Grasping Subjectivities of Peace And Power in the Analysis of International Peacebuilding

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*THIS IS THE FIRST DRAFT OF A WORK IN PROGRESS – PLEASE DO NO QUOTE WITHOUT FIRST CONSULTING THE AUTHOR*

Abstract

The emergence of a vast amount of literature discussing the ‘local’ domain of peacebuilding over the last years has reflected (and contributed to) the increasing use of ethnography as a methodological approach to understand the effects of international activities in post-violent conflict societies. Whereas this literature has greatly contributed to a deeper understanding of the interactions between international and local actors and the power dynamics that frame these interactions, the more subjective aspects that conform everyday life in these contexts have been more difficult to grasp. This paper discusses some of the challenges related to ethnographic research in the pursuit of different subjectivities of peace and power in peacebuilding contexts. After offering an overview of the epistemological and methodological trends in peacebuilding research over the years, it discusses two factors that influence the quality of ethnographic research. The first is the becoming familiar of what I call the local ‘social grammar’. The second is the practical process of ‘translation’ of local subjectivities, which, I argue, have to be informed by the social grammar. The paper offers some examples of such processes in the analysis of the concepts of peace and power, before concluding with some remarks regarding the next steps to improve this research agenda.

Introduction

The number of ethnographic studies in the domain of peacebuilding has increased at a fast pace over the last decade (e.g., Milne, 2010; Millar et al., 2013; Autesserre, 2014a and 2014b; Denskus, 2014; Bräuchler, 2015). This increase can be explained by several factors. First, the critical ‘local turn’ in the analysis of peacebuilding has opened the doors for the deep questioning of how peacebuilding activities were conducted over the 1990s and 2000s — mostly from the top-down. As a consequence, a new interested has emerged in academia for a better understanding of local dynamics of peace, as well as how local and international actors interact in the context of such

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interventions (e.g., Mac Ginty, 2010; Richmond 2011; Millar et al., 2013). Second, several authors have started to question the very assessment of peacebuilding activities, pointing to the contradiction between official reports that often highlighted the positive outcome of external actions and the everyday local experiences of peace (Sandole, 2010; Roberts, 2013; Millar, 2014; Maschietto, 2015). Third, and as a consequence, an increased interest in Anthropology and its methods has emerged as an alternative (and also complementary) way to understand the limitations of peacebuilding activities.

There is no doubt that the rise of ethnographic studies has contributed to a profound rethinking of peacebuilding efficacy. Besides pointing to the many contradictions between institutionally top-down-led reforms and the everyday social dynamics of post-violent conflict contexts, they have paved the way for the emergence of new theoretical thinking, new concepts and new practical approaches that have, to a certain extent, also influenced the policy discourse (Paffenholz, 2015). At the same, with rare exceptions (Millar, 2014), the increase of these kinds of studies has not been followed by a very systematised methodological discussion about the use of ethnography in peacebuilding contexts. Partly, this may be because of the nature of these studies, which focus on small individualise cases. Yet, given the specific nature of post-violent conflict settings and the recent epistemological debates in the study of peacebuilding, such an agenda is crucial at this stage.

This paper aims to contribute to this reflection by pondering on the challenging task of analysing subjective aspects in peacebuilding contexts. To do so, it first presents an overview of the epistemological and methodological choices that have dominated peacebuilding research over the years, before the emerging trend in ethnography. Next, it discusses two interrelated aspects that are deemed fundamental to the process of grasping subjective. The first is the becoming familiar with what I call the local ‘social grammar’. The second is the practical process of ‘translation’ of local subjectivities, which, I argue, have to be informed by the social grammar. The paper offers some examples of such processes in the analysis of the concepts of peace and power, before concluding with some remarks regarding the next steps to improve this research agenda.

**Researching peacebuilding: an overview**

The way peacebuilding has been analysed in academia has been largely influenced by how the term has been defined and dealt with in the policy realm.

Whereas the term ‘peacebuilding’ existed before the 1990s, being discussed, for instance, by Galtung in 1976, its popularity and centrality in the policy domain was directly linked to its
introduction in the United Nations (UN) milieu, following the publication of the 1992 Secretary General’s report *An Agenda for Peace*. In the report, peacebuilding indicated an “action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict” (UN, 1992, par. 21), either between nationals, either between peoples. In 1995, *The Supplement to An Agenda for Peace* further elaborated the concept, pointing to the more general changes associated to the end of the Cold War and the changing nature of conflicts, and the need for interventions to be long term, in order to help restablishing “effective government” (UN, 1995: par. 13). Efforts to this end would include “the building up of national institutions, the promotion of human rights, the creation of civilian police forces and other actions in the political field” (ibid.). This document paved the way for what would become the mainstream view of peacebuilding in the policy realm, where the concept became associated with what was later commonly referred to as the ‘liberal peace’. That is, according to this agenda, building peace in post-conflict states entailed pushing for democracy and development, which would, in turn, help addressing the root causes of conflict, such as social injustices, and facilitate the process of reconciliation.

As this agenda proved extremely ambitious with a very low rate of success over the 1990s, greater emphasis was eventually placed on the institutional aspect of the state as the locus where international actors should target in order to help foster stability before pushing for a broader agenda of democracy and liberalisation (Paris, 2004; Fukuyama, 2006; Sabaratnam, 2011). This call, reflected in the emphasis on statebuilding and the urgency to deal with ‘fragile states’ became even stronger after 9/11, where peace inside states was strongly linked to international security.

Overall, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, peacebuilding was assessed through the lenses of policy efficiency in a fairly positivistic way. That is, the first big stream of academic research on peacebuilding largely followed the mainstream epistemological approaches that dominated International Relations research. As there was a general concern with the efficacy of peacebuilding operations, and with how to improve their ability to promote stability in war-torn countries, several comparative studies were conducted, trying to identify variables that could, in turn, explain and also be influenced so as to increase such activities’ efficacy (see, for instance, Paris, 2004; Paffenholz, 2005; Doyle and Sambanis, 2006; Call and Cousens, 2007; Sandole, 2010).

One of the key studies from 2004, *At War’s End*, by Roland Paris, for example, compared 11 countries that had hosted peacebuilding missions, in order to assess the extent to which political and economic liberalisation had contributed to lasting peace in those countries. While critical, in
the sense that it problematised the way that liberal peace was implemented, Paris’ work still called for intervention in “war-shattered states” and emphasised the need for liberal marked democracies for peace to last. His proposal was, thus, to find new mechanisms to increase the efficacy of such intervention – in this case, by applying the formula “institutionalization before liberalisation”.

The 2006 work from Doyle and Sambanis also built on comparisons to understand “how the international community, and the UN in particular, can assist the reconstruction of peace in civil war-torn lands” (Doyle and Sambanis, 2006: 4). Discussing theories about the origins and solutions to civil wars, the authors proposed a “peacebuilding triangle” that helped understand how much international assistance was needed in each post-war context. This model was then applied in different cases, and lessons were drawn in order to propose a plan to improve the success record of peacebuilding missions.

While different, in the sense that it highlighted the need to focus on the specific context of each country, the work of Doyle and Sambanis was also framed by a positivistic perspective, reflected in their methodology, which included both the statistic analysis of all civil wars since 1945, as well as the empirical analysis of different cases studies, using mostly secondary sources while testing their models. More generally, both works were very much guided by a problem-solving perspective, leading, thus, to recommendation on how to improve current operations.

By the end of the 2000s, the recurrent low success record of peacebuilding missions, notwithstanding the renewed agenda of statebuilding, ushered stronger critiques, this time focused not only on the way those mission were conducted, but, more fundamentally, on their very role within the more structural international context. It seemed clear that changing technical features or focusing on institutional fixes was not good enough. The ‘local turn’ in peacebuilding represented a shift in the literature where aspects such as culture and power became central to understand the limitations of peacebuilding.

THE ‘LOCAL TURN’ AND THE CALL FOR ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES IN PEACEBUILDING

The ‘local turn’ in peacebuilding can be defined as a general shift in perspective where local actors are given priority both in the analysis as well as in the practice of peacebuilding. As noted by Paffenholz (2015), we may identify two moments where this local shift took place. In the early 1990s, important work by practitioner of peacebuilding and conflict resolution, such as John Paul Lederach and Adam Curle, called for the need to prioritize local empowerment during peace processes. This approach focused on the need to make peace sustainable and the only way to do
so was by enhancing local actors’ capacities and ownership of the process. Ultimately, it aimed at reconciliation.

The second local turn, was driven by a more direct critique of the international peacebuilding/statebuilding apparatus, in particular its impositive and ethnocentric character. From this perspective, it entailed a different kind of critique, based mostly on the epistemological and ontological domains of the mainstream peacebuilding agenda (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013; Paffenholz, 2015). A key feature of this turn is the understanding that power is a central element that needs to be taken into consideration in the analysis of peacebuilding, in particular the power asymmetries that exist between external and local actors and the design and proliferation of policy agendas.

Related to this is the call for emancipation and the revision of power relations in peacebuilding, where the concept of resistance is particularly important (Richmond, 2011). In this regard, whilst the critical turn has a clear agenda of promoting change – i.e., by unveiling the power relations embedded in international activities and by recognising and stimulating local solutions for peace – it is very different from the first local turn, in the sense that, ultimately, the main critique is directed towards the very constitution of knowledge surrounding peacebuilding. Ideas of north-south, post-colonialism and post-structuralism are thus at the very base of such critique (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013; Paffenholz, 2015).

Methodologically, the critical local turn calls for a multidisciplinary approach to peacebuilding analysis, relying extensively on Anthropology and ethnographic approaches, as well as action-related methodologies and, thus, changing considerably the way ‘efficiency’ is assessed. Moving towards a micro-level of analysis, where the everyday gains prominence, the local turn praises localised studies, everyday practices of peace, opening space for a different kind of engagement with local actors, where the latter are not mere ‘objects of study’, but agents who manifest different forms of power, often resisting international practices of peacebuilding. Peace is, thus, hybrid, as “At all levels there are subjects exercising their agency for peace or against it” (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013: 737).

The implication of these assumptions is that the prospects of success of top-down social engineering for peace – such as ‘exporting’ Western institutions of governance - are slim, to say the least. Instead, what is needed is a better understanding of how local dynamics work. That is, peace needs to be contextualised, not only in terms of history and its materiality, but also, if not more importantly, from the subjective point of view of the actors that are agents of such a peace. In other words, peacebuilding practices can only be improved as long as there is a better
understanding on how local dynamics work. This, in turn, requires direct engagement with those who are supposed to be the beneficiaries and main actors of peace, i.e., national and local actors.

It is in this context that ethnography gains relevance. Methodologically speaking, this is one the best instruments to reach local actors and engage with their realities. More generally, the case for ethnographic studies is made against the very limitations of traditional studies in pointing out the reasons for the failures of peacebuilding. As noted by Millar (2014: 15), the overall trend in peacebuilding has led to “increasing standardization, professionalization, and evaluation but with little focus on how any of this is experienced by local people on the ground in transitional states”.

This is problematic for several reasons. First, what constitute ‘success’ and ‘efficiency’ may mean different things for international agencies and local actors. Many recent empirical studies have shown that often the very indicators used to measure the success of peacebuilding have not the same relevance or even meaning to those who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of such activities (ibid., Robins, 2013; Roberts, 2013; Maschietto, 2015). It is no wonder that often many positive evaluations of peacebuilding activities do not seem to make sense once a researcher reaches the local level and asks ordinary people about their own views of such processes.

There is in fact a basic problem of ‘translation’, where the language used by international, as well as many of the givens that are at the base of peacebuilding activities and ideology, often do no match local reality. It is with this in mind that Millar (2014), in his call for more ethnography in peacebuilding, suggests that, before proposing any ‘solutions’ practitioners and academics should make a step back and first understand local actors’ perspectives. The premise here, often unacknowledged in the peacebuilding agenda, is that the phenomena being study is in fact culturally variable (ibid.). Yet, contrary to that, most practices start form the premise that the values underlying peacebuilding and the experiences lived through this process are somehow universal (ibid.; Richmond, 2011).

A key point stressed by Millar is the fact that peacebuilding is experiential, that is, the way peacebuilding is lived and understood is contingent on how different actors experience it. At the same time, capturing such experiential variations is a challenging task that cannot fully be accomplished by means of quantitative methods, such as surveys, one of reasons being the fact that the language used in such instruments is framed by external actors and development agencies (see also Mac Ginty and Firchow, 2016). That is, words and variables are predefined, so they cannot capture other elements that, in practice, may be more relevant for local agents but that are not envisioned in the paradigm that frames these interventions in the first place. In order to truly understand how local actors experience these interventions, it is necessary to provide space for
alternative concepts and local transcripts to show up, and ethnography seems, so far, the best instrument for this purpose. This entails engaging with different types of local actors, as expectations about peace and experiences vary. In other words, it entails dealing with the more subjective aspect of peace, while acknowledging that subjectivities directly impact objective outcomes, i.e., actors’ actions and responses towards peacebuilding activities.

The following sections discuss two challenges related to the task of understanding subjective aspects in peacebuilding settings. I start from the premise that, if the main purpose of the ‘local turn’ is to get closer to local actors, identify their priorities and contribute to a peace agenda that fosters emancipation, it is crucial that a platform of communication is well established. As straightforward as this may seem, in practice, this ability depends on a complex process of translation that is influenced by elements such as empathy, power dynamics (particularly between the researcher and the research participants), as well as structural factors that the researcher cannot control.

The first challenge is related to the acknowledgment and identification of what I call ‘social grammars’, which shape the world of the researcher and the world of those actors she is trying to understand. The second challenge, closely linked to the former, is mastering the process of translation of local subjectivities. This challenge is more practical, in the sense that it entails both decoding the language of the researched actors as well as problematizing one’s own language and find the best way to improve communication between the two systems.

**Acknowledging different social grammars and subjectivities**

By ‘social grammar’, I mean the set of principles and implicit and explicit rules that influence social behavior in a certain society. This includes the broader historical, cultural and spiritual frames that shape the way actors understand the world. In a nutshell, it is what helps an actor make sense of the world.

Other terms have been used to express this general idea. Johan Galtung, for example, speaks of social cosmologies, where ‘cosmology’ stands for “certain motivational syndromes that are embedded in [actors’] collective subconscious (in contrast to their consciously present ideology)” and that affect behaviour (Galtung, 1997: 188). By referring to social cosmology, Galtung’s intent is to assert the primacy of culture or civilization, in contrast to approaches that stress the primacy of the economy, or political institutions, for example. Accordingly, “Cosmology is the code, or program, of a civilization, usually better seen from the outside than by insiders who will typically find it too normal and natural, like the air around them, to be able to verbalize it.” (ibid.: 188-9).
In a different fashion, Pierre Bourdieu (1977) uses the term *doxa*, to refer to the sense of limits (or sense of reality) that each individual has, or, in other words, what each individual takes for granted (in particular implicit set of rules that govern social action). In his theoretical sociological approach, Bourdieu states that a *doxa* is fundamental in shaping and perpetuating what he calls *habitus*, that is, the structures that shape and limit (or regulate) actors’ behaviour over time. Differently from the idea of social cosmology, understanding the *doxa* entails a critical assessment of both material and symbolic aspects of a society. In fact, changing a *doxa* is extremely difficult, because general patterns of behaviour and the current distribution of resources (material and symbolic) tend to validate the existing taxonomies that classify people and, therefore, reinforce the *doxa*. When it is possible to see the *doxa* as a system of representation, as opposed to an absolute reality, then it is possible to have a competing alternative *doxa* and contestation may take place.

The idea of social grammar as used in this paper is detached from any specific social theory, but it is closer to the concept of *doxa* rather than to social cosmology. While acknowledging the crucial role of culture, it is not exclusively focused on it, not least because the assumption here (and especially considering peacebuilding settings, where international efforts aim at expanding Western values and institutions) is that culture is in constant motion, and is also framed by historical and economic factors. Moreover, the social grammar does not refer exclusively to either formal or informal (or even subconscious) rules, but encompasses both reflective and non-reflective action.

In practical terms, the idea of social grammar shares some general assumptions of situated theory. Situated theory stems from the premise that “The ability to discern what may be intelligible and legitimate in some social system requires some knowledge of local understandings about action”, which, in turn, “form the basis for the design of local action” (Miller and Rudnick, 2010: 65). Accordingly, these understandings “are generated from the analysis of local systems of practice, premise and meaning that animate social life in some place” (ibid.). It is through the analysis of these cultural understandings that it is possible to identify what are the local strategies, “for managing and improving social life that are developed in, and indigenous to, a given locale or community” (Philipsen 2009 quoted in Miller and Rudnick, 2010: 65).

When I refer to social grammar, I am referring specifically to the general system of local practices, which may include explicit and implicit recognised rules, which guide local attitudes and behaviours. It comprises, therefore, the broader frame of socially accepted beliefs and rules.
The idea of subjectivities, on the other hand, points to the multiple ways each actor or groups of actors perceive and experience the different processes they engage with in their daily lives, including, in this case, any peacebuilding related activity. While using the term ‘subjectivities’, I subscribe to the idea of “multiple interpretative horizons [that] give actors an ability to adapt to social context and [that] are a source of autonomy” (Haugaard 1997: 187). Such interpretative horizons influence both the practical consciousness knowledge, i.e., the tacit knowledge that the actor is not able to formulate discursively, as well as the discursive consciousness knowledge, i.e., that is, the behaviour that results from a conscious reflection of an actor (Giddens 1979). In other words, any behaviour, be it ‘automatic’ or ‘rational’, is influenced by a broader context that precedes it – the social grammar in place – as well as by how each actors understand their own position in this broader setting. The idea of subjectivities focuses, therefore, on interpretation and meaning. Understanding the social grammar of a society is key to grasp local subjectivities, as it provides the general context that is the starting point for interpretation. The implication here is that, for the researcher to interpret local action, as local actors themselves understand it, she has to be familiar with the social grammar, which changes often dramatically across cultures.

But how can we capture the social grammar and the actors’ subjectivities in a particular peacebuilding setting? It should be stressed that, while social grammar and subjectivities are interrelated, identifying both may entail different objectives and processes. Identifying local subjectivities, as in recognising the difference between the dominant international view of local dynamics and local views of the same processes, has been, in fact, one of the main concerns of several studies within the local turn (see, for instance, Mac Ginty, 2008; Roberts, 2011 and (ed.) 2013 Richmond, 2011; Hellmüller, 2013; Millar et al., 2013; Autesserre, 2014). Many of these studies have in fact focused on the need to acknowledge friction, hybridity, local resistance, diving into empirical cases and mostly based on ethnography, to illustrate the different local experiences and interpretations of peacebuilding.

While most of these studies have focused on single in-depth case studies, more recently an effort has been made towards the systematic expansion of the understanding of local subjectivities. In 2013, Roger Mac Ginty and Pamina Firchow started an ambitious project called the Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI), which aimed at expanding the overall understanding of peace at the local level. Based on the premise is that “outside actors can ever fully understand the experiences of

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2 The term ‘subjectivities’ (plural) differs from ‘subjectivity’ (singular). The latter is often related to Foucault’s research on the techniques of the self, that is, ‘how was the subject established, at different moments and in different institutional contexts, as a possible, desirable, or even indispensable object of knowledge’ (Foucault 2000: 87). From a Marxist-oriented perspective, ‘subjectivity’ has a different connotation, one that stands for ‘the conscious projection beyond that which exists, the ability to negate that which exists and to create something that does not exist yet’ and, thus, it encompasses a movement against limits (Holloway 2010: 25-26).
others” (Mac Ginty and Firchow, 2016: 7), the project aims to identify indicators of peace that are constructed by the communities themselves, from the bottom-up, instead of being previously chosen by the researcher. The EPI has been piloted in South Africa, Uganda, Southern Sudan, Zimbabwe and, more recently, in Colombia, offering a comparative domain that is rarely present in ethnographic studies. Among its findings, the results confirm the overall gap between official peacebuilding evaluations and what local actors have to say. Moreover, the project has identified what could be considered ‘unconventional’ indicators of peace and security that are extremely meaningful to local actors, even though they have never appeared in the lists of international agencies (ibid.).

As one of purposes of the local turn is precisely to unveil the discrepancies between international planning for peace and local experiences, identifying such incongruences (or the different subjectivities) is a key step. But understanding the social grammar entails asking not only how local actors experience peacebuilding, but also why they experience it the way they do. In his framework for peacebuilding ethnography, Millar (2014) refers to this as he speaks of the importance of ethnographic preparation. But what does ethnographic preparation stands for?

In practical terms, grasping the social grammar of a specific society would entail pursuing an in-depth study of local culture and history. In his book, Millar refers specifically to the reading of the available anthropological literature on the country/society under study. But this may be more complicated than it sounds. In some cases, the researcher may be lucky enough to have access to a wide range of publications of that society. Yet, in other cases, information is not so easily accessible, either because not much has been written, or because the material available is in another language. Additionally, not only is culture dynamic and ever changing, but also, and particularly in peacebuilding contexts, there may be important variations across time and space, even within the same country, especially in the way actors relate to violence and the state. The point to be stressed here, is that, ultimately, some social dynamics may be observable only in loco, which means that ethnography may need to be conducted for an extended period of time, so the researcher may understand local culture and social dynamics beforehand in order to make sense of the very data she wants to analyse.

Also, while conducting a fieldwork, it is important to consider a series of factors that affect the researcher’s ability to apprehend the social grammar. In this paper, I would like to focus on three specific factors that affect this process.

The first factor is reflexivity. Reflexivity has been widely discussed in Sociology. Bourdieu, for instance, advocated that a reflexive practice is imperative in order for an academic to produce
good science (Swartz, 1997: 271-274). A reflexive practice means that the researcher needs to be constantly aware of three major biases while conducting research: first, she needs to control the values and practices that she brings from her social background to the object of inquiry; second, she needs to be aware of her field location, that is the position that the researcher holds in her specific field of production; third, she needs to constantly examine her epistemological and social conditions in order to assess her ability to make scientific claims. For Bourdieu, a reflexive practice will not fully eliminate the problem of bias, nevertheless, it may largely reduce the bias as the researcher is placed under critical analysis as much as the object of research (ibid.).

Reflexivity has been a widely mentioned topic in the critical local turn, but it has not always been explicitly discussed, perhaps because it is considered a given in the context of cultural and post-colonial studies. In this literature the call for reflexivity usually comes along the critique to the universalist appeal of the liberal peace and its cultural insensitivity (Richmond, 2011; Millar, 2014). The very base of the critique, after all, is that the researcher calls into question her own epistemological assumptions and open up to local values that may be different.

Stepping out of one’s own value system, and acknowledging that a ‘Western’ perspective of science and social order exist is definitely important. Nevertheless, quite often the critical turn moves to another problematic pattern, which is the tendency to dichotomise things in terms of ‘otherness’. As noted by Meera Sabaratnam (2013), even the critics of the liberal peace are often trapped into several ‘avatars of Eurocentrism’, that is, often the most fundamental aspects related to how we do research remain uncontested. One of the ways this takes place is by researchers constantly opposing the ‘West’ and ‘the rest’ (or the ‘North’ and the ‘South’), so, ultimately, the point of departure of the analysis is still Eurocentric. Linda Smith (1999:13-14), in her book Decolonizing Methodologies, makes a similar point when she notes that “Many indigenous intellectuals actively resist participating in any discussion within the discourses of post-coloniality. That is because post-colonialism is viewed as the convenient intention of Western intellectuals which reinscribes their power to define the world”.

This leads to the second factor that needs to be taken into account in the process of grasping a different social grammar – the need to move beyond a dichotomic view of the world. As I have argued elsewhere, the emphasis on dichotomies obscure alternative ways of talking about peace, which move beyond the idea of peace as opposed to violent conflict, but which make more sense locally (Maschietto, 2017). By dichotomising things we risk leaving aside anything that does not relate to one of the two extremes we are considering. So, while some dichotomies, such as North/South may help make sense of our standing point, they may be counterproductive if the
point is to embrace the diversity that exists within the ‘other’. That is, our sense of ‘otherness’ not only is still centred on ourselves, but it also tends to unify the ‘others’, even though they may be as different (if not more different) among themselves than they are from ‘us’.

This is in itself a reflexive exercise that leads us to dissect more thoroughly our own epistemological stand. Recounting the argument of Stuart Hall, Smith (1999) reminds us how the concept of the West functions. First, it allows ‘us’ to characterize and classify societies into categories; second, it condenses complex images of other societies through a system of representation; third, it provides a standard model of comparison; finally, it provides criteria of evaluation against which other societies can be ranked (Smith, 1999: 42-43). Moving beyond dichotomies and choosing to start a reflection beyond the very critique of the ‘West’ is, thus, an important exercise to move away from our ingrained epistemological training.

Ultimately, reflexivity needs to be imminent and pervasive. More generally, as reminded by Millar (2014), it begs the researcher to explore conceptions of the ‘self’ that are at the base of Western and non-Western thought. The call here is to remember that the ‘non-Western’ world is plural and has multiple conceptions of the self that may not necessarily be understood in opposition to Western assumptions.

This leads me to the third factor that helps us grasp different social grammars, which is the constant comparison of narratives. Comparing narratives helps the researcher become familiar with the local social grammar by allowing the identification of commonalities and differences in discourses, interpretations and understandings of specific events. While the commonalities may reveal the more general rules of the social grammar, the variations may point out to the different places where each actor places himself within that set of rules. For example, in some countries, such as Mozambique, party politics play a key role in defining the distribution of power in a society, regardless of where one stands in the social structure. Yet, being a woman in the rural area places additional constraints in the spaces that an actor has to navigate her through the social system. Both aspects are important and complementary but most likely they will appear with different intensities depending on who is the researcher talking to.

While as a rule critical peacebuilding studies have emphasised the need to reveal the voices of the ‘marginalised’, I argue that the full understanding of the social grammar requires the comparison across a wide range of different actors, including those in high positions of power. In my own experience, certain narratives proliferate from the top to the bottom in such a powerful way, that they may often obscure or become superposed to other narratives. Other times, they may be
reinterpreted, partly altering the way the social grammar is experienced. Such nuances are important for the process of translation, discussed below.

**The process of translating subjectivities**

The online Merriam-Webster dictionary defines ‘translation’ “an act, process, or instance of translating: such as (a) rendering from one language into another; also the product of such a rendering; (b) a change to a different substance, form, or appearance (conversion); (c) (1) a transformation of coordinates in which the new axes are parallel to the old ones (2) the uniform motion of a body in a straight line”. In a nutshell, the idea of translation entails an important degree of transformation; in the case of language, the transformation occurs so that content is rendered understandable to an audience that is not familiar with the original form of the information.

In translation theory there are two different assumptions about the use of language. On the one hand, there is an instrumental view of language, where language is perceived as a means to capture “objective information, expressive of thought and meanings where meanings refer to an empirical reality or encompass a pragmatic situation” (Rubel and Rosman, 2003: 6). On the other hand, there is a hermeneutic view, where emphasis is given to interpretation, that is, thoughts and meanings, where the latter ultimately shapes reality (ibid.).

Competing models of translation have also developed. While some perceive translation as a natural act, being the basis for the intercultural communication where common and universal aspects of human experience may be shared, others see this process as rather unnatural. The latter view emphasises cultural differences and the “foreignization” of translation, where the translator has to come to terms with “otherness” (Rubel and Rosman, 2003). From this perspective, translation can also perceived as a tool for the expansion of ideological and political agendas. As noted by Cronin (1996, quoted in Rubel and Rosman, 2003), “Translation relationships between minority and majority languages are rarely divorced from issues of power and identity, that in turn destabilize universalist theoretical prescriptions on the translation process”. Ultimately, the language to be translated may be informed by different values from those of the language of the researcher, so these differences must be taken into account.

In social sciences, the process of translation goes beyond the mere interlingual translation, but it also entails ‘translating’ observed events into reliable information. This in turn requires an exercise of interpretation. When it comes to ethnography, the divergent views of translation mentioned above are extremely important. The way the researcher will deal with the information
gathered will be framed by the above challenges and one of the key issues to have in mind is ‘how to be able to deal with the different values and meanings of each language and make it all clear to the final audience?’.

This is even more challenging in the analysis of peacebuilding, where, despite the rise of ethnographic studies, there still is an important quest for generalizations and theory development (Milne, 2010). This influences the research design of most academic works, including the definition of variables to be studied as well as concept development. How to reconcile the particularism embedded in ethnography with the more general analytical and policy goals of peacebuilding?

As Milne (2010: 79) observes, this choice is related to the exercises of ‘understanding’ (a feature at the core of ethnography) and ‘explaining’ (a feature at the core of theory development), where ‘“explanation” entails absorbing the observable phenomena into one’s own terms of discourse, while ‘understanding’ presupposes acceptance of multiplicity of positions and broadening, if not transcendence, of one’s own perspective”.

Ultimately, researching peacebuilding entails navigating through both these aspects of explaining and understanding, as well as perceiving the process of translation as a delicate exercise of identifying when meanings are similar or diverge between the two systems of communication – the language of the researcher and the language of the actors under analysis. This means that, while conducting research, a reflexive posture entails the recognition of two different processes that take place at the same time: on the one hand, the researcher is trying to understand a set of mostly predefined concepts, for instance, how peacebuilding (as defined by a series of factors) has been implemented or experienced by different kinds of local actors; on the other hand, she is trying to grasp local understandings and experiences that may be obliterated by the very theories and concepts that inform the research. Not doing so may lead to unreliable findings that neither ‘explain’ nor help ‘understanding’ peacebuilding and its success or failure.

In the remaining of this section I discuss this process by focusing on the analysis of the concepts of peace and power and the practical challenges involved in the process of translation.

UNDERSTANDING ‘PEACE’

It seems ironic that while peace is a core element pursued in the international agenda, very rarely, if at all, those who are supposed to be its beneficiaries (i.e., the victims of a violent protracted conflict) are asked about what they understand that peace is or should be. On the contrary, what usually takes place is that a certain definition of peace is agreed upon or implicitly assumed in
international reports, which, in turn, is used to guide policy action. As noted in the critical literature of the local turn, this is problematic in many ways. The universalising appeal of peace is not only culturally insensitive, but, more practically, it affects the very expectations and responses of local actors towards the new state of peace.

Responding to such critique, many recent studies have made an effort to move beyond methodological model whereby a concept is pre-defined, to a model where local actors have the opportunity to provide their own inputs about the peace they live in. In a previous article (Maschietto, 2015), I have covered, for example, the case of Mozambique, a country for long considered a successful case of peacebuilding. In 2012, twenty years after the conclusion of the General Peace Agreement, I asked several villagers in a rural district what they thought had changed with ‘peace’. It was noticed that, while they did not have to run away any longer and could finally produce their crops and have a family, they still suffered with lack of access to infrastructure, such as hospital, schools and roads. While things were better that during the war, the scenario was still dire, as many did not have access to potable water and other basic services. Rarely did any of the villagers refer to the benefits of democracy and multiparty elections. On the contrary, their focus, while thinking of peace was on issues related to development and the need for jobs and minimum conditions to be able to sustain their own families and develop their communities.

Studies in other countries have also shown similar examples of dissonance between the projections of peace pushed by peacebuilders and the expectations and views of local actors. Talking about Southern Sudan, Roberts (2013) found similar discrepancies between the views of the local population and peacebuilders, where the latter placed emphasis on democratic reforms, whereas most local actors were concerned with basic needs. Moreover, as also noticed in Mozambique, the very understanding of what democracy entailed varied considerably, as local actors often perceived democracy as extremely connected to development.

Referring to Timor Leste and Nepal, Robins (2013) stressed how the international emphasis on rights (framing the concern with human rights, as one of the pillars of peace) does not resonate with the more dominant emphasis on needs present locally. In Timor, problems such as lack of schools nearby where to send the children, lack of resources to buy food, and even to pay for the rituals for the dead of the conflict were the main ones identified by the participants. The last issue was in fact a main problem both in Timor and Nepal. In Timor it was particularly heightened by the local understanding that not performing rituals for the dead has numerous consequences, such as bringing sickness and death to other family members (ibid.).
Studies in Sierra Leone (Millar, 2014) and Indonesia (Bräuchler, 2015) have also highlighted the problems related to the concepts of justice and reconciliation imbued in the peacebuilding agenda. In Sierra Leone, for instance, Millar (2014: 49-53) recalls that the way the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was experience was often the opposite of what international actors would expect, with many local actors noticing how the hearings only added wounds to the people, by reminding them of the violence that took place, without offering anything concrete in terms of how to improve the current lives of the population.

The list of examples of discrepancies in terms of understandings and expectations of peace could go on. The point to highlight here is that a peacebuilding assessment will lead to very different conclusions depending of the variables used to define its success. In the cases illustrated, local actors were given the chance to provide a direct input of what they understood as the most important aspects of peace and regarding the peacebuilding, which, in turn, shaped their expectations regarding change and their responses towards the peacebuilding activities that took place. The intellectual exercise in the cited works was focused on comparing narratives: the ones that initially framed the researcher’s starting point (i.e., the dominant meanings of peace and peacebuilding in policy practice and the assumptions behind these paradigms) were compared with the experiences and understandings of local actors.

As noted above, however, the complete process of translation needs to be set in the specific social grammar in order to be more thorough. The discrepancies noted in each of these studies can only be fully understood in light of the history and cultural context that shape each of these societies. For example, in a country like Mozambique, which has a long history of political centralisation, and where tradition plays a strong role in the everyday lives of most of the population, the relationship between the citizens and the state is of a very different nature than in other settings, such as Western Europe. More than a view that the state should be accountable to the population to which it serves, there is in fact a predominant view that the state is like a ‘father’, or a ‘provider’ (Afrobarometer, 2012). This, in turn affects the understanding of what peace entails.

Dynamics of clientelism and patronage have also been widely discussed when it comes to Africa (although they are definitely not exclusive to this continent). From this perspective, the expectations related to peace are intrinsically related to the dynamics that shape such social mechanism, and which stands in contrast to the idea of meritocracy prevalent in the West. As Millar (2014) explains, while discussing the case of Sierra Leone, many people became highly frustrated with the TRC because they expected that some kind of material compensation would
arise from these mechanisms, following the sensitization campaign and the message that the TRC was going to ‘help’ Sierra Leoneans. This was more than just a different understanding of what ‘help’ means. It was a friction between the values imbued in the very idea of the TRC and the everyday social dynamics of the communities in Sierra Leone.

In the case of Indonesia, Bräuchler (2015) observed that some of the challenges of pursuing related to the different logics that shape traditional justice and the forma judiciary system: while justice tribunals and criminal courts are usually based on a retributive justice model and seek the guilt of and sanctions for individual perpetrators, this is often in shock with traditional justice perspectives, where the aim is restore social relationships and reintegrate society. This causes a clash in terms of expectations and explains some of the shortcomings embedded in peacebuilding reforms.

The above examples show that the issue at stake is not only a matter of translating ‘words’, but understanding their meaning in that specific (cultural, political, historical, etc.) context. In other words, it is the social grammar that helps researchers makes sense of the meaning of local inputs, i.e., local subjectivities and their raison d’être.

Still, looking at the examples presented, there is one further issue that needs to be critically assessed. Looking at the two-way process of translation, referred to above, the key issue here was making sense of local experiences regarding pre-defined concepts of a broader agenda of peacebuilding. For instance, if ‘justice’ is imbued in the idea of peace fostered by international actors, then the contrast is set between how ‘justice’ is interpreted and understood in the peacebuilding agenda and the local experiences of the implementation of this agenda. That is, the starting point is still the language of the researcher. This may seem logic, from the standpoint of Western dominant methodology, but I would like to point out a practical concern related to this. As peacebuilding has become a widespread international enterprise, the increasing engagement of international actors and NGOs in peacebuilding activities has as a direct effect the internalization of specific terms at the very local level. This means that, unless the researcher reaches a community that has been mostly isolated (which is increasingly more rare), chances are that local actors will be very familiar with terms that inform peacebuilding activities. This has several consequences when it comes to translation.

First, more often than not local actors will have an idea (even if incorrect, but often correct) of what the researcher is ‘looking for’ or ‘expecting to hear’. So, for example, even if local understandings of peace may be eminently related to spiritual aspects, the fact that many people have been in touch with a range of agencies that work with peace as a fairly liberal concept (i.e.,
peace=democracy + markets + human rights), there is a great chance that, while addressing the researcher, participants will switch their register to the language they know the researcher is familiar with.

Noticing such variation in the use of language is extremely important. They may reveal that, in many scenarios, the participants are actually more familiar with the cognitive world of the researcher than vice-versa. Here is where reflexivity becomes particularly important: is the researcher ultimately just listening to what s/he is expecting to hear? Once more, it is the previous knowledge of the social grammar that will allow the researcher to question the very use of language, or make additional questions that may switch the course of the interaction to a less ‘Western-centric’ language.

The case may be the opposite when the terms used by the research are not as ‘popular’, as discussed below.

**TRANSLATING ‘POWER’**

While specific terms (such as ‘peace’, ‘participation’, ‘local development’, just to mention a few) have become extremely popular in the peacebuilding policy agenda, having been subject to wide discussions and several definitions, others have simply been hidden here and there, appearing in some documents and in the literature, but being much less discussed and problematised.

The concept of ‘power’ is perhaps one of the most debated in social theory (e.g., Sociology, Anthropology, Political Science, etc.), and yet when it comes to peacebuilding, it has rarely been addresses in a more systematic way. When it is so, it usually refers to ‘power-sharing’ or, more recently, in the critical literature, it connotes the problems linked to post-colonialism. However, not only has power so many different meanings within the ‘Western’ literature (e.g., Dahl, 1968; Lukes, 1974; Haugaard, 2002), but it also has different connotations to local actors.

I would like to refer here to my own experience while conducting fieldwork in Mozambique. While studying empowerment in a rural district, one of my initial objectives was to understand how power dynamics had changed since the end of the war in 1992. In particular, I wanted to see if local actors felt that their own power had increased in any way since the end of the war. I did no have any strict pre-definition of power, but my general purpose was to understand how people felt about their own ability to control their lives or influence local and/or national dynamics.

In my initial sketch of questions for the focus groups, a few of my questions were related to power in the broadest possible way, as I did not want to pre-establish any power field. I wanted
to identify, in the participants’ views things such as ‘who has power in your community?’, ‘do you feel you have any power to change things [in ‘x’ domain]?’, and so forth. Soon it became clear that, while the idea of peace – and its different connotations – were a fairly easy topic to engage with – the idea of ‘power’ was much more confused and disperse. Two were the main reasons for such confusion. First, at this level I was dealing with groups of people who spoke a local language and the interpreter had obvious difficulties to translate ‘power’ as a general word. Second, the responses were also very different in nature: while some participants immediately alluded to the local governance structure to indicate who had positions of power locally, in other situations there was a clear effort by participants to check what exactly I was looking for (what power? power for what?).

I eventually gave up asking some of the original questions, as they brought more confusion than clarification. At the same time, other questions allowed me to grasp the dynamics I was trying to understand. On the one hand, it became clear that one important power dynamic was indeed related to the very hierarchical way the government is structured, including at the local level, that is, power was understood largely in terms of authority and ability to control and influence. On the other hand, other stories illustrated other dynamics of power – or feeling of powerlessness – in the case of local actors’ perceived ability to change things that affected their daily lives.³

It is beyond the purpose of this paper to propose an agenda to investigate power in the context of peacebuilding. What I would like to stress here, in the context of the process of translation, is the contrast between the study of peace and power. It is not that peace has a more consensual or universal connotation than power (on the contrary, many studies show how complex and various the interpretations of peace are, e.g., Galtung, 1981; Richmond, 2005; Dietrich, 2012). Nevertheless, in the particular context of peacebuilding, it seems that the widespread use of ‘peace’ and ‘peacebuilding’ in the policy agenda has largely influenced the prospects of communication in the realm of ethnography.

This is not necessarily good or bad. In fact, it can be argued that the popularization of the concept of peace, while apparently facilitating the process of communication between researcher and local participants, obscures the researcher’s access to other interpretations and meanings of peace that are not necessarily related to the mainstream pillars of the international peacebuilding agenda. We may see, in fact, a process of ‘foreignization’ (Rubel and Rosman, 2003), whereby the connotation of the concept has become more aligned with the language of the external actor, distancing itself from more endogenous interpretations, which, in turn, become more difficult to

³ A detailed account of these power dynamics is available in Maschietto, 2016.
access. Put under perspective, this very process also reflects broader dynamics of power involving the way the research is conducted and the many ways in which the researcher is also limited by its mode of communication.

Concepts that are openly more contested and less popularised in the policy realm, such as ‘power’, while presenting more challenges in the process of translation, also facilitates the reflexive process by forcing the researcher to move away from her social grammar.

Conclusion

This paper has reflected on the challenging task of analysing subjective aspects in peacebuilding contexts. While there have been a growing number of ethnographic studies expanding our understanding of local subjectivities in peacebuilding settings, much less has been written regarding the methodological steps to conduct such an endeavour.

With the aim of contributing to this agenda, I focused on the specifics of two interrelated aspects of this process, respectively (1) the need and means to understand the local social grammar and (2) the process of translation of local subjectivities. The point made is that an effective process of translation needs to be accompanied by a thorough understanding of the social grammar that frames the language, actions and attitudes of the society being studied.

The paper further offered two concrete examples of the process of translation, by discussing the concepts of ‘peace’ and ‘power’ and their subjective interpretation at the local level. The examples suggested that the exercise of understanding subjectivities is also informed by the very expansion of peacebuilding worldwide and the respective popularisation of some concepts at the local level. As local actors become more familiar with the internationalised mainstream version of some concepts, the researcher needs to be particularly reflexive in order to avoid (or at least, minimise) a biased narrative.

Moving beyond a ‘Westernised’ epistemological stand requires a constant exercise in reflexivity. Whereas this paper has pointed to some of the challenges related to this process, it is worth stressing that many concepts that are imbued in the very way ‘we’ see the world may also be completely different in other cultural spaces. The conceptions of ‘time’ and ‘space’, for example, which inform peacebuilding research, may make no sense locally and yet how they inform the researcher’s process of translation should also be further assessed.

In conclusion, I would like to add that, while the turn towards Anthropology and the increased use of ethnography has brought numerous contributions to the analysis of peacebuilding,
engaging in dialogue with other fields, such as Translation Studies (as this paper has tried to do), Linguistics and Psychology, may further contribute to the field’s development and the researchers’ ability to better understand and explain peacebuilding, as well as to the development of a more solid methodological agenda for research in peacebuilding.

References


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