INTRODUCTION

A View from Below: Conducting Research in Conflict Zones

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WITNESSES TO WAR

Think for a moment of the men, women, and children who live in the world's armed conflict zones.[1] At the time of this writing, these people would include those living in parts of Afghanistan, Darfur, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Colombia, Gaza, Iraq, southern Somalia, central Sudan, and the towns of Libya, Syria, and northern Mexico (now engulfed in a drug war) – to name just a few. Unlike those fortunate enough to live in areas not experiencing armed conflict, people in conflict zones must confront daily life in a highly compromised and challenging environment. In addition, they have to share their domestic setting with three groups that usually do not have a salient presence in more peaceful regions – armed forces and groups, the humanitarian aid industry, and so-called observers or witnesses of the conflict.

A conflict zone is one in which armed forces and/or groups are present and are actively engaged in acts of violence and warfare. Armed forces refer to state forces, including state-backed militias, as well as state forces operating as part of NATO, African Union, or United Nations or other multilateral military missions. Belligerent forces are those that the state or a body of authority (such as the United Nations) has recognized as belligerents to a war; usually this designation is given to sovereign states. Nonstate armed groups can also be considered belligerents, but only if they are recognized as such by the state or a body of authority. However, such state-generated recognition is rare as it triggers certain rights for the belligerent forces under the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols. Nonstate armed groups also include insurgents, a term designating a group that has taken up arms against

[1] The term "armed conflict" is used here to describe conflict of varying degrees of intensity. A precise definition of the term is not provided in any treaty body; see United Nations (2004, 8).

a recognized, constituted authority (usually a sovereign state) and that is not recognized as a belligerent to the conflict.[2] For example, in both Afghanistan and Iraq multiple insurgent groups are engaged in armed conflict against state forces, multilateral forces, and, in some cases, each other. Insurgencies also arise where there is a complete breakdown of the state and different factions vie for control, as in Somalia in 1998–2006 (Bruton 2010). Nonstate armed groups also include organized armed criminal groups, such as the drug cartels of Colombia and Mexico, or roving groups of bandits with shifting alliances such as are found, for example, in Darfur, Somalia, and many areas where insurgent groups are present.

A second group with whom people living in conflict zones share their environment is humanitarian aid workers, there to provide relief and humanitarian assistance. Humanitarianism is based on the principles of impartiality, neutrality, and independence (Walker and Maxwell 2009, Sphere Project 2011), although the extent to which these principles are followed by humanitarian agencies or are perceived by the recipients of humanitarian assistance is subject to debate (Barnett and Weiss 2011, Barnett and Weiss 2008, Keen 2008). Humanitarian aid workers are associated with an ever-expanding number of secular and nonsecular local, national, and international organizations and have a wide range of agendas (Webster and Walker 2009, Stoddard, Harmer, and Taylor 2010, Donini 2008).

In conflict zones there is also a third group that the local population must accommodate, at times in their actual homes. These are the observers or witnesses of the conflict – the journalists, researchers, filmmakers, and others who come to document and understand what is happening and then communicate their findings back to a variety of audiences. This third group is potentially as important to the people living in conflict zones as the first two groups. By conveying their impressions of what is happening to people living outside the conflict zones, these observers can influence advocacy and underpin change. They can also play a role in enabling or obstructing peace. How these observers go about their work – conducting research, gathering stories and interviews for the media, and making films – is the topic of this book. Our purpose is to capture some key lessons from their experience for the benefit of other researchers, journalists, and filmmakers, experienced and novice alike.

[2] Within international law, the term "belligerency" indicates the legal status of two or more entities, usually sovereign states, engaging in war. Belligerents may also include rebel forces if such forces are recognized as such by the sovereign state or an authority such as the United Nations. However, if the rebel forces are not recognized as belligerents, then their actions to rebel constitute an insurgency.

The book's conceptual point of departure is that it is both possible and necessary to conduct sound and rigorous research and documentation in the challenging contexts of conflict zones. It is important to carry out such research because new networks and new forms of power, wealth, marginalization, and social reordering emerge in conflict zones (Mazurana 2004, Duffield 2001, Duffield 2002, Nordstrom 2004). These dynamics should be not only documented but puzzled over and understood as they will have tremendous implications for people's lives and the futures of their countries. This history should not only be written by and about the victors and their elite companions, but also about local people whose daily lives become intertwined with the conflict. As Elisabeth Wood points out, information flowing from conflict zones is characterized by "the absence of unbiased data from sources such as newspapers, [and] the partisan nature of much data compiled by organizations operating in the conflict zone" (2006, 373). This bias is all the more concerning when media sources or organizations are largely controlled by a state that is party to the conflict, as is the case with conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Myanmar, Sudan, Russia, and Uganda. The need to challenge and correct biased reporting makes independent research, reporting, and filmmaking all the more important.

Rigorous research, reporting, and filmmaking can also present alternative perspectives and narratives of any armed conflict. It is often to the benefit of the architects of war to ensure that the realities of war are not presented or presentable. Carolyn Nordstrom's writings are among the most elegant and illuminating on this subject. Nordstrom likens the behavior of the architects of war to that of a story she is reading of a magician performing magic.

> The illusion is performed out of doors, often in a dusty field. The magician works inside a circle surrounded by spectators, assisted by a young girl, his obedient daughter. Near the end of the show, the magician suddenly and unexpectedly takes a hold of the girl, pulls a dagger from beneath his cloak and slits her throat. Blood spurts, spattering their smocks and sometimes the clothing of the spectators nearby. The magician stuffs the body of the girl into a bulb basket he has used throughout the show. Once she is inside, he covers the basket with a cloth, and mutters incantations. Removing the cloth he shows the audience that the basket is empty, the body of the girl gone. Just then the spectators hear a shout from beyond the circle. They turn to see the girl gaily running through the crowd into the magician's waiting arms. (2004, 182)

Nordstorm writes that in reading this description, she realizes that for those most marginalized and violated during war, "the illusion refers to the very real, and very dangerous, politics of power. The purveyors of war suddenly

pull out daggers and slit throats, and then for the grande finale – peace – they attempt to show that no one really died, that no harm was really done, that no war-orphan street children exist" (2004, 182). Researchers, journalists, filmmakers, and others working in conflict zones can directly challenge this process of sanitizing, mystifying, and obscuring the realities of war, and as such their findings have very real implications for peace.

Many of us living outside conflict zones believe in the importance of giving a voice to, and relating to, the daily experiences of those living in conflict zones – especially those who have been displaced, brutalized, marginalized, or impoverished by the conflict. This book, *Research Methods in Conflict Settings*: A *View from below*, joins a long intellectual tradition of according epistemic privilege to socially marginalized communities. This tradition is founded on the idea that those on the margins of power actually have a better understanding of the center than the center does – either of itself or of the margins (Marx and Engels 1998, hooks 1990, Spivak 1988, Bar On 1993).[3] As contributor Tim Longman writes in this volume:

> Everyday people are important sources of information not simply because public opinion affects the success or failure of policies but also because ordinary people – the kind who may not have finished school, who work with their hands, who are often struggling for daily survival – offer a perspective that comes from the grassroots. Living in communities where they are overlooked or discounted by the more powerful members of society, common people often have access to information that the elite do not. Sadly, they frequently bear the brunt of war-related violence and other human rights abuses, so they have important eye witness accounts to report.

Our authors also explore the ways in which the experience of oppression, marginalization, and violence is not only an experience of powerlessness and despair, but also a site of critique, alternative realties, and agency through resistance to victimization and violation (hooks 1990, Bar On 1993).

The populations written about in this book have experienced state and insurgent violence and conflict, punctuated by periods of peace or "times of not-war not-peace,"[4] often for generations. In seeking to gain insight into and reporting on the experiences of marginalized, conflict-affected populations,

[3] See, for example, Marx and Engels's epistemic privileging of the proletariat and bell hooks's and postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's writings on marginality as a space for the production of counterhegemonic discourse.

[4] This term is used by Nordstrom to characterize times during which states or international actors may proclaim the conflict to be over, but civilian populations are still bearing the brunt of continued violence at the hands of armed actors (Nordstrom 2004).

our authors faced a range of challenges – gaining access to these populations, gathering data in insecure and challenging locations, and presenting findings to multiple audiences. Conflict environments are often rapidly evolving, requiring that researchers be flexible and able to adapt their methodologies. Furthermore, as Wood points out, "the ethical imperative of research ('do no harm') is intensified in conflict zones by political polarization, the presence of armed actors, the precarious security of most residents, the general unpredictability of events, and the traumatization through violence of combatants and civilians alike" (2006, 373). All researchers face ethical dilemmas and problems, but in conflict zones these issues can sometimes mean people's lives are at stake.

While nothing can substitute for time spent in the field, researchers can prepare themselves to meet the challenges presented in conflict settings. Apprenticing with an experienced researcher can help a lot but is not always possible. One of the most productive approaches is for externally based researchers to partner with an organization based in the conflict zone and staffed with local people. Finding the right partner and developing the partnership are worth dedicating time and resources, including where possible a separate field trip before the research commences.

All of the authors have spent considerable portions of their professional lives exploring the experience of people living in conflict zones. Their chapters recount their struggles and dilemmas – practical, ethical, intellectual – and the ways they have addressed them. From these experiences we can identify three common themes and conceptual dilemmas that are important to consider in carrying out research in situations of armed conflict: the responsibility attached to representing oneself and others in violent environments, the careful choosing of research methods in conflict settings, and the skill of accessing, creating, and ultimately understanding the fluidity of safe spaces to carry out research.

RESPONSIBILITY AND REPRESENTING ONESELF AND OTHERS IN VIOLENT ENVIRONMENTS

One of the primary concerns of researchers working in situations of armed conflict is the responsibility of communicating their findings. Iris Marion Young, in arguing for developing principles for ethically sound and socially responsible research, suggests that research has the potential, and indeed obligation, to expose and transform unjust structures (Young 2006). Our contributors are motivated by different goals – to advocate, to gain information to assist, to represent unheard voices, or to reveal marginalized or suppressed

experiences or perspectives – and all pay attention to the analysis of power. They seek to understand how the struggle for power within conflict zones plays out in people's daily lives, at the levels of gender, age, ethnicity, wealth group, and religion. Some, as in the chapters by Tim Longman and Paul Fishstein and Andrew Wilder, are able to convey their research findings to international human rights bodies or national governments to influence and push for change. Other contributors pursue deeper understanding of the conditions creating marginalization and violence and seek to make a difference. For example, Jok Madut Jok's work on sexuality and violence led him to receive training as a midwife and eventually to open a girls' school in South Sudan.

Independent researchers, journalists, and filmmakers routinely have to negotiate the way they represent themselves, their allegiances and objectivity, and the influence they seek to gain through their research findings. The lines between aid workers, journalists, military, private contractors, and researchers have blurred. Journalists are embedded with fighters from different armed forces and groups. Anthropologists and social scientists collect information for state military intelligence. Military bases house both military and civilian personnel. Private contractors provide personnel security but also conduct field research for development or humanitarian agencies. Some private military and security contracting firms have sought to link with research universities to win large competitive bids for work in conflict zones worth millions of dollars. In such a mix, it is important for researchers, journalists, and filmmakers to be clear about their independence.

Our contributors consider carefully how they will represent themselves in and out of "the field," and how they will represent their research communities and the violence permeating their lives. This includes, for example, how researchers introduce themselves and their projects and their dress, manner, and behavior in the field, as Dyan Mazurana and Lacey Andrews Gale and Molly Bingham and Steve Conners stress in their chapters. In her chapter, Catherine Brun writes, "We are part of the field both when we conduct fieldwork and when we are away from the locations we define as our field. This has implications for how we understand our position as researchers." Brun and others rightly remind us that the field is not simply a set geographic space that a researcher moves in and out of. The field is also a social terrain, constructed through processes operating on multiple levels, always involving complex power relations (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Brun 2009).

Another key consideration for independent researchers is how to represent violence and violent environments, both to understand and to communicate the realities of people living within situations of armed conflict. Hugo Slim advocates against overly abstract analyses that talk "easily and intellectually

about violence without recognizing it for what it really is" (2008, 8). Slim contends that research and writing (or filmmaking) on violence should incorporate actual civilian experience to affect the reader or viewer emotionally at the same time he or she is conceptualizing and intellectualizing the violence. The key, Slim writes, is to select the telling of those experiences carefully to ensure they are necessary and illuminating for the discussion and respectful of the victims. As filmmaker Catherine Hébert writes in this book:

> You do not film Misery, War or Hunger. At best, you film the *experience of* misery, war and hunger … we can understand many things just by seeing how people live. When Caroline walks 10 miles from her village to the city, morning and night, to avoid being captured by the rebels, that's the war we're seeing. When little Dennis, the street child, sleeps under a shop awning with ten other kids and gets up at dawn to "look for some light" and to scrounge for food, that's the war we're seeing. When elderly Anguleta takes us to the ruins of what was once her village and sighs as she looks at the skeletal remains of her hut, that too is the war. It's the war in the everyday.

Margaret Urban Walker's insights into the linkages and amplifiers of violence in situations of armed conflict also provide important contributions to understanding how to study and represent violence. She finds that violence and harms[5] are often linked and "create destructive synergies of loss and suffering" that can expose victims to additional violence and harms, even when the victims are not the primary target (Walker 2009, 20). These destructive synergies of loss and suffering come about because "some forms of violent harm or loss precipitate further losses that enlarge the impact of, and may in the end be worse or less manageable than, the original violation or loss itself" (Walker 2009, 52). Isis Nusair's chapter on Iraqi refugees in Jordan is, in part, so poignant because she brings forth these synergies. As one of the women she interviews says, "We live in exile, and there is no stability or security.… There is no stability from the inside. We always feel that there is something missing.… You speak two languages, Iraqi inside the house and Jordanian outside. The psychology of it all is hard and the way people treat you is hard as well." A number of our contributors engage in revealing, exploring, and representing the linkages and multipliers of violence experienced by the people they encounter, from torture and rape victims, to peoples who have been forcibly displaced, to those crossing armed check points, to persons involved in insurgent forces.

[5] Harm refers to physical or mental damage, an act resulting in injury, or a material and tangible detriment or loss to a person.

Walker's theories of the discontinuity and rupture of violence in people's everyday lives are also instructive. Walker challenges theories that posit violence in war as a continuum of violence, in which conflict-related violence is understood as an extreme projection of everyday violence and the structural discrimination and inequalities faced by marginalized or disempowered populations during periods of peace. Rather, she contends that one must pay attention to the lived experiences of people and understand

> the shattering experience of discontinuity, the sense of enormity and outrage, or the terror, despair, and social ruin of victims in many actual instances of violence in conflict. What theory reconstructs conceptually as a continuum may not correspond to victims' shocking and traumatizing experiences of violence in conflict and repression situations. (Walker 2009, 29)

To illustrate, a woman who because of social, cultural, religious, and family pressure accepts without complaint her husband's beating and demands for sexual relations, is in no way prepared for being beaten by strangers, raped in public (at times by males her children's age), or kidnapped and abused (Walker 2009). Studying and representing violence necessitate an ability to discern the discontinuity and ruptures when they occur, recognizing them not as an amplification of an earlier manifestation but as a break, something that should be scrutinized for the new meanings and realities that are being produced. In noting and analyzing these discontinuities and rupture, one is better able to think through both the short- and long-term implications of how people are being (and will be) affected by violent acts and processes going on within conflict zones. Michael Wessells in this book engages directly with the ruptures and the long-lasting ripple effects caused by children forced to become fighters, the rape and sexual abuse of elderly women and girls, and the violation of cultural taboos and practices. Bingham and Connors deal intellectually and practically with these ruptures when news and images of the abuse and torture of prisoners in Abu Ghraib break during their work.

The writings of Duffield (2001) and Nordstrom (2004) encourage us to pay attention to the realities and complexities of daily life in conflict zones, revealing that much of what is occurring is not in and of itself violent but is instead the actions of highly adaptive and resourceful people trying to improve their lives in extremely challenging circumstances largely beyond their control. Nusair's contribution in this book on her work with Iraqi refugees clearly illustrates these points. Additionally, Nordstrom's and Nusair's empirically grounded research throws into question not only conceptualizations of, but representations of violence, peace, war, conflict, postconflict, perpetrators, victims, refugees, winners, losers, development, and destruction. How these