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## FORUM - Complementarity and Interdisciplinarity in Peace and Conflict Studies

Roger Mac Ginty

**Abstract:** This essay unpacks some of the nuances and complexities of peace and conflict studies. While it accepts that there are divisions between those who study conflict and those who study peace, it argues that there are also multiple sites of overlap and complementarity. Many of those who study topics labelled as ‘peace’ are actually studying conflict, meaning that we have a complex ‘masala’ of *peaceandconflictstudies*. Moreover, trends within social science research more broadly reflect the increasingly inter-disciplinary nature of recent work.

### Introduction

There is very little pure peace research and very little pure conflict research. Instead, virtually all ‘*peaceandconflictstudies*’ research is a graduated version of the same thing. Methodological, epistemological, dissemination, and material divisions do exist in the study of peace and conflict, but it would be inaccurate to cast this as a story of two distinct camps - one called ‘peace studies’ and the other ‘conflict studies’. Rather than a peace versus conflict studies binary, or even a Venn diagram with distinct areas for peace studies and conflict studies and some overlap between the two, the situation is much messier – something akin to a plate of spaghetti. Other contributions to this Forum maintain that there is a distinct division between work that examines conflict processes (in shorthand ‘conflict’) and work that examines conflict prevention and responses (in shorthand ‘peacebuilding’). This essay seeks to add a layer of explanation to this position by making the case that much scholarly work on conflict prevention and response actually examines conflict as well. I argue here that what we see in the literature are distinctions between methodological and epistemological approaches to peace and conflict studies. Moreover there are more points of convergence, complementarity, and tolerance in peace and conflict studies than there are acute points of division.

The essay will proceed firstly by examining peace and conflict studies generally and narrating existing and potential points of division. I then highlight areas of overlap and commonality. In this second section, the essay puts forward the argument that what is highlighted by the empirical work in the introductory essay to this Forum is actually a distinction between a particular approach to peace studies and a particular approach to conflict studies. The introductory essay and other empirical work captures this well, but does not characterize the totality of peace and conflict studies. In the third section, the essay puts forward reasons to be optimistic with regards to distinctions and divisions within the study of peace and

conflict. There has never been a better time to engage in inter- and multi-disciplinary work and, at the same time, we can celebrate in its own right specialized work that draws on the rich heritage of various (sub-) disciplines.

### **Divisions within Peace and Conflict Studies**

Multiple divisions exist within the study of peace and conflict. The chief divisions, however, are not between those who study peace and those who study conflict, as implied by the authors of the introduction to this Forum. Instead, I argue here that two meta divisions – one epistemological and one methodological – are fundamental.

The first of these stems from whether or not a research project takes a problem-solving or critical perspective (Cox 1981). Broadly-speaking, problem-solving approaches focus on an immediate concern and seek to find solutions. As such, they can be practically useful and bring tangible benefit. They might, for example, identify a conflict and recommend ways to manage it and mitigate its negative impacts. Studies that adopt problem-solving approaches might be timely, be able to work in conjunction with existing policy approaches, and be mindful of a range of practical factors including cost and feasibility. Critical approaches, on the other hand, look beyond immediate problems and would accuse problem-solving approaches of focusing too heavily on manifestations rather than underlying factors (Pugh 2013: 11-24). Critical perspectives are concerned with the structural factors that underpin social problems. Thus, they would see many problem-solving approaches as being compliant with power and unwilling to challenge structural inequalities (relating to gender, economics, and legitimacy, among other factors) that promote and maintain conflict. For critical scholars, a-historical and un-contextualised work is unable to capture, in an accurate and comprehensive way, a situation of peace and conflict. Herman Schmid's (1968) still valid rebuke to Johan Galtung (1967) pointed out that much peace research confirms rather than challenges existing orders. For Schmid (1968: 220), peace research had largely given up its radical ambitions and was concentrating on 'control and integration with the international system'. Problem-solving scholars might counter that critical scholarship is, at best, unhelpful in the face of immediate needs and, at worst, a conceit and intellectual indulgence. Of course, a strict problem-solving/critical binary does not apply in all cases – some scholarship can span these worlds. In the main, however, it is legitimate to seek to categorise research according to these labels.

A second meta division that affects peace and conflict studies, but also other disciplines within the social sciences, is the divide between qualitative and quantitative scholarship. This methodological (although also epistemological and cultural) divide is particularly noticeable in political science and international relations wherein rational choice and quantitatively oriented studies often stand in contrast to case study and contextualised qualitative research. This is not to say that there are no qualitative rationalists, merely that rational choice positivism is often pronounced among quantitative scholarship. An excellent defence of quantitative approaches to the study of conflict appears in Regan (2013). I will return to this quantitative versus qualitative divide later in the essay as, to a certain extent, the particular type of conflict studies identified in the empirical introductory essay to this Forum (called ‘conflict studies’) favours quantitative methods while the study of peace (called ‘peacebuilding’) favours qualitative approaches. The win-win situation of mixed methods research that combines quantitative and qualitative research is becoming more prominent, though significant research silos and inter-disciplinary prejudices still exist.

In addition to these divisions, a significant bias is worth mentioning: the scientific study of peace and conflict studies is dominated by universities and research centres in the global north. This is not to say that research does not occur in the global south. Political economies, however, mean that research originating from the global north is likely to have more traction in terms of dissemination. A very significant imbalance means that researchers in the global north initiate, organize, conduct, and disseminate most scientific and scholarly research of conflict and post-conflict situations. The practical impact and consequences of this, in terms of the policy environment, can be seen in the bibliographies of major policy documents that draw on academic work. Overwhelmingly, the work that shapes policy comes from scholars based in the global north (UNESCO 2018; World Bank 2018). While case study material might be commissioned from researchers based in the global south, influential conceptual and theoretical work tends to come from researchers in the global north. The divisions between researchers in the global north and global south may also be apparent in an Orientalism running through much published output, which assumes that the international and the center are western, and the local and periphery are non-western. While there have been attempts to move beyond binaries, not least through investigations of hybridity and other networked dynamics (Mac Ginty 2010), some critical scholars have found this unconvincing (Sabaratnam 2013; Hameiri and Jones 2018).

Within a context shaped by these meta-divides and the risk of Orientalism, it is possible to identify divisions in peace and conflict studies, particularly between those who might identify themselves as scholars of 'peace' and 'conflict', respectively. Discussion of these divides, however, requires caveats that caution against sweeping generalisations, and recognition that academic subject areas can be vibrant spaces that defy easy categorisation. For the sake of comprehension, we may be tempted to apply labels (and thus homogeneity) to groups of scholars who would self-identify in different ways but not necessarily with each other. Rather than list these caveats, I identify three points of difference between the study of peace and the study of conflict.

The first point of division is that, in theory, the study of peace and the study of conflict focus on different subjects. In its pure form, peace studies examines situations of peace and how to attain and maintain them, preferably through pacific and consensual means. Much of peace studies has a normative dimension, believing peace to be a preferred public good. In its pure form, by contrast, conflict studies is the study of violent conflict. While it may not have the normative ambitions of peace studies it can, in some variations, focus on how conflict can be waged more effectively. This is especially true of studies that fall under the rubric of strategic or war studies. Some studies of conflict may focus solely on the violent, tactical, or kinetic aspects of conflict and ignore the broader sociological context. Thus, there is a *prima facie* case that peace studies and conflict studies are different sub-disciplines as they focus on different things and may have a different normative worldview. As will be discussed later, however, these pure forms of peace or conflict studies pale in comparison with more common forms of peace and conflict research that do not work on ideal type cases of peace or conflict. Instead, much work is contextualised, cognizant of complexity, and focuses on pre and post-conflict situations as well as situations during conflict.

A second division between the studies of peace and conflict relates to their underlying institutional dynamics. The vast majority of scientific research in these subjects occurs in university settings and is prone to the political economies of university contexts, some of which favour peace research and some conflict research. Research is subject to the vicissitudes of increasingly neo-liberal universities, and what is probably the most significant divide in contemporary higher education: between management and scholarship (Slaughter and Rhoades 2000; Enright et al. 2017). It can be argued that the study of conflict does have advantages over peace studies in this area, in that there has been a trend towards the securitisation of research. Whether the mushrooming of 'terrorism' research institutes in the wake of 9/11 (Mac Ginty

2018: 35), or the multi-million dollar social science research initiatives funded by the US Department of Defense, there is a sense that security-related research has access to funding that may not exist for research labelled as 'peace' (DoD 2018). This is not to say that research labelled as peace goes without funding and opportunities. But as the travails of the United States Institute of Peace attest, the word 'peace' can make for a tough funding environment (Chaffetz and Weiner 2011; Halper 2011). It is noticeable that many funding calls take violence and precarity as their starting points, rather than an overt association with the goal of peace.

A third possible division between the study of peace and the study of conflict is that the former may have more of a bias towards processes and the latter towards events (Mac Ginty 2016: 15-31; Visoka 2015). The abovementioned caveat on avoiding sweeping generalisations may be borne in mind when reading this paragraph. In theory, peace is regarded as a multi-level social process. It involves holistic approaches that are on-going and transformative. Peace, or the absence of peace, may be seen as part of a broad hinterland of factors that coalesce to produce complex social phenomena. A peace studies approach, in this line of thinking, would involve not just examining a conflict, but its causes (structural and proximate), the precursors to conflict, and the aftermath. The study of conflict, on the other hand, may focus on events or particular incidents (e.g., battles, wars, strategic rivalries). This may have methodological implications in that the study of incidents may steer researchers towards events data and thus more readily open up quantitative possibilities. The study of processes may steer researchers to more contextualised methods that can take into account histories and interwoven accounts of social process. In reality, both the study of peace and conflict include much variation. Scholars who self-identify with peace studies may look only at a particular aspect of peace, or use a narrow temporal frame. Scholars associated with conflict studies can take a broad view, examining the *longue durée* that leads to a particular incident as well as looking at its aftermath and broader context.

### **Conflict Studies versus Peacebuilding?**

Having examined broad divisions between the study of conflict and the study of peace, this essay specialises and examines divisions between what the Forum's introductory essay terms the study of conflict processes (conflict) and conflict prevention and responses (peacebuilding). As empirical evidence to highlight these divisions, I include an analysis of journal articles and the connections (or lack of connections) between them (Gledhill and Bright,

this issue). I focus on the division between a particular approach to the study of conflict and a particular approach to the study of peacebuilding.

In keeping with the observation that the cases we choose determine the results we get, I question the identification of the ‘conflict’, ‘peace’ and ‘peacebuilding’ categories alluded to in the introductory essay to this Forum (Gledhill and Bright, this issue) and in the ‘state of the art’ empirical study by the same authors (Bright and Gledhill 2018). These studies rest on sampling from nine ‘peace and conflict’ journals and nine ‘international relations’ journals, which creates two points of concern. The first is that taken together (and with notable exceptions), the sampled journals tend to privilege positivist, rational choice work that generally fits into mainstream debates. While quantitative work, which often uses datasets to find correlations, is at home in many of these journals, these same publications tend to offer less space to work that is inspired by sociological or post-colonial and post-structuralist approaches. Thus there is a danger of bias in the sample towards particular methodological approaches (quantitative and rational choice) that are more associated with the study of conflict than of peace.

A second concern is that many recent studies of peacebuilding (or conflict prevention and response) appear in relatively new (and not yet ranked) journals like *Peacebuilding*, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*, and *Conflict, Security and Development*. Therefore, a significant swathe of peacebuilding literature, which is overwhelmingly case study-based and much of it critical and influenced by post-colonialism, is absent from the sample. All samples have limitations, of course, but the absence of so much peacebuilding literature limits the empirical study’s claims (Bright and Gledhill 2018).

A further complicating point is that much of what might fall under the study of peacebuilding (or conflict prevention, resolution, management, transformation, and the study of ‘post-conflict’ interventions and reconstruction) is actually the study of conflict. Two factors are worth highlighting here. The first is that over the past fifteen years, many studies of peacebuilding – especially those emanating from UK and European universities – have concentrated on the ‘liberal peace’ and critiques thereof (Richmond 2006; Richmond 2009; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013). For these studies, the liberal peace has used language of liberalism (individual emancipation, rule of law, free markets etc.) to justify peacebuilding and statebuilding interventions in societies emerging from violent conflict and authoritarianism

(Campbell, Chandler and Sabaratnam 2011; Selby 2013). Importantly, this literature regards the liberal peace as a system – one that emphasises compliance to norms that are set by (and tend to benefit) leading states and transnational corporations and is comfortable with structural violence and in some cases direct violence. Thus, for example, the literature is replete with articles that analyse ‘peace’ through a lens that critiques the liberal peace, but they are actually examining issues such as the exclusion of Guatemala’s indigenous majority in the post accord era (Brett 2013), the co-option of warlords in Afghanistan (Sedra 2013), and counterinsurgency masquerading as peacebuilding in the Palestinian occupied territories (Turner 2010).

A second point to emerge from the peacebuilding literature is that much of it highlights how violent conflict does not end. Instead, it often morphs into (or is succeeded by) criminal violence and various forms of insecurity and precariousness (Vorrath, 2017; Mac Ginty and Firchow 2016). Demobilised militants might engage in predation, members of the security forces might engage in corruption, and conflict may continue – albeit with less overt and direct violence – despite a peace accord or new constitution. Consider, for example, the case of South Africa in its post-apartheid incarnation. Despite massive constitutional change, an innovative Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and very significant shifts in symbolic politics, South Africa remains a deeply divided and violent society (du Toit 2001; Pillay 2016). A ‘coloured’ interviewee told this author in December 2016 – twenty five years after the end of apartheid – that ‘a farmer [that is, a white person] would never sit beside me the way you are sitting beside me’. Many of the academic works on South Africa, the former Yugoslavia, Guatemala, and many other societies that might include ‘peace’, ‘peacebuilding’, ‘reconciliation’, or other ostensibly post-conflict terms in their titles are actually studies of on-going and dynamic conflict.

### **Reasons to be Optimistic**

Having outlined possible and real divisions between the study of peace and the study of conflict, this essay now turns to what it sees as opportunities for collaboration and complementarity between scholars of various dispositions and perspectives who fall into the broad category of peace and conflict studies. As the opening paragraphs of this essay note, there are not two neatly divided camps – one containing peace scholars and the other containing conflict scholars. Instead, it seems more accurate to describe a large, loose and vibrant community of peace and conflict studies scholars, some of whom would be happy with that

label and others not. There are three reasons to be optimistic about the health of peace and conflict studies.

The first is that the field is growing, as evidenced in the increasing number of publications, journals, and conference panels. The Peace Studies Section is currently the third largest in the International Studies Association. A growing field is an encouraging indicator of vibrancy, especially in terms of the number of PhD students and early career researchers who can energise debates and engage in exciting fieldwork. To a very large extent, this growth in the field has been driven by real world events and attempts to explain and deal with post-Cold War conflicts. There has been a greater recognition that peace and conflict are complex social phenomena that require sophisticated analyses that involve development, political economy and gender as well as more traditional explanations from International Relations.

A second reason is that there is greater support for interdisciplinarity and mixed methods work. This is not to underestimate the strength of disciplines and the obstacles to interdisciplinarity (Lyle 2017). Yet there is a recognition among many scholars that no single discipline offers all of the answers to complex social phenomena. Thus peace and conflict studies, a field that has probably been most closely associated with politics and international relations, has seen a significant number of publications that very consciously draw on feminism, anthropology, sociology, and geography. For several decades, these disciplines have debated positionality, subject-sensitive research methodologies, and the possibilities of intersectionality. Many peace and conflict studies scholars have been making up for lost time by enthusiastically drawing on insights and methodologies from other disciplines. The ‘spatial turn’ in peace and conflict studies, for example, draws very heavily on work from critical geography and urban studies, while the ‘local turn’ looks to anthropology, feminism, and sociology. Inter-disciplinary work, much of it explicitly supported by state research councils (RCUK 2016) and thereby governments, has seen the enrichment of peace and conflict studies, and the coming together of (sub)disciplines that ordinarily had little contact.

A final and important reason to be optimistic concerns the apparently increasing awareness among many scholars of issues of positionality and the limitations of their own research. In part, greater attention to positionality is due to the success of post-colonialist theorists in driving home messages on the dangers of Orientalist approaches to research. It is also a product of increased awareness of the need for localisation of research – or the need to augment top-down approaches with bottom-up methodologies and perspectives that are better

able to capture local and sub-state dynamics. This essay posits that such shifts would lead to better research that more accurately reflects the impact of peace and conflict on peoples' lives. The greater the localisation of research, the more researchers will have to draw on methodologies that allow them to access the local – by drawing on the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and other participatory forms of research. This, in turn, has led to some debate about what methodologies might be considered 'good enough', recognizing that the local level in conflict-affected areas rarely provide laboratory conditions. (Firchow and Mac Ginty 2017)

### **Concluding Discussion**

While the general tone of this essay is optimistic, we should not be naïve in relation to the obstacles facing peace and conflict studies. This essay does not deny that there are clusters of 'conflict' and 'peacebuilding' scholars who often use different methods, epistemologies, and – crucially – dissemination outlets. Yet, at the same time, inter-disciplinary and mixed methods work is thriving (Moran 2006). The most urgent problem by far facing peace and conflict studies is the division between those working in the global south and those in the global north, and the need for meaningful interaction and partnership. We have a problematic situation in which privileged outsiders often study conflicts that are quite alien to them, thanks to the ability to do so remotely (for example through an interrogation of datasets) or on-site often through relatively short fieldtrips.

In general, however, there is room for optimism. Academic life is not without its political economies, hierarchies and exclusions; but generally it is what we make it. In large part, we are free to study what we want to study and how we want to study it. If our goal is to remain in a silo, we can. If we want to experiment, use mixed methods, or flirt with or embrace other disciplines, there are opportunities to do so. Given that inter-disciplinary work offers us the possibility of enhancing our understanding of peace and conflict, there is an onus on disciplinary powerholders (journal editors, conference program chairs, department heads) to take forward agendas of inclusion, emancipation, and interdisciplinarity.

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