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Book Review

Peace and conflict studies research: a qualitative perspective, edited by Robin Cooper and Laura Finley, Charlotte, Information Age Publishing, 2014, 219 pp., US \$45.99 (softcover), ISBN 978-1-62396-1.

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This text is a concise yet comprehensive overview of qualitative research for the many fields included under the broad umbrella of “peace and conflict studies.” It focuses on practical description of methodology over theory, yet the introduction’s theoretical overview provides a meaningful foundation for the research highlighted in subsequent chapters. Research strategies addressed include grounded theory, phenomenology, case study, ethnography, narrative inquiry, and participatory action research (PAR) and the penultimate chapter specifically addresses conflict zone research considerations. The editors and contributors describe trends and challenges in the field, such as: managing biases and beliefs; addressing validity, reliability, and generalizability in qualitative research; managing self-care in addition to participant care; and conducting research that is localized and contextual in order to authentically represent participant voices.

The book’s focus on reflexivity provides a broad prescription for self-reflection by the researcher and attention to critical analysis in data interpretation in order to explore the ethics of engagement in research. For example, the editors

make a distinction that, “conventional ethnography tends to uphold the status quo, and critical ethnography tends to reinforce change” (7). Their call for critical ethnography is a simple and appropriate distinction for peace and conflict studies research. This distinction is complemented by deeper questions in some chapters, such as: What kind of change? Who decides what change should occur?

Most chapters address research on post-conflict peacemaking and peacekeeping, however Cooper and Finley raise important questions in the introduction about designing qualitative research to address positive peace. These approaches are covered indirectly in chapter two, an excellent guide to qualitative research design by Cooper and Rice, and they are addressed directly as action research projects by Morrow and Finley in chapter eight. Although implications arise in other chapters, such as Welty’s description of Organizational Ethnography in chapter six, more examples of participatory action research (PAR) or institutional ethnography would provide additional substance on research methods that directly support a focus on positive peace. This is my only misgiving about an otherwise excellent volume.

Key concepts in the text align well with peace and conflict studies including a praxis-orientation; ethical concerns about representation, reflexivity, and positionality with conflict and post-conflict subjects; and safety for both subjects and researcher. The text is praxis-oriented, asserting that peace and conflict theory must be engaged with research practice in qualitative research so that each informs the other. Laura Finley’s chapter three, ‘Giving voice: using grounded theory to examine teachers’ perceptions of school violence and responses to it,’ is a fine example of research praxis that employs creative tensions between theory and practice to safeguard representation while analyzing deeper themes and constructed meanings. The ethics of representation are highlighted in the introduction and addressed by multiple examples throughout the book as a primary concern of qualitative research. Peace research and conflict research - especially across boundaries of gender, class, race, and nationality - requires researcher reflexivity to actively critique and to avoid reproducing cultural violence. These dynamics of positionality are addressed especially well in contributions by Welty (chapter six) and Hiller & Chaitlin (chapter seven). Chapter nine, also by Julia Chaitin, is entitled ‘We’ll have to reschedule the interview; the air raid siren just went off again’. It is both a cautionary tale and an exploration of the tensions between rigorous research and the physical and psychological safety of researchers and participants in relation to violence and conflict in research.

The concluding chapter, by editors Finley and Cooper, offers a glimpse

into the future of qualitative peace research, including community-based research (CBR), and using the arts in peace and conflict studies research. These forward-thinking insights left me wanting more examples of research methods that promote agency in participants as a forthright objective of peace and conflict studies research, like the aforementioned PAR, and research methods that interrogate power directly and systematically such as institutional ethnography.

The important themes raised in this volume reminded me of a recent conversation with a UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) manager. He identified the tension between rigorous qualitative research and the expedient need of field operators: between the time-intensive care required for research design, ethical engagement, and thoughtful analysis, and the brief and dynamic time constraints for assessing, understanding, and acting in peacekeeping operations. Peace and conflict studies researchers have pressing work ahead, to develop meaningful research agendas while serving the critical and time-sensitive needs of peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding work. *Peace and conflict studies research: a qualitative perspective* is a significant step in this direction, a coherent and useful text for researchers, educators, students, and practitioners. As I consider books for a new qualitative research course in my undergraduate Justice and Peace Studies program, this volume is at the top of my list.