3. ‘Knowledge for peace’: integrating power to increase impact

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INTRODUCTION

The promotion of peace can be improved through adequate knowledge. This is the rationale for peace research which is expected to help generate such knowledge. The general way such knowledge is produced and how it interacts with the policy of peacebuilding have been debated intensively. However, the dimension of power within the research process has hardly ever been explicitly discussed. I argue that power, beyond being an important component of peacebuilding itself, is also relevant in the sphere of knowledge production. A conscious integration of power dimensions into the research process should enhance the quality of research and the impact it has on policy decisions. In this chapter, I will first describe the relation between peace research and peacebuilding with a focus on power-related dimensions. Second, I will sketch some resource asymmetries and the impact of changing political environments that influence these power dimensions. Finally, the concept of conflict sensitivity and the instrument of research partnerships are presented as means to control for power distortions in the production of ‘knowledge for peace.’

PEACE RESEARCH AND PEACEBUILDING

Peace research has been subject to many definitions, interpretations, and critiques (Richmond, 2007; Giessmann and Rinke, 2019). While peace research is operating at various levels of analyses, ranging from largely deductive normative approaches to empirical inductive research, within or across a high variety of disciplines, there is a consistent overall objective to generate evidence and insights which would allow relevant actors to reduce the degree of violence used in social interactions. This might occur with the broad ambition to improve the fate of humanity or just to transform a specific social practice at the micro-level.

Thus, peace research is closely linked to the policy of peacebuilding which ‘sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relations’ (Lederach, 1997: 20). Accordingly, peace should not be conceived as merely a stage in time, but as a dynamic social construct (*ibid.*). While in the past peacebuilding used to be influenced through many ‘causal beliefs’ (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993: 10), recognition has grown that in order to be effective, peacebuilding can benefit from scientific evidence. Social scientists coined the label of ‘evidence-based’ practice to describe the ‘promotion of more effective social interventions by encouraging the conscientious, judicious, and explicit use of the best available scientific evidence in professional decision making’ (Zarghi and Khorasini, 2018: 231). In this line of argument, modern peacebuilding should be seen as an evidence-based policy which is open to all methodological and theoretical approaches and not limited by any kind of ‘peace orthodoxies’ in terms of tacit unverified assumptions (Goetschel and Hagmann, 2009: 60). Evidence is expected to improve the quality of peacebuilding and to enhance the probability that peace might be achieved. These assumptions provide the rationale for both peace research and its expected contribution to the promotion of peace.

It is well known, however, that the uptake of scientific evidence into policy does not follow a linear path. Interactions between the spheres of science and policy are characterized by iterative processes and policies are never just about problem-solving, but also about values and political preferences (Young et al., 2008: 218). This counts in particular for the field of peacebuilding where a significant gap exists in our understanding of how research can contribute to peacebuilding and where the understanding of how knowledge circulates and what this means for the types of policies adopted remains very limited (Bush and Duggan, 2014). It seems plausible that this is due to the different values and divergent political preferences at stake in the field of peacebuilding. The fact that peace as such enjoys a broad or even universal positive connotation should not be taken for a universal consensus about either the substance of peace or the trajectories that will lead towards peace. The substance of peace remains contested, so do the views about how to best achieve it.

The logical consequence following this assessment is to request the improvement of the science-policy interface in order to enhance the impact of research on policy. This rationale builds on the tacit assumption that science and policy are two rather separate spheres in terms of power and politics: whereas the policy sphere is contingent on stakeholders’ political interests, the sphere of science functions according to scientific rigor and excellency. I would like to challenge this assumption.

Without questioning the benefit of research for practice and the relevance of iterative exchanges between science and policy, this chapter recognizes that the distinction stipulated between the two spheres is not as hermetic as usually

assumed. Power and politics also enter the sphere of research. Taking them into consideration and including the respective dimension in research processes should improve the quality of exchanges between the two spheres. This starts at the methodological and epistemological level, where research which emphasizes measurable outcomes tends to dominate activities which produce immeasurable outcomes (Eyben, 2013: 10). This ‘politics of results and evidence’ is about how power determines the meanings that influence a course of action including the assumption that evidence pertains to verifiable and measurable facts and a particular understanding of causality, efficiency, and accountability (Eyben, 2013: 4–6). The field of peacebuilding adds additional challenges because peacebuilding results can often not easily be quantified, respective interventions take place in contested environments in which results will be subject to different perspectives depending on the stakeholders’ political orientations, and, finally, peacebuilding is not a linear process (Bächtold et al., 2013: 8).

It is also clear, however, that peace research has always included a critical dimension. In addition to traditional or problem-solving theories, critical theory includes the researcher’s societal environment in interpreting the results (Cox, 1981). Peace research is expected to reflect on its own doing (Weller, 2017). On one side, this is due to its content: peace research aims at transforming the societies it works on (Goetschel, 2009). The ethical responsibility which comes along with this activity asks for constant questioning and a search for best possible alternatives to what is already being achieved. On the other side, the conditions under which research operates affect its content and therefore its results. Thus, reflection on its own ‘modus operandi’ and on the structures governing peace research is essential and follows the precepts of critical theory (Horkheimer, 1974).

So called ‘pragmatic approaches’ to peace research claimed to transcend power-related problems through a better integration of local needs and realities as providing the major (or even only) source for solutions to most peace and conflict related problems (Chandler, 2015). But it remains unclear how such approaches allow for ‘neutral’ knowledge production by focusing on ‘what works’ in a given context. Such a perspective risks obscuring even more the ways in which knowledge comes to be understood and valued and how different kinds of knowledge often exist in hierarchies. This is particularly the case for peacebuilding and peace research where normative positions, a desire for solutions, and the interactions of many different types of actors all shape co-existing and often competing epistemic communities (Lemay-Hébert and Mathieu, 2014; Goetschel and Jones, 2016).

Being aware that knowledge provides a model of reality, explains its problems, and thereby confers the capability to act, such debates are of crucial relevance not only for research but also for policy actors (Grundmann and Stehr,

2012: 16–17). The choice of epistemologies, theories, and methods influences the spectrum of thinkable and therefore available policy options. Therefore, being aware of power dimensions in research and developing possible ways of controlling for them is of eminent relevance not only for quality science but also for peacebuilding policy.

RESOURCE ASYMMETRIES

When in the aftermath of the Cold War the so-called liberal agenda (Lidén, 2005) became the dominant paradigm of international peacebuilding, it affected not only policies but also related research. Since the mid-1990s bilateral donors, multilateral institutions and NGOs integrated a wide array of peacebuilding activities into their policies and programs, thereby effectively beginning to ‘implement’ peace. This evolution gave way to a proliferation of peacebuilding activities, budgets and staff within foreign ministries and development agencies. Peace forcefully entered the contemporary discourses and practices of policy-makers, bureaucrats and development planners (Goetschel and Hagmann, 2009: 56). Peacebuilding not only penetrated the policy agenda of major diplomatic and aid organizations, it also materialized in new funding schemes in both policy and academia. Academic programs often grounded their reflections on the same ‘peace orthodoxies’ as did civilian peacebuilding. Due to the Northern-based origin of the funding, peace research programs replicated the power asymmetries which could be observed in the policy field. Observers conceived peacebuilding as the benevolent response of Western countries faced with the task of pacifying conflict-ridden or post-conflict societies in developing countries. Most academics supported the basic principles of liberal internationalism that inspired peacebuilding projects (Paris, 2002). Taking preset normative assumptions as a universal given, researchers lacked reflexivity towards the political anchorage of liberal peace. In addition, they were not sensitive enough by far to the multiple dimensions of their positionality resulting from their topic, their relations with policy and their contexts in North and South.

When reflecting on possible power asymmetries of research in conflict, post-conflict, and transitional contexts, it helps to start by looking at structural conditions both in terms of relative resources and in terms of perception of researchers by local stakeholders. Power can have different dimensions such as financial resources or access to political or communication networks. Ultimately, power is seen as a capacity to influence decision-making on relevant issues (Lasswell and Kaplan, 1950). It seems reasonable to assume that power will encounter all the more suspicion when political tensions prevail in the local context both generically and as part of the politics of intervention and the wider conflict dynamics. This may trigger reactions ranging from ‘shrink-

ing spaces' for researchers to the promotion of 'alternative facts' (Hendricks and Vestergaard, 2019) as a counter-version to scientific results (or facts).

The expression of 'shrinking space' has been used to describe the diminishing possibilities for NGOs to act in countries governed by authoritarian regimes, affected by political conflict, or both (swisspeace, 2016). For almost 30 years, NGOs have enjoyed a rather broad range of action even in such environments. Within the last few years, however, states such as Egypt, Ethiopia, Israel, Turkey, or Russia have started to publicly enact political measures and legislative programs that have seriously limited the scope for activities of traditional NGOs, or rendered them entirely impossible. While this is not the place to discuss these measures, it is worth mentioning them, as similar dynamics have started to shape the research field as well. While researchers always had to ask for permission and access to implement their work, discussions about the legitimacy and quality of research in areas marked by political tensions have become more difficult and – perhaps more relevantly – restrictions on research have become more common and even accepted. In addition to restrictions imposed on research space, 'alternative facts' began to be established and legitimized by influential and powerful actors. Referring to the electoral victory of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the USA, several observers described how facts no longer played a decisive role in being elected, nor for making policy decisions. Instead, facts matter because a politically influential person considers them to be 'truth.' While the production of knowledge and evidence about reality follows clear criteria for detaching the results of the findings from the individual researcher by establishing standardized research procedures, so called 'alternative facts' are based on the truth as legitimized through an individual in a position of power. In this case, the issue is no longer knowledge production, but rather 'truth production.' A political regime may refute knowledge produced by science and describe it as subversive. This can lead to situations in which both factors intermingle and where ultimately the power of the researcher (or the institutions behind her/him) determines the validity of facts. Such 'power-determined' research can take various forms and may run under different labels such as the 'validation' of research results (KFPE, 2015). Obviously, such a way of proceeding contradicts fundamental ethical principles of scientific research. In a context in which such 'truth production' prevails, the valorization of research results becomes very difficult: an administration that claims to have the truth does not depend on knowledge production and may even disdain it, because it might function subversively by questioning such 'truths.' This has two consequences. First, it limits the space and the standing of scientific research as political regulations and cuts in funding might occur. Second, it transforms scientific research in itself into a political statement or even a political act. Taken together, this represents

a considerable paradigm shift for scientific research compared to its development over the past years and decades (Gabriel and Goetschel, 2017).

As a consequence, and in order to survive, researchers run the risk of adopting or even internalizing the predominant visions and assumptions of their own societies, forgetting about their subjective and normative nature. This challenge is not confined to any particular region or hemisphere: in the more remote past, typical examples were research agendas shaped under the umbrella of the Cold War or in conflicts such as the Vietnam War in the USA. More recently, the Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) agenda or that of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) also constituted particular political or ideological *a priori*. While the history of the way governments handled the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic still has to be written, it seems certain that the analysis of the interactions between science and political decision-makers will form a major point of interest. Researchers should not adapt to any kind of ‘state of emergency’ which can preclude asking certain questions about the foundations and bases of particular policies or orders (Lacy, 2011). While they should by no means abstain from analyzing these themes and policy fields, researchers should, however, critically reflect on the implications these programs and labels have on their own choices and on the perception of their roles as researchers by their counterparts in societies in North and South.

In order to deal with these challenges linked to the described asymmetries of power, two practices emerged which both showed a growing consciousness of researchers to the relevance of power and politics in the context of fragile states: the first one is linked to the concept of conflict sensitivity, the second one to the instrument of research partnerships.

CONFLICT SENSITIVITY

The concept of ‘conflict sensitivity’ applies to actors active in contexts in which political tensions exist, including those that find themselves faced with, in the midst of, or transitioning from, conflict. It refers to the ability of a person or an institution to understand the context in which it is operating, to understand the interaction between its own activities and the context, and to act upon that understanding in order to avoid negative and maximize positive impacts on the conflict. This refers to both what is being done and to how things are being done. It includes intended as well as unintended effects (International Alert, 2004). The concept of conflict sensitivity grew out of ‘do-no-harm’ programs in the field of development and humanitarian policy (Anderson, 1999). It was only recently introduced in the field of research where it rapidly attracted considerable interest and prompted the development of several sets of specific recommendations and guidelines (Hilhorst et al.,

2016; Bentele, 2020). These guidelines stress that research always forms part of one (or several) contexts and that the presence of researchers, particularly international ones, in politically sensitive environments can be very sensitive. They provide questions researchers should keep asking themselves along the whole 'research circle,' e.g. from the development of their research question through the implementation of their research up to the valorization of results.¹

Though it emerged in the development policy field, conflict sensitivity could easily be adapted to challenges faced by researchers as it focuses on activities taking place in fragile contexts but which are not directly dealing with the conflict itself. Conflict sensitivity foresees a set of measures which should ensure that the researchers internalize and reflect on their own role and its implications in a given context. In order to be conflict sensitive, researchers should try to get an understanding of the context, such as by means of a conflict analysis (Buxton et al., 2006). Their awareness should build on an assessment about the implications their research activities will have on the local context. Such an assessment should be based on the recognition that every activity is part of this context and cannot be understood as neutral. Even well-intentioned acts can end up being seen as partisan or having harmful effects. Reflecting on their positionality allows researchers to reflect on the consequences of research decisions such as why they chose a specific research focus and methodology, why they ask their research questions in a particular way, why and how they choose particular research partners (see also next section) or how particular funding schemes could impact the perception of their work. The political analysis underlying a conflict sensitive approach also entails a positionality-check of the research(er) at the socio-political level. This makes it possible for the researcher and the research institutions hosting or funding them to become more aware of the position of the research project within a given political context (Gabriel, 2017).

Looking at the aforementioned resource asymmetries through the lens of conflict sensitivity, the latter helps discern tensions which could arise in a research environment marked by power imbalances. A scientifically top-rated researcher may encounter opposition and cause frictions within a given context due to a lack of conflict sensitivity. Moreover, international researchers might be seen by research subjects or those in the research context more as agents of power structures in which they operate than as open-minded individuals. Applying a proper conflict sensitivity assessment to their project considerably reduces the risk of this happening.

RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

Research partnerships currently represent the most sophisticated tool for addressing structural inequalities in power during research. Having originated

in the field of development research, they have been used and further developed by research governing bodies such as the Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KPF) or the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) of Research Councils UK. Research partnerships can be defined as innovation-based relationships that involve significant efforts in research and development (Hagedoorn et al., 2000: 567). They may include private or public partners as well as a mixture of both. A specific subset are research partnerships with developing countries.² As an instrument designed to promote research in such countries, they include projects in which groups of scientists from two or more partner countries carry out long-term, transdisciplinary, collaborative research on problems that are important to all the partners (KPF, 1998). In order to achieve their objectives, they build a common set of criteria which entail a combination of results-oriented research activities and capacity-building components at individual and institutional levels, or both. For example, the guidelines of KPF include the following 11 principles: (1) set agenda together; (2) interact with stakeholders; (3) clarify responsibilities; (4) account to beneficiaries; (5) promote mutual learning; (6) enhance capacities; (7) share data and networks; (8) disseminate results; (9) pool profits and merits; (10) apply results; (11) secure outcomes (Stöckli et al., 2012).

While research partnerships combine contextually embedded and produced knowledge with exchanges between different partners, they encapsulate large parts of the aforementioned pragmatic approach (Chandler, 2015). But in addition to it, research partnerships control for structural aspects shaping the communication of scientists. With regard to conflict affected areas, research partnerships provide an interesting framework with the potential to include both local knowledge and contextual sensitivity. However, researchers engaged in research partnerships face two types of challenges when working in conflict contexts.

First, research partnerships have a structural impact on the environment in which they operate. Beginning from the very outset of the research, the choice of partners has the potential to empower the academic institutions involved. As Northern partners typically contribute a significantly larger portion of the financial resources to the partnership, Northern researchers end up having an impact on the structural conditions of their partners in the Global South: they get empowered compared to their environment, but they also enter some kind of dependency towards their Northern partners. In politically sensitive contexts, external researchers may not even have a real choice of partners in the local context. A variety of partners may not exist or securing research permits may be dependent on cooperation with certain scientific institutions. Thus, doing research under such conditions equals a strengthening of existing (power) structures.

Second, several of the research partnership criteria listed above require particular attention within conflict affected areas. For instance, the definition of the research interest should be sensitive to the context (criteria 1). This is also relevant with regard to accounting to beneficiaries (criteria 4), disseminating results (criteria 8), and using these results (criteria 11). In particular, transdisciplinary research aims for the research results to have an impact on the operational context. In this respect, expectations may diverge: research can just contribute to policy effectiveness as measured against agreed upon objectives. In the realm of peace research, this kind of enquiry is referred to as ‘problem-solving’ research (Cox, 1981). But research results may also question policy practice more fundamentally. Although such knowledge might contribute to policy effectiveness and legitimacy over the long term, policy actors dealing with a variety of immediate concerns may not perceive this contribution over the short term and rather see it as challenging their sphere of competence and even their sovereignty.

This means that research partnerships have to adapt to the context in which they operate: on the one side there is the ‘donor’ public in the North which consists of research funding institutions, selected state (peacebuilding) agencies, and possibly also political bodies such as NGOs or parliamentary committees. There is, on the other side, the ‘recipient’ public in the South which is composed of local research partners, national and local governments, and, possibly, stakeholders such as NGOs or other civil society entities. While the general differentiation between a ‘Northern’ and a ‘Southern’ public makes sense in regard to the different functions the respective publics take within peace research and peacebuilding, in reality many more collectives and beliefs have to be taken into account. This is especially relevant in the South, where different political cultures and traditions and therefore also different types of actors may have to be addressed.

Research partnerships will be more efficient the better they fit into the different contexts in which they operate. Ideally, this would be achieved through a balanced weight of Northern and Southern partners in the partnership – an objective which is very difficult to meet. But a significant step forward can already be achieved by applying conflict sensitivity also to research partnerships. Indeed, partnership-related issues form an integral part of the guidelines described above.

CONCLUSIONS

As an abstract objective, peace enjoys almost universal support. However, views about what it should consist of and how it could best be achieved vary considerably. These debates are not just about the adequacy of technical approaches and solutions but also about political preferences. Even

though peacebuilding has developed into an evidence-based policy field, the science-policy interaction remains largely opaque and power sensitive. In that sense, peace research is better described as critical research than as a problem-solving exercise. But the inclusion of power dimensions into research should not be limited to self-reflection. It can be operationalized by means of a thorough assessment of the relationship between research(ers) and the conflict context, i.e. through the application of conflict sensitivity, and by means of well-governed research partnerships. Both of these allow research programs to control for potential resource asymmetries and the implicit political connotations of research activities.

These practices equal a 'political sensitivity' check or a socio-political positionality assessment. Conflict sensitivity can complement interpretative research methodologies by adding a lens that focuses on the socio-political level at which the research is designed, funded, and implemented. On the meta-level, this provides an additional filter for analysis that responds not only to conflict contexts but also to the entire North-South research environment. It supports the whole research ecosystem from the formulation of research questions, over the implementation of research, to the interpretation and dissemination of research results. It could also generate information that has previously gone unconsidered. This is applicable to the political contexts in both the North and the South, as well as to the interactions of researchers with both environments.

Peace research and the 'knowledge for peace' it seeks to produce are embedded in particular contexts and as such also subject to existing power dynamics. Best practices as the ones described will not eliminate these influences. But they can enhance awareness and make visible different (structural) biases resulting from them. If this occurs throughout the whole research cycle, it will not only improve the quality of research itself but will also ease the interaction between research and practice.

Peace research is not just about the generation of evidence. It aims at having some impact. This impact depends on the way evidence is produced and how it evolves into knowledge. For all this, sensitivity to the context and related power dimensions is crucial.

NOTES

1. Accessed 17 April 2020 at <https://naturwissenschaften.ch/organisations/kfpe/csresearch>
2. See Chapter 4 by Jones et al. for another discussion on research partnerships with developing countries, in the context of the research project that has generated this edited book.

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