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**Sensitive Topics, Sensitive Environments:
Challenges for Comparative Research in Conflict-Ridden Societies**

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A NOTE TO THE READER:

Dear Colleague,

This is a draft on a paper on comparative field research. At this point, I have not reached quite as far as I had intended. This means that I have yet to draw out implications of and solutions to the problems I raise and I need to include more examples. In addition, some sections remain to be written, but I have attempted to indicate in bold and italics and with a few key words what I want to develop in these sections. Since the paper is presented in a workshop setting, I do hope that the draft will be sufficient for stimulating discussion on the challenges of comparative research in demanding settings. I welcome any suggestions on how the paper can be improved.

All the best,
Kristine

¹ A first draft/outline of this paper was presented at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, November 6, 2008. I am grateful to my colleagues at the department who generously shared their views and insights at the seminar.

Abstract

This paper focuses on the challenges involved in comparative research in countries which are experiencing or recently have undergone a violent conflict or civil war. It identifies both methodological and ethical challenges and argues that the insecure research setting and the sensitivity of the research topic will influence all parts of the research process. The paper addresses questions concerning 1) the research design (case selection and concepts/measurements), 2) data collection in the field, and 3) analysis of the data and publication of the study's findings. While many of the problems encountered in comparative field research are predetermined by the very focus of our research, adequate training, experience and reflection will improve the research process and the findings generated from studies on war and peace.

I. Introduction

This paper addresses methodological and ethical questions which arise from field research in countries which are experiencing or recently have undergone a violent conflict or civil war. The paper will focus on the particular challenges of pursuing comparative research in such contexts. It will include reflections on my experience of research on peace processes and political violence in various parts of the world and make use of existing scholarly literature on field research in sensitive or insecure environments. By now there is a significant methodological literature which describe the challenges involved in field research which provides practical advice for scholars involved in such research. These include, for instance, suggestions on how to record and organise the empirical material, time-management and budgeting, and interview and survey techniques.² However, hardly any of these studies review these issues from the point of view of comparative research and few of these studies examine issues related to research design.³

The main challenge confronting the researcher using a comparative method, is that there may be differences in the countries of study concerning how insecure the research environment is, and how sensitive the research topic is. Such concerns have implications for every part of the research process. Thus, this paper analyses the research challenges relating to: 1) the crafting of the research design, 2) the data-gathering process (the field research), and 3) analysis of the data and publication of the study. The purpose is not to cover all methodological and ethical questions of field research in conflict-ridden societies, but to address those challenges which are

² Some of these deal with field research generally (e.g. Lieberman 2004; Seligmann 2005), while others specifically address research in conflict societies (e.g. Lee 1995; Nordstrom and Robben 1995; Smyth and Robinson 2001; Wood 2006).

³ Those who include reflections on comparative research are, for instance, Lieberman (2004), Knox and Monaghan (2002), and Schnabel (2001). There are many useful accounts which are based on research carried out in one country. See e.g. Armakols (2001), Clarke (2001), Gokha (2006), and Wood (2006).

intrinsic to comparative research. Comparative research is not only fraught with challenges, but also has several advantages compared to other research approaches. Thus, I seek to highlight the potentials of comparative research in overcoming some of the difficulties inherent in research in conflict-torn societies.

To examine the promises and pitfalls of comparative research in conflict-ridden societies, I will link the literature on comparative research methods to the experiences of field research in demanding research settings. In doing so, I will make use of a number of studies on field research and my own research experience in countries such as Guatemala, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Kosovo and Northern Ireland.⁴ I also draw on the experience of a number of colleagues with whom I have discussed these issues over the years. Some of the challenges examined in this paper relate to the sensitive environment in which the research is carried out. The insecurity of the research setting is determined by the type of conflict which is studied, and when in a conflict's trajectory the research is carried out. The research context will change as the conflict develops in new directions: an escalation in the conflict will make matters worse and de-escalation will generally improve the research context. Other challenges are results of the sensitivity of the research focus. In many instances, it is a combination of both an insecure research environment and a sensitive research topic, which causes problems in the research process. This is the case for most studies on research themes which are at the core of peace and conflict research, for instance, studies on political violence, on reconciliation processes, and on armed groups, such as paramilitaries, rebels or guerrillas.

⁴ My first experience of research on the field was in 1999 when I carried out a study in Northern Ireland. Since then, I have carried out empirical studies with some kind of field component on a yearly basis, either with a cross-country or within-country comparison, or as a single case study.

While some of the issues reviewed in this paper are specific or compounded for peace and conflict research, others overlap with research in other social science disciplines. The challenges are particularly severe when a scholar is new to a research context. But improving research skills, careful preparation for field research, and concerns about ethics, are equally important for the more experienced research scholar.

My own research is anchored in a research tradition which searches for general tendencies, while at the same time recognising the limitations involved in such endeavours. In this view, research aspires to cumulate knowledge based both on theoretical/conceptual development and theory-driven empirical research. With regard to methods, such research utilises a multitude of approaches. In terms of qualitative, comparative research techniques, structured focused comparison, and within-case analytical methods such as process tracing or analytical narratives, can be applied. These methods constitute a “middle ground between barefoot empiricism and highly deductive hypothesis-testing” (Lieberman, 2004, 2). From this perspective, field research serves two purposes: 1) the collection of data through various research techniques, e.g. interviews, surveys, focus groups or participant observation, and 2) an improved understanding of the case and the context, which will facilitate the analysis of the data.

The paper is divided into five parts. After the introduction, I analyse issues which relate to important elements of the research design, and in particular questions concerning case selection and concepts/measurements. Next I examine the challenges of the fieldwork itself and points to issues such as access to informants, research procedures and risk assessment. The third part outlines some of the key challenges in the analysis of the empirical material and in publishing the findings of the research.

The final, concluding section, summarises the main challenges emerging from comparative research in conflict-ridden societies.

II. Critical Aspects of a Research Design

Research designs for comparative research in conflict and post-conflict environments need to be carefully crafted. A research design determines the structure of the research: the elements which jointly integrates the research question, theory, method and data. Two issues will be examined in relation to the overall research design: 1) case selection, and 2) concepts and measurements.

Case selection

The selection of cases is critical to any research design, not least comparative, qualitative research. Case selection has to be guided by the objectives of the study and with only a few cases, a random selection of cases is usually inappropriate. Instead, “selection must be done in an *intentional* fashion” (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994, 139, italics in original). A number of important points have been made about case selection and related problems. Different consideration can drive the selection of cases: for instance, cases can be studied because they are typical or most-likely cases, or because they are deviant or extreme cases (see e.g. George and Bennet 2005; Gerring 2007). For comparative research, the essential issue is case selection which provides for an “appropriate frame of comparison” (Collier and Mahoney, 1996, 66-69). This involves: 1) identifying a variation in the outcome which is to be explained,⁵

⁵ This is important in order to avoid selection bias. The type of selection bias that Collier and Mahoney (1996, 60) are concerned with is “selection bias that derives from the deliberate selection of cases that

2) identifying cases which in fact are comparable and where we can expect similar causal processes to take place (in other words, we make assumptions about unit homogeneity).

With these guidelines in mind, the first step in a case selection process is to identify the important variation in the outcome that the study seeks to explain. Such outcomes can, for instance, relate to the level of violence in post-war societies or variations in the achievements of a reconciliation process. A large share of comparative research in this field compares cases which are conceived of as cases with some degree of success and some degree of failure.⁶ The tendency to use terms such as ‘success’ and ‘failure’ is likely to be a result of the normative concerns which are driving the discipline. Peace and conflict research has its origin in the devastating world wars and was founded with the normative purpose of preventing war and building sustainable peace (Wallensteen 1998).

Thus, there are underlying assumptions in the discipline motivated both by methodological and normative concerns. If we are to learn about the driving forces for peace, we also need to examine the failures, the cases in which peace has not been achieved. However, this is where the challenge for field research begins: whether a case has succeeded in bringing peace or whether it is still at war will have implications for access, the security of the researcher and the informants, and a number of other issues related to the research process. As pointed out by George and Bennet, cases should not be selected “simply because they are interesting, important, or easily researched using readily available data” (George and Bennet 2005, 83). Yet,

have extreme values on the dependent variable...”. The issue of selection bias has generated widespread debate. See e.g. King, Keohane & Verba (1994) and Barbara Geddes (1990).

⁶ For instance, in an influential book on peace agreements, Fen Osler Hampson (1990) studied five cases which either succeeded or failed (Angola, Namibia, El Salvador, Cambodia, Cyprus). While not all studies use the terminology of failure and success, these are often implicit in the formulation of the research problem.

practical considerations *are* important: the research environment in which the research will be carried out will have implications for several aspects of the data-gathering process.

A certain type of selection bias will be introduced as result of this predicament. Researchers may prefer to study cases where they expect data not to be too difficult to gather or where they will not place themselves in unnecessary danger. Because of this, certain cases become overrepresented, in particular those in which peace has taken hold or at least where there is not a full-fledged war.⁷

The way in which to deal with this problem is to at the first stage of case selection apply strict criteria – guided by the research objectives – in terms of the type or class of cases which are of interest. For instance, my doctoral dissertation, was concerned with the impact of high-profile incidents of violence on peace negotiations.⁸ With regard to case selection, I first identified a set of negotiation processes and within those I identified high-profile incidents of violence. While the researcher may not be able to identify all relevant cases, he/she should not only consider the cases of his/her personal preference.

Once an ‘ideal’ set of cases has been identified, the researcher can probe into how accessible the cases are. In my dissertation I settled for high-profile incidents of violence in four negotiation processes: Northern Ireland, South Africa, Guatemala and Sri Lanka.⁹ These countries were all experiencing ‘socially protracted conflicts’, in which attempts had been made to solve the conflict through peace negotiations.¹⁰ In

⁷ This is similar to the kind of selection bias which George and Bennet (2005, 51) refers to when discussing how ‘historically important cases’ have received much research attention, at the expense of less ‘important’ cases.

⁸ The dissertation was recently published as a book, see Höglund (2008).

⁹ In each process I analysed three incident, in total twelve cases.

¹⁰ Protracted social conflict (PSC) is a term developed by Edward Azar. PSCs are longstanding and often violent conflicts and the “focus of these is religious, cultural or ethnic communal identity, which

addition, at the time of case selection, all four countries were deemed as accessible from a research point of view. Among the countries, Sri Lanka was the only one in which the parties had not reached a conclusive peace deal. But a nascent peace process held the promise of an improved research context.

Strict selection criteria on high-profile incidents of violence were particularly useful in preventing me from focusing only on those events which have received most media and scholarly attention.¹¹ Because I felt uncertain about how accessible information on each of the high-profile incidents would be, I also kept a list of alternative cases which would have been useful if one of the cases would turn out to be difficult to research.

It can never be known with certainty to what extent a case will be difficult to research and how accessible it will be at the time you are to pursue the field research. Changes in the conditions can happen fairly rapidly. For instance, my research on the failed 1994–95 peace process in Sri Lanka was facilitated by the 2002 ceasefire which made travelling to the war-torn areas in Sri Lanka possible. By late 2005, travelling to the same areas had become precarious due to an escalation of violence. What are the options for comparative research in such a situation? Should he/she drop the case? In many instances, there are alternative ways in which sufficient information can be obtained. For instance, there may be diaspora communities available outside of the country which can be interviewed or areas in the country which is accessible. If data cannot be gathered in a systematic manner across the cases, the researcher can

in turn is dependent on the satisfaction of basic needs such as those for security, communal recognition and distributive justice” (Azar 1990, 2).

¹¹ I used the term high-profile incident of violence to indicate a specific kind of violence, defined either by the nature of the operation or of the target of the attack. It involved one or more of the following characteristics and were further specified in the dissertation: 1) assassination of high-ranking person; 2) mass casualty attack; 3) symbolic attack against the identity of a party to the conflict; 4) symbolic attack against the peace process.

consider using the cases in a comparative study for different purposes. While lack of systematic data across cases may be seen as a flaw in the design, the comparative study here has an advantage. While changing conditions in one research setting may inhibit data-gathering in that specific research setting, some kind of comparison can usually be made between the cases.

There are also ethical issues related to case selection, which relate to the broader question of the role of the researcher in conflict zones. *I will seek to develop this point with a discussion on how our research is not indispensable.*

Concepts and measurements

Another methodological challenge in a comparative research design is related to concepts and measurements. The issue is twofold: 1) the same theoretical concept may have different connotations in different contexts, and 2) the same phenomena can have different manifestations in the societies under study. Such considerations should be dealt with in the research design.

The theoretical concepts we use, and how we define them, have implications for the validity of the study. A problem arises when the same theoretical concept have different meanings in the societies we compare. George and Bennet gives the example of the term democracy: “a procedure that is ‘democratic’ in one cultural context might be profoundly undemocratic in another country” (George and Bennet 2005, 19). A set of concepts in peace and conflict research display similar variations in meaning, for instance forgiveness and victims.

The relationship between concepts and measurements is critical. “We can not measure unless we know first what it is that we are measuring” (Sartori 1970, 1038). The concern with theoretical concepts is not solely an exercise in theory. Concepts are

important because they are what Sartori refers to as ‘data containers’. Without solid conceptual understanding and measurements, comparative research will fail in its efforts to cumulate knowledge and will misinform the explanatory value of the theories probed (Sartori 1970, 1039). The key to dealing with these problems is to move along the ‘ladder of abstraction’, moving from highly abstract concepts at the theoretical level to a high level of concretisation at the measurement level.¹² According to Sartori (1970, 1043), the “low level of abstraction may appear uninteresting to comparative scholars. He would be wrong, however, on two accounts. First, when the comparative scholar is engaged in field research, the more his fact-finding categories are brought down to this level, the better his research. Second, it is the evidence obtained by nation-by-nation, or region-by-region ... that helps us decide which classification works, or which new criterion of classification should be developed.” In this sense, the usefulness of the concepts (the ‘fact-finding containers’) can only be assessed at the lowest level of abstraction. Part of field research, thus, is to uncover the usefulness of the concepts and measurements: to test, adjust and retest, so that they reflect reality.

The implication of this review is that comparative researchers need concepts with a high level abstraction at the theoretical level in order to be able to make a relevant comparison between the cases. But at the level of operationalisation of the same concepts, context-specific measurements are often required. For instance, when analysing political violence, such violence can have markedly different manifestations in different societies. Whereas political assassinations of a clandestine nature were common during the peace process in Guatemala, massacres with political overtones

¹² The meaning of concepts can be a research topic in itself, but most studies do have to make choices about the concepts used when developing the research design.

were widespread in South Africa. Another illustration relates to violence against collaborators. In South Africa, necklacing became a manifestation of a specific type of violence commonly used against people collaborating with the apartheid regime. Necklacing was a lynching practice in which a gas-filled rubber tire was placed around the body and put on fire. In Northern Ireland such practices were not used, but instead collaborators with the other side were often subject to so-called punishment shootings, in which the target was shot in the knee. It is only with careful and context-sensitive analysis that it is possible to determine whether these two practices provide measurements of the same kind of concept.

Here I also want to make a point about language and terminology. The language used is important, it is often politically sensitive. As posed by Knox: “Should the researcher adapt to different political settings in the absence of neutral language?” (2001, 215). In many conflict-ridden societies, certain terms become almost provocative, such as forgiveness in Northern Ireland and reconciliation in Cambodia. Thus, language raises questions about ethics.

III. Field Research: The Data-Gathering Process

This section will examine the issues which may arise when the research is carried out. These relate to 1) access to information, informants, and respondents¹³, 2) research procedures, and 3) risk assessment. It is important that the researcher considers and evaluates these issues before the field research is undertaken, since once in the country, judgement may be blurred by the mental and physical stress (e.g. due to emotional drainage, loneliness, and harsh physical conditions), which the researcher may be subject to. At the same time, the local knowledge which is needed to make an

¹³ In the remainder of this paper I will be using the ‘informants’ and ‘respondents’ interchangeably.

informed judgement, is not possible to fully get a grip on without being in the country.

Assess to information

As discussed in relation to case selection, some information is difficult to get access to. Access to informants and their propensity to provide relevant information is influenced by, for instance, how trustworthy the researcher is considered to be and the sensitivity of the research topic. In general, the problems with access have to do with fears of reprisals for speaking openly about sensitive issues, a culture of silence which may be a result of repression of expression of opinions, and the stigma (shame and trauma) of having been a victim or perpetrator of violence (Feenan 2002, 149). For instance, one scholar reports that in Central Asia, “many people ... believe that merely talking about conflict with outsiders can provoke it” (Tabyshalieva 2001, 134).

In addition, for the reasons mentioned above, it can also be difficult to assess the information provided in conflict-ridden societies. Parties in a conflict have incentives not to reveal or to misrepresent information, because doing otherwise can give the opponent advantages (Fearon 1995).¹⁴ Due to the asymmetrical nature of many conflicts, some groups may be more accessible or available to researchers. Weaker parties, such as minority groups, may be more willing to speak with researchers because they see it as a way to channel their opinions and express their demands. Again, a number of ethical questions arise when considering issues concerning access: what kind of information do I really need? How will my probing

¹⁴ On the general problems associated with reporting and sources on violent conflict, see Öberg and Sollenberg (2003).

into these questions influence the informants? What right do I have to ask these questions?

The approach of the researcher in terms of how he/she presents herself is likely to be similar in all cases. Yet, the research setting in which the data-gathering is carried out will be influenced by a set of factors which I will now discuss in turn: timing of the research, entry points, research fatigue, and nationality of the researcher.

Timing. The sensitivity of the research topic may depend on when in a conflict cycle the research is carried out. With the passing of time, the sensitivity of a research topic can change with the result that people are more willing to speak about what has unfolded in the past. For instance, in the midst of, or following a successful peace process, the reduction of tensions and the creation of momentum often makes the research pursued less of a ‘hot’ topic and facilitates access to relevant informants. However, incomplete or failed peace processes are often followed by polarisation and an escalation of violence, which make it difficult to gain access to informants and useful information. In such a context, the researcher dealing with armed groups can be suspected of being a terrorist sympathiser. However, it should be noted that in some conflict societies, the presence of researchers is seen as beneficial because they provide security for the community or individual who is participating in the study (Lee 1995, 15). Also, a new post-conflict order creates new roles for the actors who took part in the war which can create incentives for them to portray the situation in a certain way.

The implication for comparative research is that it is generally more difficult to get adequate and relevant information for the ‘failed’ cases. For instance, a colleague is pursuing work on communities in Colombia, which are using a strategy

of non-violence to protect the community from violence. The purpose has been to explain why some of these communities have been more successful than others. The researcher has not been able to travel to the worst affected community. In this way he found that the 'failed' cases were much more difficult to access than the successful cases. This example shows that challenges relating to variation in access are equally applicable to studies comparing communities or regions within a country, as to cross-country studies.

Entry points. In terms of gaining access to relevant networks, the importance of introduction by key persons cannot be overestimated. In societies where access is problematic, reliance on key gatekeepers and consent from important stakeholders might in fact be necessary (Feenan 2002; Lee 1995).¹⁵ In such cases, access to informants can be facilitated by local organisations and the researcher may therefore seek partnership with a local NGO or a research institution.¹⁶ However, such affiliation with local partners is not unproblematic. In conflict situations, there are few social actors who are seen as neutral. NGOs, universities and research institutes become part of the overall polarisation of societies. For this reason, it is important to evaluate how the organisation is perceived in the local context and the implications it can have for access to informants. The affiliation with a local organisation can influence perceptions about the researcher's neutrality and prevent him/her from

¹⁵ An important debate concerning access relates to the distinction between the 'insider' versus 'outsider' researcher and the identity of the researcher. See, for instance, Hermann (2001) and Lee (2005).

¹⁶ Some kind of affiliation can also be important for the researcher who is on field research for an extended time-period, since the affiliation also serves as a social context for the researcher who is far away from his/her colleagues, friends and family. Scholars have reported difficulties in the relationship with local agencies in that the organisation attempted to 'hijack' the project. There can also be instances where your local agency ignores those contacts that you find most important because it is not in their interest to have contacts with them (Gokah 2006).

independently gaining access (Howard 2004, 9). For instance, in Sri Lanka some of the Colombo-based NGOs have a high standing with the international community and have links to high-level politics. But they may not be the most adequate channels into some of the local communities. The dilemma for the comparative scholar is that in certain research setting, he/she will be highly dependent on local partners. Such dependence may, in turn, influence the type of information which is available to the researcher. To avoid bias, an important advice is to use different points of entry to informants (Cammet 2006; Gokah 2006). In addition, a specific entry point may be exclusionary, since social networks in divided societies may not be overlapping. Associating with one side might prevent access to the other side.

Research fatigue. It is important to note that the ‘successful’ cases which receive a large share of attention from researchers, also can suffer from limited access due to what has been termed ‘research fatigue’ (Clark 2008). For instance, Feenan (2002, 152) notes that the “proliferation of interest from the research community may also inhibit hard-to-hard respondents such as members of paramilitary organizations”. In South Africa, a country which have attracted an enormous amount of interest from foreign scholars, I have encountered suspicion from local community leaders, universities, and NGOs about my research. They have had bad experiences with researchers who, in their view, come to South Africa, take the information they need and leave without returning anything to the South African society or the communities they study.¹⁷

¹⁷ Other scholars have reported similar difficulties in South Africa. See e.g. Kaarsholm (2006).

Nationality. Nationality may influence the perceived neutrality/independence of the research and the researcher. In many countries, the UN, NATO or other organisations play a key role and the researcher's perceived association with such organisations can influence how the researcher is received (Cammett 2006, 16). Different sides to the conflict are likely to view different nationalities or organisations as sympathetic or unsupportive of their cause. In Kosovo, for instance, NATO was generally liked by the Kosovo Albanians, while many Serbs expressed distrust towards the foreign troops. In some areas in Sri Lanka, people expressed relief when they found out that I was not Norwegian, since the Norwegian mediators are considered biased in favour of the LTTE by part of the Sinhalese population. Many Tamils, on the other hand, have been supportive of the Norwegian mediation effort. In South Africa, Sweden's longstanding support for the struggle against apartheid has generally been a door opener.

Research procedures

In comparative research, we strive to apply the same research procedures in the cases under study. In all research, the question of informed consent from informants and respondents is an important issue.¹⁸ In situations in which a research environment is fraught with insecurity and where the research topic may be sensitive, issues concerning how the research will be used and issues relating to confidentiality is critical.

Here I want to develop a point about documentation: in some case you are able to record interviews, in others not. In some cases, you may be able to report

¹⁸ Elisabeth Jean Wood (2006, 379–381) provides an informative analysis of the ethical and practical challenges involved in informed consent in work carried out in war-zones.

names and places, in others not. What are the implications for a comparative study? What are the ethical implications in terms of, for instance, security of the informants? Informed consent is important, but is sometimes not enough.

Risk assessment in multiple conflict zones

Considerations about access and confidentiality for informants are also related to the security of the researcher. In many ways, the security risks in conflict societies are highly exaggerated in media accounts. Violence tends to be localised and confined to certain geographical areas. This means that the scholar who will spend time away from the areas where most foreigners venture into is not in need of general insights, but requires information that is “timely and accurate” (Lee 1995, 65).

Different types of security risks are present in different countries, and in different regions within a country. In large parts of South Africa and Guatemala, violent crime is omnipresent and the risk of armed robbery is substantial. In Sri Lanka, on the other hand, crime is not an issue, instead the security risks are related to the political violence and the armed conflict. For instance, concerning some of the violence I have studied there are still court cases going on and people expressed fear of disclosing information concerning these cases. Researchers working on such issues can easily be considered as a spy, a terrorist sympathiser or a human rights activist. In most research settings the most serious threats to the security of researchers relate to accidents (especially during transport) and illness (e.g. malaria and dengue fever) (Lee, 10-15).

Risk assessment should be made in an explicit manner and the specific challenges in each case should be evaluated. Such risk assessment should, in

particular, take into account local knowledge.¹⁹ Assessments about security should also include an analysis of the risks involved for informants and collaborating partners.

IV. Analysing and Publishing the Material

The experience emerging from the field research has implications for the analysis of the material. The type of information obtained and its sensitivity influences how the material of the different cases is analysed, what conclusions that can be drawn, and how it can be published.

Analysing the Material: Emotional Attachment

Once the field research is over and the researcher seeks to analyse the material a new set of challenges emerges. Re-reading the material may evoke strong feelings and memories about the field experiences. The respondents may be “living inside your heads” (Kleinman and Copp 1993, quoted in Goodrum and Keys 2007, 256). Some of us have had colleagues or informants who have been killed or imprisoned. Such events may create an emotional attachment to the material which may influence the motivation and ability to analyse certain cases. The researcher may feel overwhelmed by fears, guilt, sadness or even anger. A related problem has to do with the researcher’s identification with one of the sides (Armakolas 2001). Such identification may also bias the interpretation of the data.

When researching sensitive issues, there is a risk that that the researcher loses his/her professional perspective on the material. The result can be that a certain bias

¹⁹ Belousov et al (2007) provide an excellent overview on the security risks in their field research on the shipping industry in Russia. This article highlights the importance of local knowledge and outlines practices which can be introduced to improve the safety of the researcher.

enters into the analysis, or that the researcher becomes cynical, distant or patronising. In order to avoid such situations, the researcher must never lose sight on the purpose of the research. Peace and conflict research is normatively based and our empathy should be used constructively in the research. In many instances, comparative methods can help the researcher to keep perspective in a constructive manner. The comparison itself facilitates an analysis which relates to a broader picture and not only to one specific conflict zone (Schnabel 2001, 203).

Publishing

When the analysis has been carried out and the researcher is in the writing-up phase, he/she may feel uncertain about what kind of information that can and should be revealed and how it should be published.²⁰ Such qualms are results of several different considerations. First, the perspective of the researcher is generally different from policy-makers, NGO staff and even of the local researcher. The researcher can feel uncomfortable with the feeling that the results produced were not what the research subjects had expected (Armakolas 2001, 169–170).

Second, there can be fears that publishing the findings will put informants or local communities at risk. A main concern here is that the researcher has no control over the product and how it is interpreted and used, once it has been published (Smyth and Darby 2001, 51).

Third, the researcher can fear that he/she will be prevented from access to the research environment in the future, if the results of the study are made public. Such

²⁰ A problem related to publication is how the difficulties in the data-gathering process should be presented in publications. Nilan (2002) argues that successful publication usually requires the data collection to be presented as an orderly process without any major difficulties. Otherwise manuscripts might be rejected by reviewers, since the common perception is that there is control over the data collection process.

was the case for a Norwegian scholar, whose work on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (published in *Third World Quarterly*) was interpreted as supportive to the rebels. For this reason, he was denied a visa to enter Sri Lanka after the piece had been published and disseminated.

If we omit information in some cases, a fair comparison cannot be made and the findings may be driven in the wrong direction. The most common way of dealing with sensitive material is to omit any references and details which can reveal the identity of the informants or the community. Other ways of dealing with it is to delay publication or publish in purely academic forums. Yet, in some cases, the researcher finds himself/herself avoiding to write about matters that are deemed as too sensitive to be disclosed. Such self-censoring can be necessary to prevent the research from ‘doing harm’ (Wood 2006). Concerns about the implications of the publication of the findings are in line with the Uppsala Code of Ethics which “rests upon the idea that the scientist is – at least to some extent – responsible for how his/her findings are put to use in society” (Gustavsson et al 1984, 313).

V. Concluding Remarks

To some extent the challenges involved in comparative field research are predetermined by the very nature of our research and the questions we are interested in finding answers to. This paper has outlined some of the key challenges for comparative research in conflict-ridden societies and has highlighted how the research context and the questions we focus on have implications for research design, data collection and analysis of the empirical material gathered in conflict-torn and divided societies. These challenges are interlinked. The selection of cases will, for instance, influence issues concerning access and publishing. It is important to note that

comparative research offers tools for dealing with some of the problems related to research in conflict-ridden countries. In particular, the comparison can help the researcher to maintain a broader perspective and prevent him/her to become entrenched in one of the cases which may – in a worst case scenario – introduce a bias into the data-gathering process and in the analysis of the material.

The researcher intent on pursuing comparative field research in conflict zones has to find the appropriate balance between stringency and flexibility. Most studies have financial and time constraints. Due to changes in the conflict dynamics, the data-gathering process and the analysis of the material emerging from conflict zones, can run into problems which were difficult to foresee when important decisions concerning research design were taken. For this reason, it is important to be open about the problems encountered during the research process. While the difficulties in obtaining information and data can be frustrating, the difficulties involved in the process can give useful information about the topic under study. For instance, it will provide information about where the real power lies, or about how it has affected people in terms of expressing opinions or sharing information.

Research in conflict zones also raises ethical questions about the value, necessity, and implications of our research. Such issues need to be addressed throughout the research process, not only – as is often the case – during the field research.

A last point, which may seem to counter the main thrust of this paper, is not to overestimate the difficulties of doing research in war-torn societies. Many of the problems reviewed here characterise comparative research in general. With training, experience, and reflection on methodological and ethical issues, comparative field

researchers make important contributions to an improved understanding of the pertinent issues of peace and war.

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