

Coordinated Ethnographic Peace Research: Assessing Complex Peace Interventions Writ Large and Over Time

Gearoid Millar

University of Aberdeen

g.millar@abdn.ac.uk

Abstract

Post-conflict interventions are often promoted for their presumed positive long-term influence on peace and justice. Concerns linger, however, that they can also let the state off the hook by replacing, and thereby undermining, its capacity over time. Unfortunately, scholarly research assessing the long-term influence of post-conflict interventions is rare, and practitioner evaluations are primarily short-term processes regarding individual, temporally bounded projects. This paper explores the potential of, and challenges to, coordinated ethnographic peace research for assessing the longer-term influences of post-conflict interventions writ large on state capacity. A key challenge is identified in the complex interactions between projects implemented a) in parallel, b) at different scales, and/or c) in different time periods; which together mean that any influence observed may be overdetermined and hard to link back to a specific peace or justice project. But, as will be argued, coordinated ethnographic peace research provides hope of overcoming these challenges.

Keywords

Ethnographic Peace Research; Peacebuilding; Transitional Justice; Evaluation; State Capacity; Complexity

The Long-Term Impacts of Post-Conflict Intervention

Since the early 1990s, increasing resources have been allocated for post-conflict interventions of various kinds. In the field of Transitional Justice (TJ) this includes substantial efforts to reform legal codes, rewrite constitutions, retrain legal professionals, and promote the rule of law and respect for human rights. It also includes institutions tasked with holding perpetrators accountable, including International Criminal Tribunals, the International Criminal Court, various ‘hybrid’ courts, and dozens of Truth Commissions. In the broader field of Peacebuilding (PB), the list is even more extensive. All of these processes evidence the rapid expansion of the post-conflict intervention industry,¹ as well as the professionalisation of the institutions and individuals who comprise that industry;² estimated today to consume as much as \$10 billion per year.³ However, for all this activity, the ‘sector’ still faces substantial questions regarding its efficacy and there are two distinct traditions of evaluation operating in parallel within the field.

As will be discussed below, while there are certainly qualitative studies, the *scholarly* tradition is dominated by positivist large-N quantitative studies examining impacts across multiple cases which claim to provide ‘generalisable’ findings, but without assessing specific interventions. Operating parallel this are the *evaluative* assessments of individual projects, carried out using both qualitative and quantitative methods by implementing organisations.⁴ Hence, the quantitative scholarly work provides broad assessment of the effects of interventions across cases, while both the the evaluative work focuses explicitly on individual projects and their specific outcomes and impacts. Unfortunately, there is little work seeking to bridge between the two (with the exception, perhaps, of the Everyday Peace Indicators project),⁵ and none of these approaches attempt to evaluate the *long-term legacies* of post-conflict interventions⁶ *writ large*.

This is a significant oversight, as longer-term legacy has always been of concern to policymakers, practitioners, and scholars. Within TJ we see this in the focus on memorials, museums and commemorative rituals which are intended to have long-term impact by influencing memories of the past violence and in the focus on accountability for the purpose of deterrence. Indeed, proponents of hybrid courts explicitly claim that they will have a ‘lasting impact on bolstering the rule of law in a particular society, by conducting effective trials to contribute to ending impunity, while also

¹ Tobias Denskus, ‘Peacebuilding Does Not Build Peace’, *Development in Practice* 17, no. 4-5 (2007): 657.

² Ole Jacob Sending, ‘Why Peacebuilders Fail to Secure Ownership and Be Sensitive to Context’ (NUPI Working Paper 755, Norwegian Institute for International Affairs, Oslo, 1992), 3.

³ Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Peace Index 2017* (Sydney, Australia: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2017), 3, <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2017/06/GPI17-Report.pdf> (accessed October 25, 2019).

⁴ Kenneth Bush, ‘A Measure of Peace: Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA) of Development Projects in Conflict Zones’ (Working Paper No. 28, International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, 1998).

⁵ Pamina Firchow and Roger Mac Ginty, ‘Measuring Peace: Comparability, Commensurability, and Complementarity Using Bottom-Up Indicators’, *International Studies Review* 19, no. 1 (2017): 6-27.

⁶ Sukanya Podder, ‘Thinking about the Legacy of Peacebuilding Programmes’, *Peace Review* 23, no. 2 (forthcoming).

strengthening domestic judicial capacity'.⁷ In the broader field of PB the regular resort to the notion of a 'sustainable peace' also indicates the interest in leaving a long-term legacy. Indeed, whether rooting peacebuilding in 'social justice',⁸ in 'structures',⁹ or in institutions,¹⁰ orthodox peacebuilding inherently assumes the long-term sustainability of the state to be the end goal. In short, the variety of processes administered in post-conflict contexts are not ends in themselves, but steps towards the ability of the state to hold perpetrators accountable, to govern, and protect its people in the long-term.

However, as the focus of this special issue makes clear, the potential for interventions to let the state off the hook by replacing, and thereby undermining its long-term capacity to form policy, ensure accountability, provide services, or manage institutions of democracy has long worried TJ and PB scholars. In the liberal peace tradition, it is often quite uncritically assumed that the multitude of processes administered in parallel or in sequence by a variety of external actors will provide the foundation for these goals. However, there are few positive examples of this operating on the ground and, sadly, many examples of failure. Such failures must also be recognised as part of the legacy of post-conflict interventions writ large. But, problematically, the usually applied processes of assessment – whether scholarly or evaluative – do not focus on these longer-term impacts, and often systematically obscure the unintended consequences from view.

It is proposed here, however, that Ethnographic Peace Research (EPR) holds the potential to provide this longer-term perspective and to uncover the unseen and unconsidered consequences of interventions writ large and across time, and particularly when implemented in a coordinated manner incorporating practitioner evaluators (including local actors) focusing on their individual, and a handful of scholars providing an overview and comparison across projects. This argument might seem obvious to readers familiar with the valuable contributions ethnographic research has made to understanding the impacts of TJ and PB interventions in specific cases,¹¹ but, as is discussed below, the lack of recognition for such research evidences how such research is marginalised from the debate. This paper argues, however, that Coordinated Ethnographic Peace Research (CEPR) has the potential to incorporate ethnography into evaluation, thus helping to better assess post-conflict interventions writ large and over time.

⁷ Marieke Wierda, Habib Nassar and Lynn Maalouf, 'Early Reflections on Local Perceptions, Legitimacy and Legacy of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon', *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 5, no. 5 (2007): 1065-81.

⁸ Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167-91.

⁹ Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace*.

¹⁰ Michael W. Doyle, 'Three Pillars of the Liberal Peace', *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 3 (2005): 463-66.

¹¹ See e.g. Carolyn Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007); Rosalind Shaw, 'Memory Frictions: Localizing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Sierra Leone', *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1, no. 2 (2007): 183-207; Kimberly Theidon, *Intimate Enemies: Violence and Reconciliation in Peru* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Gearoid Millar, *An Ethnographic Approach to Peacebuilding: Understanding Local Experiences in Transitional States* (London: Routledge, 2014); Birgit Bräuchler, *The Cultural Dimensions of Peace: Decentralization and Reconciliation in Indonesia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Ethnographic Peace Research in Scholarship and Evaluation

The EPR agenda, as it has developed thus far, cannot be considered a novel approach to peace scholarship. It is more appropriately understood as an attempt to promote and extend the influence of work within Anthropology examining the influence of culture in TJ and PB processes,¹² and the local experiences of violence and recovery in post-conflict societies.¹³ This became necessary because such work has largely been ‘sidelined in peace studies’,¹⁴ and largely instrumentalised where it is used in the post-conflict literature.¹⁵ This is, in part, a result of the dominance of positivist science in the field, which Jackson argues forces Peace Studies to ‘proceed on a narrowly determined arrangement in which the positivist method appears to be the sole bearer of “scientific” legitimacy’.¹⁶ As a result, ‘normal science prevails’ in the leading journals in the field (the *Journal of Peace Research* and the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*)¹⁷, which overwhelmingly present studies deploying ‘positivist and problem-solving approaches’.¹⁸ While there are well respected alternative journals which are more open to post-positivist, feminist and critical approaches (such as *Peacebuilding or Cooperation & Conflict*), these journals do not have the prestige or impact of the two disciplinary gate-keepers.

In short, while there have long been and continue to be substantial efforts made within the field of Anthropology that are pertinent to dynamics of peace and conflict, it is quite rare to see substantial references to, engagement with, or serious consideration of this work, or the cultural dimensions of peace intervention in the leading journals, and the policies regarding and practices of post-conflict intervention rarely evidence much exposure to or understanding of this research. While it has become fashionable to make reference to the importance of culture and context in these fields, driven largely by some key works in the critical tradition (of which the EPR agenda is an offshoot),¹⁹ this rarely results in a substantive response, in policy or practice, to other ways of living.

¹² See Kevin Avruch, *Culture and Conflict Resolution* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, 1998); Richard A. Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Alcinda Honwana, *Child Soldiers in Africa* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Henrik Vigh, *Navigating Terrains of War: Youth and Soldiering in Guinea-Bissau* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006); Bräuchler, *The Cultural Dimensions of Peace*.

¹³ See Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story*; Das, *Life and Words*; Theidon, *Intimate Enemies*.

¹⁴ Birgit Bräuchler, ‘Contextualizing Ethnographic Peace Research’, in *Ethnographic Peace Research: Approaches and Tensions*, ed. Gearoid Millar (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 34.

¹⁵ Oliver P. Richmond, ‘Rescuing Peacebuilding? Anthropology and Peace Formation’, *Global Society* 32, no. 2 (2018): 223.

¹⁶ Richard Jackson, ‘Towards Critical Peace Research: Lessons from Critical Terrorism Studies’, in *Researching Terrorism, Peace and Conflict Studies: Interaction, Synthesis, and Opposition*, eds. Ioannis Tellidis and Harmonie Toros (London: Routledge, 2015), 21.

¹⁷ Matti Jutila, Samu Pehkonen and Tarja Väyrynen, ‘Resuscitating a Discipline: An Agenda for Critical Peace Research’, *Millennium* 36, no. 3 (2008), 639.

¹⁸ Oliver P. Richmond, ‘Reclaiming Peace in International Relations’, *Millennium* 36, no. 3 (2008), 450.

¹⁹ See e.g. Rosalind Shaw, Lars Waldorf and Pierre Hazan, *Localizing Transitional Justice: Interventions and Priorities after Mass Violence* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver P. Richmond, ‘The Local Turn in Peace Building: A Critical Agenda for Peace’, *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 5 (2013): 763-83.

Instead a nominal recognition of diversity is largely subsumed within the already taken for granted post-conflict ‘tool kits’ and ‘best practices’ among the policymaking and practitioner communities.²⁰ While post-conflict intervention theory, policy, and practice are desperately in need of more substantive understandings of the diverse cultures and contexts in which TJ and PB occur, and the related expectations and experiences of post-conflict intervention that they drive, they have thus far failed to incorporate approaches which might provide this understanding. The effort to develop the EPR approach within the TJ and PB scholarship is a respond to this failure. But, as will now be discussed, there are distinct differences between what we might consider scholarly research and evaluative research, and EPR necessarily requires some adaption as it transitions from one to the other. I will, therefore, first review how EPR in a scholarly register has been described, before describing what this might mean for EPR in an evaluative register.

EPR’s Scholarly Register

Thus far, EPR has largely developed for scholarly research assessing the local experiences of international intervention,²¹ and as a flexible approach to examine interactions between the diverse actors involved in post-conflict processes across the local, national, and international scales.²² This literature notes that EPR has many benefits for scholars of post-conflict intervention, including its inductive and post-positivist ethos, its methodological flexibility, requirement for researcher reflexivity, and its ability to provide thick description and assessment of how and why events unfold as they do. EPR, in this scholarly register, is not a specific methodology for collecting and analyzing data, but an approach which can incorporate various forms of data collection and analysis – what Hennings described as a ‘method repertoire’²³ – which commonly include methods such as semi-

²⁰ Oliver P Richmond, ‘Beyond Local Ownership in the Architecture of International Peacebuilding’, *Ethnopolitics* 11, no. 4 (2012): 372; Timothy Donais, *Peacebuilding and Local Ownership: Post-Conflict Consensus-Building* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 6.

²¹ Gearoid Millar, ‘Local Evaluations of Truth Telling in Sierra Leone: Getting to “Why” through a Qualitative Case Study Analysis’, *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 4, no. 4 (2010): 477-96; Gearoid Millar, *An Ethnographic Approach to Peacebuilding*.

²² Gearoid Millar, ‘Ethnographic Peace Research: The Underappreciated Benefits of Long-Term Fieldwork’, *International Peacekeeping* 25, no. 5 (2018): 653-76; Gearoid Millar, ‘Towards a Trans-Scalar Peace System: Challenging Complex Global Conflict Systems’, *Peacebuilding* (2019), doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2019.1634866

²³ Anne Hennings, ‘With Soymilk to the Khmer Rouge: Challenges of Researching Ex-Combatants in Post-War Contexts’, *International Peacekeeping* 5, no. 5 (2018): 632.

structured interviews,²⁴ informal conversations,²⁵ documentary analysis,²⁶ narrative cartographies,²⁷ and participant observation.²⁸ This *methodological flexibility* opens up the scholarly register to local scholars and non-Anthropologists, and is central to achieving *thick description*.

Geertz initially described thick description as the central goal of ethnography, and as the task of deciphering ‘a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures’ which the ethnographer works ‘first to grasp and then to render’.²⁹ EPR’s scholarly register, therefore, must include close investigation of the context of post-conflict intervention to see the local experience of those interventions not from an outsider (or etic) perspective, but from the insider (or emic) perspective,³⁰ to understand ‘the meaning and significance of social phenomena for people in those settings’.³¹ As such, thick description requires long-term engagement on the ground and a willingness to explore the local concepts regarding justice and peace which are foundational to local expectations and experiences of interventionary projects. Thick description, in short, allows scholars to explain *why* and to understand *how* interventions unfold as they do or are experienced as they are.

While methodological flexibility and thick description are hugely important to EPR, they are both reliant on scholarly reflexivity. *Reflexivity*, or the ‘critical consideration a researcher gives to their own positionality and role in impacting on or influencing the setting or subjects of their research’,³² allows scholars to recognise their own positionality vis-à-vis the phenomena and agents under study. This is incredibly important for research which seeks to be sensitive to the diversity and complexity of post-conflict settings, to adjust methods during a study in response to findings, and to recognise the nuances of power and agency within research settings. Methodological diversity and scholarly reflexivity, therefore, facilitate the broader goal of achieving thick description, which, in

²⁴ Maren Tomforde, ‘How Much Peace Can the Military Instigate? Anthropological Perspectives on the Role of the Military in Peace Intervention’, in *Ethnographic Peace Research: Approaches and Tensions*, ed. Gearoid Millar (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 207-30; Victoria K. Sakti and Anne-Marie Reynaud, ‘Understanding Reconciliation through Reflexive Practice: Ethnographic Examples from Canada and Timor-Leste’, in *Ethnographic Peace Research: Approaches and Tensions*, ed. Gearoid Millar (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 159-80.

²⁵ Courtney E. Cole, ‘Beyond “Being There”: Space and Mobility in Ethnographic Peace and Transitional Justice Research’, in *Ethnographic Peace Research: Approaches and Tensions*, ed. Gearoid Millar (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 231-52.

²⁶ Annika Björkdahl and Johanna Mannergren Selimovic, ‘Feminist Ethnographic Research: Excavating Narratives of Wartime Rape’, in *Ethnographic Peace Research: Approaches and Tensions*, ed. Gearoid Millar (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 43-64.

²⁷ Luuk Slooter, ‘Conflicting Boundaries and Roles: Impressions of Ethnographic Fieldwork in the French *Banlieues*’, in *Ethnographic Peace Research: Approaches and Tensions*, ed. Gearoid Millar (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 115-36.

²⁸ Bräuchler, ‘Contextualizing Ethnographic Peace Research’.

²⁹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 10.

³⁰ Birgit Bräuchler and Philipp Naucke, ‘Peacebuilding and Conceptualisations of the Local’, *Social Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (2017): 432.

³¹ Charles C. Ragin, *Constructing Social Research: The Unity and Diversity of Method* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1994), 91.

³² Gearoid Millar, ed., *Ethnographic Peace Research: Approaches and Tensions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 8.

turn, allows nuanced explanation of why and how events unfold as they do across time.

However, the distance between EPR and the positivist scholarship that dominates the field, as discussed above, is striking, and the gate-keeping role played by the leading journals means that there is little willingness or ability to prepare the next generation of scholars to forego training in statistical analysis and develop instead a capacity for EPR. The institutions which incentivise such decisions, from the funding agencies and publishers to the future employers and promotion committees, instead discount such research as un-generalisable, peripheral, and less prestigious. This, in turn, promotes continued privileging of statistical approaches, which have proven insufficient for analyzing how international power and influence operate over the long-term within complex conflict and post-conflict dynamics.³³

EPR's Evaluative Register

Given these disincentives for EPR in its scholarly register, our faith might better be placed in EPR's evaluative register. While evaluators often deploy qualitative methods in the form of interviews and focus groups, core elements of EPR such as thick description and reflexivity are not generally incorporated into evaluation practices. But there are ways for practitioners to incorporate EPR elements into evaluation in streamlined ways which, at the same time, allow the engagement of more local evaluators. EPR evaluation, for example, might focus on Millar's four pillars of the ethnographic approach to peacebuilding.³⁴ The first of these pillars, for example, is simply to start to see *peacebuilding as experiential* instead of institutional. It is argued that evaluation that sees post-conflict justice and peace as experiential recognises that post-conflict projects are not themselves the end goal of intervention, but only steps on the road to providing substantive experiences; of justice, accountability, security, peace, etc. In this vein, if the goal is to evaluate the long-term legacies of post-conflict interventions, then understanding how people experience those interventions over the long-term is clearly key.

The second pillar of EPR in an evaluative register is described as *ethnographic preparation*, which, in turn, is discussed as a substantive understanding of existing ethnographic work regarding the culture and society under study prior to any research. While local evaluators are at a distinct advantage here in already having this knowledge, international evaluators employed by practitioner organisations often have little knowledge of the local language, society or culture and they do not speak to or engage with the local people targeted, focusing instead on English speaking elites who may even be associated with the intervention being evaluated.³⁵ Evaluations relying on such limited

³³ Corinne Bara, 'Incentives and Opportunities: A Complexity-Oriented Explanation of Violent Ethnic Conflict', *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 6 (2014): 696-710; Philip Schrod, 'Seven Deadly Sins of Contemporary Quantitative Political Analysis', *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): 287-300.

³⁴ Millar, *An Ethnographic Approach to Peacebuilding*.

³⁵ Séverine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

access and understanding are, to put it bluntly, never going to assess the local non-elite experiences or the longer-term legacies of post-conflict interventions. Indeed, they will only be examining the impact among a small range of potentially biased actors. Deeper knowledge of the place and the people, however, through a review of existing ethnographic studies of the society, can provide international evaluators with a greater ability to conduct grounded evaluation, while local evaluators are, of course, usually privileged in this respect.

Figure 1: Key Components of the Two Registers

Scholarly	Evaluative
Methodological flexibility	Peacebuilding as experiential
Thick description	Ethnographic preparation
Understanding of how and why	Local engagement
Researcher reflexivity	Questioning implicit assumptions

This leads to the third pillar of EPR in its evaluative register, which is *local engagement*, a further area where local evaluators are advantaged. If we define the local as the identified target community of the international intervention being evaluated,³⁶ then we put the onus on the evaluators to speak not only to accessible national or even local elites, but to identify the specific communities, identity groups, genders, or age cohorts supposedly benefiting from that specific process. EPR in its evaluative register requires engagement with these groups specifically and not those in government or the civil society actors who claim to represent them. Again, this is a marked contrast to the vast majority of evaluative practice, which engages primarily with elites who either claim to represent the beneficiaries or even implement the process being evaluated, but rarely with the beneficiaries themselves, and which generally evidence how such evaluations occur within an internationally favoured positivist approach.³⁷ In demanding local engagement, therefore, EPR in its evaluative register is more inclusive also of local evaluators.

Finally, and echoing the focus on reflexivity in the scholarly register, EPR in its evaluative register requires that all evaluators, international and local, *question their own implicit assumptions* regarding the concepts that underpin experiences of interventions; i.e. their own ideas about what constitutes justice, accountability, peace, dignity, security, etc. Such self-appraisal forces these evaluators to recognise and begin to overcome the limitations of their own internalised biases. This is necessary because assessing the ability of an intervention to foster experiences within specific

³⁶ Millar, *An Ethnographic Approach to Peacebuilding*, 82.

³⁷ UN Evaluation Group, *Evaluation Competency Framework* (New York: UN Evaluation Group, 2016), <http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1915> (accessed April 8, 2020).

sociocultural settings requires that both international and local evaluators see the intervention not through their own eyes, but through those of the targeted beneficiaries. While local evaluators may be advantaged in that they can much more easily access and understand these schemas, frameworks and perspectives, all evaluators must question their own implicit assumptions as even local evaluators may have internalized norms and expectations quite distinct from that of beneficiaries.

These two registers are distinct (see Figure 1), but they are also closely associated. The first certainly requires a more substantive theoretical engagement, while the second allows a more programmatic acceptance of the four guidelines for understanding and engaging with the local context of intervention. Both, however, are quite flexible methodologically, and so their design and deployment can be responsive to the specific actors, processes, and political or sociocultural settings involved. In short, EPR must be responsive, in both registers, to diversity, nuance, and change. By developing the approach in this way, it can be deployed by a variety of actors involved in post-conflict intervention, used in response to different challenges, retain the necessary level of flexibility, and be useful for the many different local and international scholars and practitioners engaged in assessing post-conflict interventions. This level of flexibility is hugely important for any efforts to promote EPR for assessing the long-term legacies of post-conflict interventions and how they may replace, and therefore undermine, the capacity of the state to provide experiences of accountability, peace, security or justice. This is for many reasons, but foremost among them is the complexity of post-conflict intervention over the long-term.

Complexity and Post-Conflict Intervention

Complexity is a term often deployed in post-conflict literature – particularly in discussions of ‘complex political emergencies’³⁸ and ‘complex peace operations’³⁹ – and, indeed, it is a central problematic in the contributions to this special issue. However, until very recently the concept has seen little development within the field as ‘a theoretical construct’⁴⁰ and tends instead to be confused with simply ‘complicated’ systems, mechanisms, relationships, or situations.⁴¹ While the term is

³⁸ Jonathan Goodhand, ‘From Wars to Complex Political Emergencies: Understanding Conflict and Peace-Building in the New World Disorder’, *Third World Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1999): 13-26; Tom Woodhouse, ‘The Gentle Hand of Peace? British Peacekeeping and Conflict Resolution in Complex Political Emergencies’, *International Peacekeeping* 6, no. 2 (1999): 24-37; David Keen, *Complex Emergencies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).

³⁹ UN General Assembly, *Comprehensive Review of the Whole Question of Peacekeeping Operations in All Their Aspects*, A/69/455/Add.1, New York, United Nations, May 29, 2015; Robert A. Rubinstein, ‘Cross-Cultural Considerations in Complex Peace Operations’, *Negotiation Journal* 19, no. 1 (2003): 29-49.

⁴⁰ Wayne S. Coetzee ‘Rethinking the Theoretical Foundation of the Security-Development Nexus: Does a Hybrid Complexity-Postmodern Model Contribute?’ *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 2, no. 9 (2013): 295.

⁴¹ Gearoid Millar, ‘Respecting Complexity: Compound Friction and Unpredictability in Peacebuilding’, in *Peacebuilding and Friction: Global and Local Encounters in Post Conflict Societies*, ed. Annika Björkdahl et al. (London: Routledge, 2016), 36.

regularly deployed, therefore, its full implications are, with some notable exceptions,⁴² seldom acknowledged by scholars. However, when we acknowledge the multiplicity of actors, intentions, approaches, and conceptions engaged at a variety of scales in post-conflict societies by interventionary actors, and that these various forms of intervention interact in real-time when implemented in parallel and over time when implemented in phases or stages, while accepting that these interactions and relationships continue and maintain over many years, then we surely must come to recognise the complex nature of the phenomena we seek to understand. It becomes critical, in short, that we take seriously the dynamics central to complex systems theory, which include, among others, positive and negative *feedback* mechanisms, organic *emergence* via *self-organisation*, and *non-linear* causal relationships.

It is only by exploring the implications of complexity (via these concepts) that we can start to see why assessing the long-term impact of post-conflict interventions on the capacity of the state is so difficult. Take, for example, claims that Truth Commissions (TCs) will hold perpetrators accountable and provide experiences of justice to those who have been aggrieved during conflict.⁴³ The claim, consistently made, is that such mechanisms will reveal the truth about past violations, or an ‘affirmation of atrocity’,⁴⁴ which will allow apology and forgiveness to be exchanged,⁴⁵ and thus, inspire reconciliation between the newly accountable perpetrator and the newly empowered victim.⁴⁶ But seeing such institutional interventions as nested always within complex systems, which respond fluidly to new incentives and restructure themselves organically in response to shifting influences, highlights the terminal failure in such linear logics of cause and effect.

The nature of feedback loops, for example, evidences the non-linear interaction of influences both across scales and over time. Feedback loops are signaling mechanisms between elements of a complex system that operate to transfer information and illicit responses. A negative feedback loop is operating, for example, when an increase or intensification of one factor (police brutality, for example), triggers a response that serves to impede further intensification and then reverse that trend (perhaps accountability measures leading to punishment). Such negative feedback

⁴² Robin Vallacher et al., ‘Rethinking Intractable Conflict: The Perspective of Dynamical Systems’, in *Conflict, Interdependence, and Justice: The Intellectual Legacy of Morten Deutsch*, ed. Peter T. Coleman (New York: Springer, 2011), 65-94; David Chandler, ‘Peacebuilding and the Politics of Non-Linearity: Rethinking “Hidden” Agency and “Resistance”’, *Peacebuilding* 1, no. 1 (2013): 17-32; Cedric De Coning, ‘From Peacebuilding to Sustaining Peace: Implications of Complexity for Resilience and Sustainability’, *Resilience* 4, no. 3 (2016): 166-81.

⁴³ Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Facing the Challenge of Truth Commissions* (New York: Routledge, 2002); David Mendeloff, ‘Truth-Seeking, Truth-Telling, and Postconflict Peacebuilding: Curb the Enthusiasm?’ *International Studies Review* 6, no. 3 (2004), 355-380.

⁴⁴ Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History After Genocide and Mass Violence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 4.

⁴⁵ Ronald J. Fisher, ‘Social-Psychological Processes in Interactive Conflict Analysis and Reconciliation,’ in *Reconciliation, Justice, and Coexistence*, ed. Mohamed Abu-Nimer (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2001), 25-45.

⁴⁶ Arie Nadler and Nurit Shnabel, ‘Intergroup Reconciliation: Instrumental and Socio-Emotional Processes and the Needs-Based Model,’ *European Review of Social Psychology* 26, no. 1 (2015), 93-125.

loops serve to establish new stability and equilibria. Positive feedback, on the other hand, is when an increase or intensification of one factor triggers a mechanism that serves to accelerate further intensification. If, for example, the response to police brutality was to celebrate ‘law and order’ and invest in further militarizing the police, then we could see, as evidenced over recent decades in the US, a further increase in police brutality.

But, importantly, the eventual level of police brutality within society is a result of the countless interactions between innumerable components of the system organising themselves ‘into well-formed structures that are no part of any single agent’s intention’.⁴⁷ They cannot, therefore, be planned and predicted. This self-organisation is known as ‘emergence’, and it is an organic product of complex systems. Such systems are distinguished by the dialectical interaction of their constituent elements both among themselves and with their environment.⁴⁸ As such, a recognition of the complexity of post-conflict environments and systems demands that we focus our attention not simply on institutions, regulations, reforms or any individual relationships or processes of the system, but on the shifting alignment of associations and relationships between all of these components and between all of them in interaction with the environment encompassing the system (i.e. with the society and culture more generally) which, together, generate emergent properties of the system.

But even this description does not do justice to the problem of complexity for post-conflict intervention, as it does not fully account for the fact that interventionary processes are not only implemented in parallel, but over substantial periods of time. What this means is that they not only interact with projects implemented contemporary to themselves, but their results – the expectations they raise, the experiences they inspire, the concepts they normalise, the capabilities they provide, etc. – interact with agencies, institutions, programs, processes, norms, and reforms implemented years and even decades before or after them in an ongoing un-orchestrated complex dance. In many ways, it is the temporal nature of the interactions involved in intervention which most clearly gives rise to the non-linear dynamics of such interactions, as it is over and across time that the effects or impacts of such interventions a) cascade or settle into equilibrium, b) interact with those of other interventions administered before, in parallel, or afterwards, c) bubble up or disperse down across the scales of intervention (local, regional, national), and d) become integrated or generate friction with the lifeways of the society intervened upon. It is only over time, therefore, that the true complexity of these interactions can become apparent.

If there were more studies conducted to assess such impacts, we would most surely find not clear linear relationships between cause (intervention) and effect (experience or impact), but non-linear interactions that give rise to unpredictable and unintended consequences. Non-linearity means that the outputs generated ‘are not proportionate’ to their related input and so ‘non-linear systems do

⁴⁷ John H. Miller and Scott E. Page, *Complex Adaptive Systems: An Introduction to Computational Models of Social Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 4.

⁴⁸ Coetzee, ‘Rethinking the Theoretical’, 298.

not follow a predetermined, and thus predictable, cause-and-effect path'.⁴⁹ It is not, therefore, only the number of actors or institutions involved in intervention which makes such processes complex, but the nature of the relationships between and influences circulating among them over time. In the case of post-conflict intervention, and particularly over the longer-term interventions which we see in many cases today (25 or 30 years), those relationships have become deeply complex. It is for such reasons that De Coning argues that we must recognise our inability to design 'solutions' for local societies and stop trying to apply universal models to contemporary post-conflict societies.⁵⁰

But what do we do if we admit that justice and peace cannot be planned? As few today argue in support of a withdrawal from post-conflict intervention,⁵¹ we must assume that the post-conflict industry is here to stay, at least for some time. Further, given the increasing demands that post-conflict intervention be driven by 'evidence-based policy',⁵² and initiatives within the field itself to respond proactively to these demands – including, for example, the Everyday Peace Indicators project⁵³ and the DM&E for Peace initiative⁵⁴ – we can see that the field has evidenced some willingness already to experiment with alternative research agendas (both scholarly and evaluative). Taking this a step further, and, indeed, learning from the existing exemplars that serve as evidence of the value of EPR for evaluation,⁵⁵ should not be beyond our capability; particularly when there are such huge benefits to be gained from EPR in comparison to current practice.

As an inherently post-positivist approach, EPR can play a central role in empowering scholars to better understand the complex interactions of post-conflict interventions, both with each other and with state institutions (and across both scale and time). As described above, the core of EPR is *thick description* and the ability to explain *how* and *why* events unfold as they do. These two characteristics help EPR to overcome the ontological and epistemological limitations of the positivist perspective. Understanding, for example, how post-conflict interventions for justice and peace are experienced by populations on the ground, or how those interventions replace, and thereby undermine, the institutions or capacities of the state to provide justice through accountability and peace over the longer-term, does not require the epistemological assumption that scholars can theorise about such effects *a priori*

⁴⁹ Cedric de Coning, 'Implications of Complexity for Peacebuilding Policies and Practices', in *Complexity Thinking for Peacebuilding Practice and Evaluation*, ed. Emery Brusset, Cedric de Coning, and Bryn Hughes (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 23.

⁵⁰ Cedric de Coning, 'Complexity, Peacebuilding and Coherence: Implications of Complexity for the Peacebuilding Coherence Dilemma' (PhD diss., Stellenbosch University, 2012), 316.

⁵¹ Pol Bargaés-Pedreny and Eliza Randazzo, 'Hybrid Peace Revisited: An Opportunity for Considering Self-Governance?' *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 8 (2018): 1543-60.

⁵² Andrew Blum, 'Improving Peacebuilding Evaluation: A Whole-of-Field Approach' (Special Report No. 280, US Institute of Peace, Washington, DC, 2011), 1; Kenneth Bush and Colleen Duggan, 'Evaluation in Violently Divided Societies', *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* 8, no. 2 (2013): 5.

⁵³ Firchow and Mac Ginty, 'Measuring Peace'.

⁵⁴ DM&E for Peace, <https://www.dmeformpeace.org/> (accessed April 8, 2020).

⁵⁵ See Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story*; Das, *Life and Words*; Theidon, *Intimate Enemies*; Millar, *An Ethnographic Approach to Peacebuilding*; Bräuchler, *The Cultural Dimensions of Peace*.

and test preformed theories with observational data. Quite to the contrary, explaining *how* and *why* such interventions are experienced as they are, or effect state capacity as they do, requires a long-term and substantive engagement with the setting and the culture, as well as the capacity and function of the state in that context. Perhaps most importantly, it requires an openness to the unintended and unexpected consequences of international intervention that EPR can provide.

Integrating Coordinated Ethnographic Peace Research into Evaluative Practice

While promoting EPR in its scholarly register may prove eventually to have lasting impact on the scholarship regarding post-conflict intervention, this may not have as much impact as would be achieved by integrating EPR in its evaluative register into current practice among practitioner organisations. This, however, is a difficult challenge as implementing organisations are, if anything, even more restricted in their ability to incorporate post-positivist and inductive approaches than are academics. Indeed, the programmatic nature of intervention funding and the instrumentalist logic of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) for evidence-based policy encourage even more short-term and simplistically positivist and deductive approaches to evaluation than do the problematic incentive structures of scholarly funding, publication, and promotion. Such approaches to evaluation have long been critiqued as overly reliant on tick-box methods seeking to ‘standardise information’,⁵⁶ and for failing fundamentally to drive reflective reconsideration of the purpose of intervention.⁵⁷ Few such evaluations call for any substantive engagement with the setting and context of intervention, and generally remain checklist-laden processes with little ability to capture unintended or unexpected impacts.⁵⁸

As they evaluate only the most immediate impacts of a temporally bounded project, they have very little ability to identify and capture the fundamentally complex interactions between such interventions or their potential long-term negative effects on the capacity of the state to provide accountability, justice, peace, or security. How then can we start to integrate the EPR approach into these more programmatic and temporally bounded evaluations? There seems little logic to asking organisations involved in post-conflict intervention to just adopt a new approach to evaluation. The systems that are in place now have developed in response to very real and substantive incentivisation structures regarding each organisation’s funding sources, implementing partners, capacities and reputations. Asking for the systems that already exist to simply change would be a non-starter. However, I propose that a more pragmatic approach might nonetheless allow a move towards an ambitious Coordinated-EPR, or CEPR agenda.

⁵⁶ Mac Ginty and Richmond, ‘The Local Turn’, 778.

⁵⁷ Tobias Denskus, ‘Challenging the International Peacebuilding Evaluation Discourse with Qualitative Methodologies’, *Evaluation and Program Planning* 35, no. 1 (2012): 151.

⁵⁸ Thania Paffenholz and Luc Reyhler, *Aid for Peace: A Guide to Planning and Evaluation for Conflict Zones* (Baden-Baden, Germany: Nomos, 2007), 46.

This ambitious but pragmatic CEPR approach would encourage M&E professionals within practitioner organisations to add elements of EPR in its evaluative register (the four pillars) into their own processes, which would both provide them with better programmatic evaluation (thus meeting their obligations to funders), and develop the ability of each of these stand-alone evaluations to inform a broader or higher-level meta-evaluation that knits together the insights provided by individual evaluations of diverse interventions. The first step here (incorporating the four pillars into existing processes) would not be an insurmountable challenge and, if incorporated, the four pillars would both encourage the inclusion of more local evaluators and have great benefit for peace organisations, as they would require that evaluators have a greater knowledge of the local context and culture, engage more with local communities and the supposed beneficiaries of intervention, consider the local experiences of those interventions as opposed to the institutional successes achieved, and regularly reappraise their own culturally defined concepts of justice, accountability, security and peace. But, more practically, this means that evaluation processes would:

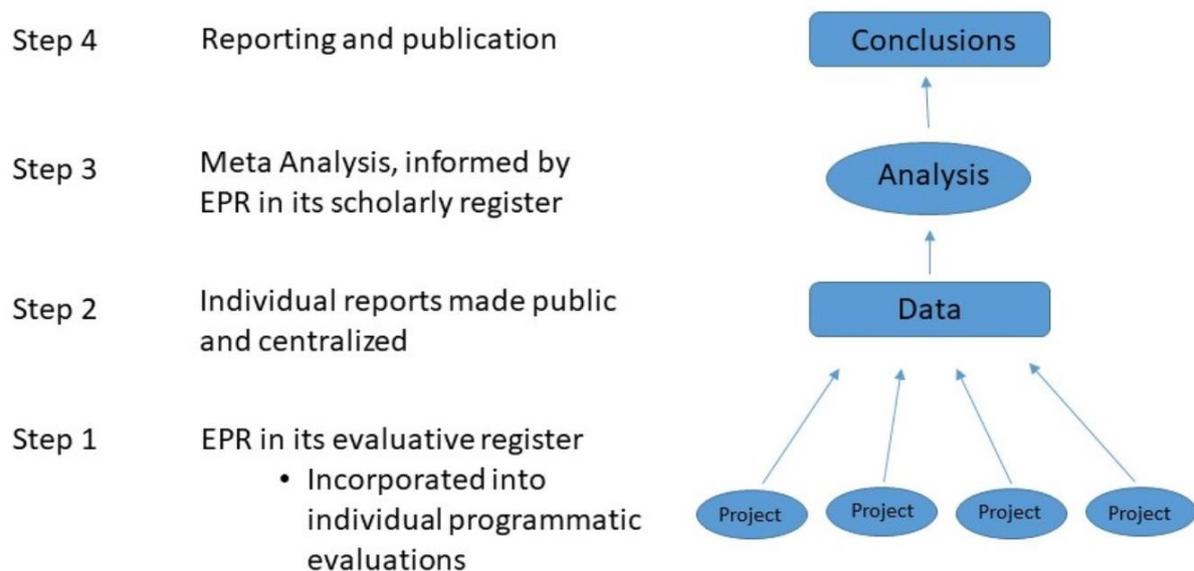
- 1) Be driven more by local experiences, concepts, and partners, than they are by funders and international organisations;
- 2) Be more flexible and responsive, so an evaluator who identifies an interesting phenomenon, pattern, or relationship can deploy a new method, if necessary, to start collecting more data in order to explore that observed dynamic; and
- 3) Be more consistent with the rhetorical claims within the field that processes should be locally owned and bottom-up.

Of course, to accomplish this peace organisations would have to shift their efforts regarding evaluation somewhat. But, importantly, they would not be required to expand their evaluative gaze beyond the remit of their own specific project. They would still be focusing on evidencing the success or failure of the project they were funded to implement.

However, the very nature of a more inductive approach to evaluation would allow these still programmatic evaluations to play a critical additional role in that they would then also be more able to identify the unexpected or unintended effects of their projects outside that remit and on longer-term dynamics, such as influences on the role and capacity of the state to enforce accountability. Evaluators assessing a truth commission might, for example, recognise the influence it had on expectations for reparations within rural communities. Or evaluators assessing the impact of an amnesty law for one window of time might become aware that this has generated resentment among those who were abused immediately before or after this window. Such ‘externalities’ are usually left out of traditional M&E processes because they are outside the set of expected project impacts or because they might raise complicated questions for funders. Importantly, a broader perspective would almost certainly include insights into the interaction (positive, neutral or negative) between interventionary projects and the capacity of state institutions.

And this is how projects carried out using EPR in its evaluative register may provide the raw data for EPR in its scholarly register to examine the long-term influence of post-conflict interventions writ large and across time. This broader CEPR project would focus not on the impacts of individual one- or two-year interventions, but on the longer-term influences of each intervention, on how those interventions interact over time, and on how each individually, and then also collectively, interact with the roles, functions, capacity and agency of government institutions (local, regional, and national) and civil society actors within the state. Such a CEPR project would have to be carried out by a team with substantially more time and flexibility to pursue the relationships and patterns flagged by the individual evaluation reports or which become apparent in the data. A very simplistic visualisation of the structure of a CEPR endeavour, capable of evaluating the long-term impacts of post-conflict interventions writ large (and their influence on the state) is provided in Figure 2.

Figure 2: CEPR: Evaluating the Long-Term Influence of Post-Conflict Intervention



Of course, nobody would expect that all local, national and international organisations currently engaged in post-conflict projects could quickly change their evaluative processes to incorporate the four pillars of EPR in its evaluative register. But it may be possible to encourage such change in many of these organisations which, after all, do generally recognise the weaknesses in their own M&E processes and have, at least rhetorically, accepted the importance of culture, context, and local ownership. If that first step could be achieved, then the second step, to make each of these standalone evaluation reports available for further analysis, would be relatively simple. There would be issues related to intellectual property or research ethics regarding sensitive or identifiable data, but making evaluations available for a larger project, particularly given that most such projects are funded by public funds, should not be an insurmountable challenge. If achieved, this would then allow the third, and perhaps most difficult step, which would be the meta-analysis of the collected evaluations.

Those conducting this step would have to be engaged and committed over a substantially longer time period. Certainly, more than the year or two covered by project evaluations, and perhaps (to really examine the longer-term impacts) over a period of 10, 15, or 20 years.

The outputs from a project of this scope (step 4), however, would be incredibly valuable. They would have the potential to both examine the differences between, as well as the interactions among, post-conflict interventions across a range of sectors (justice, democracy, markets, services, infrastructure), administered at difference scales (local, regional, national), and across time. The incorporation of EPR in its evaluative register at Step 1 would allow individual program evaluation reports to identify the unexpected and unintended consequences of specific projects, as well as impacts from and potential impacts on other projects, sectors, scales and actors outside the remit and time period of the evaluated project. In turn, the meta-analysis at Step 3 could use these hints as leads indicating potential patterns of interaction or relationships between the various interventions and both government and civil society. While there are today many studies evaluating specific interventions, and a subset of those which describe how interventions let the state off the hook for providing accountability, justice, peace and security by replacing and, thereby, undermining it, rarely does research attempt to interrogate such dynamics across the timescales necessary to observe the most important impacts, and, to my knowledge, there are no research projects interrogating such dynamics across post-conflict interventions writ large.

Conclusion

Admittedly, the above CEPR project is ambitious and would face many challenges. Not least of these are the political economy of the post-conflict sector and the reluctance of interventionary actors to acknowledge their shortcomings, the desire among dominant actors for universal solutions to post-conflict problems, and the short-term programmatic nature of current practice. However, incorporating EPR into evaluative processes does not require that we overcome all of these challenges, and could be accomplished by convincing implementing organisations that such a change would a) continue to meet the demands of their funders, b) not substantially raise the costs in time and effort of evaluation, and c) provide better insight into how their projects work and how they might be improved. Based on ongoing research with six different implementing organisations, it does not seem that there is any ideological, ontological or epistemological resistance to more inductive, post-positivist or ethnographic research among the staff of such organisations. Indeed, there is an evident desire for innovation in the evaluation 'space'. The restrictions on staff within such organisations seem largely related to bureaucracy, path dependency, professionalisation, and economic incentivisation. As a result, spurring any substantial shift in practice may be dependent on developing new financial incentives to encourage both short-term and long-term perspectives.

This is echoed, to some extent, among scholars, who are also incentivised to commit to certain research agendas and carry out certain studies by funding agencies, research councils, and foundations. But here there may also be a series of other challenges regarding ideology, ontology, and epistemology, which go to the heart of wider theoretical debates and positions within the disciplines concerned with post-conflict intervention. These issues, however, would not derail the kind of four step CEPR project as described above because, while there would clearly be a need for a critical mass of practitioner organisations to accept and deploy EPR in its evaluative register for the project to be possible, only a small number of academics need to accept EPR in its scholarly register for the meta-analysis to be possible. Of course, the meta-analysis of the individual evaluation reports would have to be nested within a deep understanding of the culture and context of the various interventions. The analysts would have to develop thick description and be reflexive about their own positionality. They would have to be flexible and use a diversity of research methods to collect the different kinds of data necessary to follow-up on the leads regarding patterns and relationships as indicated in the individual reports. But none of this requires more than a handful of committed scholars, and such numbers already exist.

In conclusion, in this paper I sought to develop an ambitious CEPR approach to allow evaluators within implementing organisations and scholars in the fields of TJ and PB to work together to examine the longer-term impacts of post-conflict interventions writ large, including the extent to which they replace, and thereby undermine, the capacity of the state to provide for justice, accountability, security, and peace. While it may be relatively simple to engage in such a project examining one intervention, in this paper I wanted to take seriously the complex interactions and relationships between interventions, in multiple sectors, at various scales, and across different time periods. A key challenge, therefore, is the inability of traditional scholarly work in a positivist tradition, as well as almost all programmatic M&E processes, to assess impact amidst such complexity. In response, I proposed that a more post-positivist and inductive approach to scholarship and evaluation should be incorporated into both the M&E processes of implementing organisations participating in such work (including local and national organizations), and the scholarship already examining such impacts. In the final section of the paper I introduced a structure for an ambitious CEPR project that would link the evaluative and scholarly registers of EPR and potentially provide much greater insight into the complex impacts of post-conflict interventions writ large and over time.

Author Bio:

Gearoid Millar is Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) of Sociology at the University of Aberdeen and his research focuses on the local experiences of international interventions for peace, justice, and development. Recently he has been developing the Ethnographic Peace Research (EPR) approach and he is the author of *An Ethnographic Approach to Peacebuilding: Understanding Local Experiences in*

Transitional States (Routledge 2014) and editor of *Ethnographic Peace Research: Approaches and Tensions* (Palgrave 2018). Articles on this and other topics have appeared in journals such as the *Journal of Peace Research*, *Cooperation and Conflict*, *Third World Quarterly*, *Peacebuilding*, *International Peacekeeping*, and *Memory Studies*.