenous groups and strategically undervalued groups. The issue focuses on a need for equality, diversity, and inclusion among ethnic, Indigenous, and strategically undervalued and vulnerable communities that goes beyond powersharing along ethnosectarian divisions. It also includes a recognition of these communities economic and political needs, decolonization, and connections between healing practices and micro and macro-based reconciliation practices so that incorporating local peace methods and norms into international, regional, and state peacebuilding and human security interventions can be adapted to the local and state levels. Overall, this

special issue tries to comprehend some of the challenges faced when researching ethnic, Indigenous, and strategically undervalued groups in protracted conflict milieus.

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