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Os Desafios da Política Externa e Segurança no século XXI

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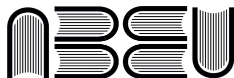

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Making Sense of the Social Grammar and Local Subjectivities in Peacebuilding Ethnography

Roberta Holanda Maschietto

1 – Introduction

Over the past decade, the number of ethnographic studies in the domain of peacebuilding has rapidly increased (MILNE, 2010; MILLAR; VAN DER LIJN; VERKOREN, 2013; AUTESSERRE, 2014; DENSKUS, 2014; BRÄUCHLER, 2015). This increase can be explained by several factors. First, the critical 'local turn' in the analysis of peacebuilding has opened doors to a deeper questioning of how peacebuilding activities were conducted over the 1990s and 2000s — which is mostly from the top-down. Consequently, new interest has emerged in academia for a better understanding of local dynamics of peace, as well as how local and

international actors interact in the context of such interventions (e.g., MAC GINTY, 2010; RICHMOND, 2011; MILLAR; VAN DER LIJN; VERKOREN, 2013). Second, several authors have started to question the very assessment of peacebuilding activities, pointing to the contradictions between official reports that often highlight the positive outcome of external actions, and the everyday local experiences of peace (SANDOLE, 2010; MILLAR, 2014; MASCHIETTO, 2015; ROBERTS, 2015). Third, and as a consequence of the latter, an increased interest in Anthropology and its methods has emerged as an alternative and complementary way to understand the limitations of peacebuilding activities.

There is no doubt that the rise of ethnographic studies has contributed to a profound rethinking of peacebuilding efficacy. Besides pointing to the many contradictions between institutionally top-down-led reforms and the everyday social dynamics of post-violent conflict contexts, these studies have paved the way for the emergence of new theoretical thinking, new concepts and new practical approaches that have, to a certain extent, also influenced the policy discourse (PAFFENHOLZ, 2015). At the same time, though with rare exceptions (e.g., MILNE; 2010; MILLAR, 2014), the increase in these kinds of studies has not been accompanied by a particularly systematised methodological discussion on the use of ethnography in peacebuilding contexts. Partly, this may be due to the nature of said studies, which focus on small, individualised cases. Yet given the specific nature of post-violent conflict settings and the recent epistemological debates in the study of peacebuilding, such an agenda is crucial at this stage.

This paper aims to contribute to this reflection by contemplating the challenging task of analysing the subjective aspects of peacebuilding contexts. To do so, it first presents an overview of the epistemological and methodological choices that have dominated peacebuilding research over the years, culminating in the widespread use of ethnographic studies. Next, it discusses two interrelated aspects that are deemed fundamental to the process of grasping subjectivities. The first is becoming familiar with the local *social grammar*. The second is the practical process of *translation* of local subjectivities, which, I argue, must be informed by the social grammar. The paper then offers some examples of these processes in the

analysis of the concepts of peace and power, before concluding with some final considerations on the next steps in improving this research agenda.

2 – Researching peacebuilding: an overview

The way peacebuilding has been analysed in academia has largely been influenced by how the term has been defined and dealt with in the policy realm. Whereas the term 'peacebuilding' existed before the 1990s (see GALTUNG, 1976), its popularity and centrality in the policy domain was directly linked to its introduction in the United Nations (UN) milieu, following the publication of the 1992 Secretary General's report *An Agenda for Peace*. In the report, peacebuilding indicated an "[…] action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict […]" (UN, 1992, par. 21). In 1995, *The Supplement to An Agenda for Peace* further elaborated this concept, highlighting the need for interventions to be long term, in order to help reestablish "effective government" (UN, 1995, par. 13). Efforts to this end would include "[…] the building up of national institutions, the promotion of human rights, the creation of civilian police forces and other actions in the political field." (UN, 1995, par. 13). This document paved the way for what would become the mainstream view of peacebuilding in the policy realm, where this concept became associated with what was later commonly referred to as the 'liberal peace' — i.e., building peace in post-conflict states entailed pushing for democracy and development, which would, in turn, help address the root causes of conflict, such as social injustices, and facilitate the process of reconciliation.

This agenda proved extremely ambitious with a very low rate of success throughout the 1990s. After 9/11, a stronger call emerged for the institutional reform of what were then labeled 'fragile' and 'failed' states. The general thinking was that stability and functional state institutions were paramount for peace, and should, therefore, precede other reforms aiming at liberalization. Thus peacebuilding became strongly associated with statebuilding (FUKUYAMA, 2004; PARIS, 2004; SABARATNAM, 2011).

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, peacebuilding was generally assessed through the lens of policy efficiency in a fairly positivistic and problem-solving way, following the mainstream epistemological approaches that dominated International Relations research. As there was a general concern with the efficacy of peacebuilding operations, and with how to improve their ability to promote stability in war-torn countries, several comparative studies were conducted in order to identify variables that could, in turn, explain and be influenced so as to increase such activities' efficacy (e.g., PARIS, 2004; PAFFENHOLZ, 2005; DOYLE; SAMBANIS, 2006; CALL; COUSENS, 2007; SANDOLE, 2010).

One of the key studies from 2004, *At War's End*, by Roland Paris, for example, compared eleven countries that had hosted peacebuilding missions in order to assess the extent to which political and economic liberalisation had contributed to lasting peace in those countries. While critical, in the sense that it problematised the way that liberal peace was implemented, Paris' work reinforced the call for intervention in "war-shattered states" and emphasised the need for democracies to be liberal in order for peace to last. At the same time, he proposed a review of *how* this should be carried out – in this case, by applying the formula of "institutionalization before liberalisation".

A 2006 publication from Doyle and Sambanis also built on comparisons to understand "[…] how the international community, and the UN in particular, can assist the reconstruction of peace in civil war-torn lands." (DOYLE; SAMBANIS, 2006, p. 4). Discussing theories about the origins of and solutions to civil wars, the authors proposed a "peacebuilding triangle" to help understand how much international assistance was needed in each post-war context. This model was then applied to various cases, and lessons were drawn into a plan to improve the success rate of peacebuilding missions.

While unique in highlighting the need to focus on each country's specific context, the work of Doyle and Sambanis was, like Paris', framed by a positivistic perspective. This was reflected in their methodology, which included both the statistical analysis of all civil wars since 1945, as well as the empirical analysis of different case studies, using mostly secondary sources while testing their models. More generally, both works (as well

as other publications at the time) were very much guided by a problem-solving perspective, with the common goal of finding ways to improve peacebuilding as a general activity.

By the end of the 2000s, the continuously low success rate of peacebuilding missions attracted harsher critiques. This time the focus was not only on the way those missions were being conducted, but, more fundamentally, on their very role within the more structural international context. It seemed clear that changing technical features or focusing on fixing institutions was not good enough. The 'local turn' in peacebuilding represented a shift in the literature where aspects such as culture and power became central to understand the limitations of peacebuilding.

2.1 – The 'Local Turn' and the Call for Ethnographic Studies in Peacebuilding

The 'local turn' in peacebuilding can be defined as a general shift in perspective where local actors are given priority both in the analysis as well as in the practice of peacebuilding. We can identify two key moments in which this local shift took place (PAFFENHOLZ, 2015). In the early 1990s, the important work of peacebuilding and conflict resolution practitioners, such as John Paul Lederach and Adam Curle, called for the need to prioritize local empowerment during peace processes. This approach focused on reconciliation and peace in the long-term, and the only way perceived to facilitate this was by enhancing local actors' capacities and ownership of the process.

The second local turn took place in the mid-2000s, driven by a more direct critique of the international peacebuilding/statebuilding apparatus, in particular its authoritative and ethnocentric character. From this perspective, it entailed a different kind of critique, based mostly on the epistemological and ontological domains of the mainstream peacebuilding agenda (MAC GINTY; RICHMOND, 2013; PAFFENHOLZ, 2015). A key feature of this turn is the understanding that power is a central element that needs to be taken into consideration in the analysis of peacebuilding, in particular the power asymmetries that exist between external and local actors in the design and implementation of policy agendas. Related to

this is the call for emancipation and the revision of power relations in peacebuilding, where the concept of resistance is particularly important (RICHMOND, 2011). Thus whilst the critical turn has a clear agenda of promoting change – by unveiling the power relations embedded in international activities and by recognising and stimulating local solutions for peace – it is very different from the first local turn in that, ultimately, the main critique is directed towards the very constitution of knowledge surrounding peacebuilding. Ideas of north-south, post-colonialism and post-structuralism are thus at the very base of this critique.

Methodologically, the critical local turn calls for a multidisciplinary approach to peacebuilding analysis, relying extensively on Anthropology and ethnographic approaches, as well as action-related methodologies and therefore a considerable change in the way 'efficiency' is assessed. Moving towards a micro-level of analysis, where the everyday gains prominence, the local turn praises localised studies and everyday practices of peace, providing space for a different kind of engagement with local actors. From this perspective, the latter are not mere 'objects of study', but agents who manifest different forms of power, often resisting international practices of peacebuilding. Thus, peace becomes hybrid (MAC GINTY; RICHMOND, 2013).

The implication of these assumptions in peacebuilding is that the prospects for top-down social engineering – such as 'exporting' Western institutions of governance – are weak, to say the least. Instead, what is needed is a better *understanding* of how local dynamics work. That is, peace needs to be contextualised, not only in terms of history and its materiality, but also, if not more importantly, from the subjective point of view of the actors that are agents of said peace. In other words, peacebuilding practices can only be improved as long as there is a better understanding of how local dynamics work. This, in turn, requires direct engagement with those who are supposed to be the beneficiaries and main actors of peace, i.e., national and local actors.

It is in this context that ethnography gains relevance. Methodologically speaking, this is one the best instruments to reach local actors and engage with their realities. More generally, the case for ethnographic studies is made against the very limitations of traditional

studies in pointing out the reasons for the failures of peacebuilding. As noted by Millar (2014, p. 15), the overall trend in peacebuilding has led to "[…] increasing standardization, professionalization, and evaluation but with little focus on how any of this is experienced by local people on the ground in transitional states." This is problematic for several reasons. First, what constitutes 'success' and 'efficiency' may mean different things for international agencies and local actors. Many recent empirical studies have shown that often the very indicators used to measure the success of peacebuilding have not the same relevance or even meaning to those who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of such activities (ROBINS, 2013; MILLAR, 2014; ROBERTS, 2015; MASCHIETTO, 2015). It is no wonder that often the many positive evaluations of peacebuilding activities do not add up once a researcher reaches the local level and asks ordinary people about their own views of such processes.

There is in fact a basic problem of translation, where the language used by internationals, as well as many of the givens that are at the base of peacebuilding activities and ideology, often do no match local reality. It is with this in mind that Millar (2014), in his call for more ethnography in peacebuilding, suggests that before proposing any 'solutions', practitioners and academics should make a step back and first *understand* local actors' perspectives. The premise here, often unacknowledged in the peacebuilding agenda, is that the phenomenon of study is in fact culturally variable. In contradiction, most practices start from the premise that the values underlying peacebuilding and the experiences lived through this process are somehow universal (MILLAR, 2014; RICHMOND, 2011).

A key point stressed by Millar is the fact that peacebuilding is *experiential*, that is, the way peacebuilding is lived and understood is contingent on how different actors experience it. At the same time, capturing such experiential variations is a challenging task that cannot fully be accomplished by means of quantitative methods, such as surveys, one of the reasons being that the language used in such instruments is framed by external actors and development agencies (see also MAC GINTY; FIRCHOW, 2016). Words and variables are predefined, so they cannot capture the elements which, in practice, may be more relevant for local agents, but are not envisioned in the paradigm that frames these

interventions in the first place. In order to truly understand how local actors experience these interventions, it is necessary to provide space for alternative concepts and local transcripts to be produced. So far ethnography seems the best instrument for this purpose. This entails engaging with different types of local actors, as expectations about peace and experiences vary. In other words, it entails dealing with the more subjective aspect of peace, while acknowledging that subjectivities directly impact objective outcomes, influencing actions and responses towards peacebuilding activities.

The following sections discuss two challenges related to the task of understanding the subjective aspects of peacebuilding settings. I begin with the premise that if the main purpose of the 'local turn' is to correspond with local actors, identify their priorities and contribute to a peace agenda that fosters emancipation, it is crucial that a platform of communication is well established. As straightforward as this may seem, in practice this ability depends on a complex process of translation that is influenced by elements such as empathy, power dynamics, as well as structural factors that the researcher cannot control. In this regard, the first challenge is related to the acknowledgment and identification of what I call the *social grammar*, which shapes the world of the researcher as well as the world of the actors attempting to be understood. The second challenge, closely linked to the first, is mastering the process of translation of local subjectivities. This challenge is more practical, in the sense that it entails both decoding the language of the researched actors as well as problematizing one's own language and, finally, finding the best way to improve communication between the two systems.

3 – Acknowledging different social grammars and subjectivities

The social grammar refers to the set of principles and implicit and explicit rules that influence social behavior in a given society. This includes the broader historical, cultural and spiritual frames that shape the way actors understand the world; it is what helps an actor make sense of the world.

Other terms have been used to express this general idea. Johan Galtung speaks of social cosmologies, where 'cosmology' stands for "[…] certain motivational syndromes that are embedded in [actors'] collective subconscious (in contrast to their consciously present ideology)" and affects behaviour (GALTUNG, 1997, p. 188). By referring to social cosmology, Galtung's intention is to assert the primacy of culture or civilization in contrast to approaches that stress the primacy of the economy or political institutions, for example. Accordingly, "Cosmology is the code, or program, of a civilization, usually better seen from the outside than by insiders who will typically find it too normal and natural, like the air around them, to be able to verbalize it." (GALTUNG, 1997, p. 188–189).

In a different fashion, Pierre Bourdieu (1977) uses the term *doxa* to refer to the sense of limits (or sense of reality) that each individual has and takes for granted (in particular, the implicit set of rules that govern social action). In his theoretical sociological approach, Bourdieu states that a *doxa* is fundamental in shaping and perpetuating what he calls *habitus*, that is, the structures that shape and limit (or regulate) actors' behaviours over time. Different to the idea of social cosmology, understanding the *doxa* entails a critical assessment of both material and symbolic aspects of a society. In fact, changing a *doxa* is extremely difficult, because general patterns of behaviour and the current distribution of resources (material and symbolic) tend to validate the existing taxonomies that classify people and, therefore, reinforce the *doxa*. When it is possible to see the *doxa* as a system of representation, as opposed to an absolute reality, then it is possible to have a competing alternative *doxa* and contestation may take place.

The idea of social grammar as used in this paper is closer to the concept of *doxa* than social cosmology, but it is not attached to the more general theory of Bourdieu. While acknowledging the crucial role of culture, the idea of social grammar is not exclusively focused on it, not least because the assumption here – especially considering peacebuilding settings where international efforts aim to expand Western values and institutions – is that culture is in constant motion, and is also framed by historical and economic factors. Moreover, the social grammar does not

refer exclusively to either formal or informal (or even subconscious) rules, but encompasses both reflective and non-reflective action.

In practical terms, the idea of social grammar shares some general assumptions of situated theory. Situated theory stems from the premise that "The ability to discern what may be intelligible and legitimate in some social system requires some knowledge of local understandings about action.", which, in turn, "[…] form the basis for the design of local action." (MILLER; RUDNICK, 2010, p. 65). Accordingly, these understandings "are generated from the analysis of local systems of practice, premise and meaning that animate social life in some place" (MILLER; RUDNICK, 2010, p. 65). It is through the analysis of these cultural understandings that it is possible to identify what the local strategies used for daily matters in a given community are.

When I refer to social grammar, I am referring specifically to the general system of local practices which may include explicitly and implicitly recognised rules, and which guide local attitudes and behaviours. It comprises, therefore, the broader frame of socially accepted beliefs and rules. The idea of subjectivities, on the other hand, points to the multiple ways each actor or group(s) of actors perceive and experience the different processes they engage with in their daily lives, including, in this case, any peacebuilding related activity. While using the term 'subjectivities', I subscribe to the idea of "[…] multiple interpretative horizons [that] give actors an ability to adapt to social context and [that] are a source of autonomy." (HAUGAARD, 1997, p. 187). Such interpretative horizons influence both the practical consciousness knowledge, i.e., the tacit knowledge that the actor is not able to formulate discursively, as well as the discursive consciousness knowledge, that is, the behaviour that results from a conscious reflection of an actor (GIDDENS, 1979). In other words, any behaviour, be it 'automatic' or 'rational', is influenced by the broader context preceding it – the social grammar in place – as well as by how each actor understands their own position in this broader setting. The idea of subjectivities focuses, therefore, on interpretation and meaning. Understanding the social grammar of a society is key to grasping local subjectivities, as it provides the general context that is the starting point for interpretation. The implication here is that for the

researcher to interpret local action in the way local actors themselves understand it, they must first be familiar with the social grammar, which often changes dramatically across cultures.

But how can we capture the social grammar and the actors' subjectivities in a particular peacebuilding setting? It should be stressed that, while social grammar and subjectivities are interrelated, identifying both may entail different objectives and processes. Identifying local subjectivities, as in recognising the difference between the dominant international view of local dynamics and local views of the same processes, has been, in fact, one of the main concerns of several studies within the local turn (e.g., MAC GINTY, 2008; ROBERTS, 2011, 2015; RICHMOND, 2011; HELLMÜLLER, 2013; MILLAR; VAN DER LIJN; VERKOREN, 2013). Many of these studies have focused on the need to acknowledge friction, hybridity and local resistance, by diving into empirical cases and building an ethnographical base with which to illustrate the different local experiences and interpretations of peacebuilding.

While most of the referred research has focused on single in-depth case studies, recent times have witnessed an effort towards the systematic expansion of the understanding of local subjectivities of peace. In 2013, Roger Mac Ginty and Pamina Firchow started an ambitious project called the Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI). Based on the premise that "[…] outside actors can ever fully understand the experiences of others […]" (MAC GINTY; FIRCHOW, 2016, p. 7), the project aims to identify indicators of peace that are constructed by the communities themselves, from the bottom-up, instead of being previously chosen by the researcher. The EPI has been piloted in South Africa, Uganda, Southern Sudan, Zimbabwe and, more recently, in Colombia, offering a comparative domain that is rarely present in ethnographic studies. While not using the term 'local subjectivities', ultimately the project shares the concern with providing local voices with agency, having identified what might be considered 'unconventional' indicators of peace and security that are extremely meaningful to local actors, but which have never appeared in the lists of international agencies (MAC GINTY; FIRCHOW, 2016).

As one of the purposes of the local turn is precisely to unveil the discrepancies between international planning for peace and local

experiences, identifying such incongruences (the different subjectivities) is a key step. But understanding the social grammar entails asking not only *how* local actors experience peacebuilding, but also *why* they experience it in the way they do. In his framework for peacebuilding ethnography, Millar (2014) refers to this as he speaks of the importance of ethnographic preparation. In practical terms, grasping the social grammar of a specific society would entail pursuing an in-depth study of local culture and history. Millar refers specifically to the reading of the available anthropological literature on the country/society under study, This, however, may be more complicated than it sounds. In some cases, the researcher may be lucky enough to have access to a wide range of publications of that society. Nevertheless, in other cases information is not so easily accessible, either because not much has been written, or because the material available is in a language that the researcher does not speak. Additionally, not only is culture dynamic and ever changing, but also, and particularly in peacebuilding contexts, there may be important variations across time and space, even within the same country, especially in the way actors relate to violence and the state. The point to be stressed here is that, ultimately, some social dynamics may be observable only in loco, which means that ethnography may need to be conducted for an extended period of time before the researcher can understand the local culture and social dynamics in order to make sense of the very data they want to analyse.

While conducting fieldwork, it is also important to consider a series of factors that affect the researcher's ability to apprehend social grammar. In this paper, I would like to focus on three specific factors. The first one is reflexivity. Reflexivity has been widely discussed in Sociology. Bourdieu, for instance, advocated that a reflexive practice is imperative in order for an academic to produce good science (SWARTZ, 1997). A reflexive practice means that researchers need to be constantly aware of three major biases while conducting research: first, they need to control the values and practices that are brought from their own social background to the object of inquiry; second, they need to be aware of their field location, that is, the position they hold in their specific field of production; third, they need to constantly examine their epistemological and social conditions in order to assess their own ability to make scientific claims. For

Bourdieu, a reflexive practice will not fully eliminate the problem of bias, nevertheless, it may significantly reduce the bias as it places the researcher under as much critical analysis as the object of research (SWARTZ, 1997).

Reflexivity has been a widely mentioned topic in the critical local turn, but it has not always been explicitly discussed, perhaps because it is considered a given in the context of cultural and post-colonial studies. In this literature the call for reflexivity usually appears alongside the critique to the universalist appeal of the liberal peace and its cultural insensitivity (RICHMOND, 2011; MILLAR, 2014). The very base of the critique, after all, is that the researcher calls into question their own epistemological assumptions and opens up to local values that may be different.

Stepping out of one's own value system, and acknowledging that a 'Western' perspective of science and social order exists is vital. Nevertheless, quite often the critical turn moves to another problematic pattern, which is the tendency to dichotomise findings in terms of 'otherness'. As noted by Meera Sabaratnam (2013), even critics of the liberal peace are often trapped into several "avatars of Eurocentrism", that is, often the most fundamental aspects related to *how* we do research remain uncontested. One of the ways this takes place is by researchers constantly opposing the 'West' and 'the rest' (or the 'North' and the 'South'), and so ultimately the point of departure of analysis is still Eurocentric. In her book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Smith (1999, p. 13–14), makes a similar point when she notes that "Many indigenous intellectuals actively resist participating in any discussion within the discourses of post-coloniality. That is because post-colonialism is viewed as the convenient intention of Western intellectuals which reinscribes their power to define the world."

This leads to the second factor that needs to be taken into account in the process of grasping a different social grammar: the need to move beyond a dichotomist view of the world. As I have argued elsewhere, an emphasis on dichotomies obscures alternative ways of talking about peace which move beyond the idea of peace as opposed to violent conflict, but which make more sense locally (MASCHIETTO, 2017). By dichotomising things we risk leaving aside anything that does not relate to one of the two extremes we are considering. So, while some dichotomies such as North/South may help make sense of our standing

point, they may be counterproductive if the point is to embrace the diversity that exists within the 'other'. That is, our sense of 'otherness' is not only still centred around ourselves, but it also tends to unify the 'other', even though they may be as different (if not more different) among themselves than they are from 'us'.

Recalling the argument of Stuart Hall, Smith (1999) reminds us of how the concept of the West functions. First, it allows 'us' to characterize and classify societies into categories; second, it condenses complex images of other societies through a system of representation; third, it provides a standard model of comparison; and, finally, it provides criteria of evaluation against which other societies can be ranked (SMITH, 1999). Moving beyond dichotomies and choosing to start a reflection beyond the very critique of the 'West' is thus an important exercise to move away from our ingrained epistemological training.

This leads me to the third factor that can help us grasp different social grammars: the constant comparison of narratives. Comparing narratives helps the researcher become familiar with the local social grammar by allowing the identification of commonalities and differences in the discourses, interpretations and understandings of specific events. While the commonalities may reveal the more general rules of the social grammar, variations can point out the different places in which each actor places him or herself within that set of rules. For example, in some countries, such as Mozambique, party politics play a key role in defining the distribution of power in a society, regardless of where one stands in the social structure. Yet, being a woman in a rural area places additional constraints and affects an actor's ability to navigate through the social system. Both aspects are important and complementary but most likely they will appear with different intensities depending on who is the researcher talking to.

While as a general rule critical peacebuilding studies have emphasised the need to reveal the voices of the marginalised, I argue that the full understanding of the social grammar requires the comparison across a wide range of different actors, including those in higher positions of power. In my own experience, certain narratives proliferate from the top to the bottom in such a powerful way that they may often obscure or become

superposed upon other narratives. Other times, they may be reinterpreted; partially altering the way the social grammar is experienced. Such nuances are important for the process of translation, as will be discussed next.

4 – The process of translating subjectivities

The online Merriam-Webster dictionary defines 'translation' as "an act, process, or instance of translating: such as (*a)* a rendering from one language into another; *also* the product of such a rendering; (*b)* a change to a different substance, form, or appearance (conversion); (*c*) *(1)* a transformation of coordinates in which the new axes are parallel to the old ones *(2)* the uniform motion of a body in a straight line". In a nutshell, the idea of translation entails comparison as well as an important degree of transformation. In the case of language, the transformation occurs so that content is rendered understandable to an audience that is not familiar with the original form of the information.

In translation theory there are two different assumptions about the use of language. On the one hand, there is an instrumental view, where language is perceived as a means to capture "[…] objective information, expressive of thought and meanings where meanings refer to an empirical reality or encompass a pragmatic situation." (RUBEL; ROSMAN, 2003, p. 6). On the other hand, there is a hermeneutic view, where emphasis is given to interpretation, that is, thoughts and meanings, where the latter ultimately shapes reality (RUBEL; ROSMAN, 2003).

Competing models of translation have also developed. While some perceive translation as a natural act, being the basis for the intercultural communication where common and universal aspects of human experience may be shared, others see this process as rather unnatural. The latter view emphasises cultural differences and the "foreignization" of translation, where the translator has to come to terms with "otherness" (RUBEL; ROSMAN, 2003). From this perspective, translation can also be perceived as a tool for the expansion of ideological and political agendas. As noted by Cronin (1996 apud RUBEL; ROSMAN, 2003, p. 6), "Translation relationships between minority and majority languages are rarely divorced from issues of power and

identity, that in turn destabilize universalist theoretical prescriptions on the translation process." Ultimately, the language to be translated may be informed by different values from those of the language of the researcher, so these differences must be taken into account.

In social sciences, the process of translation goes beyond the mere interlingual translation; it also entails 'translating' observed events into reliable information. This in turn requires an exercise of interpretation. When it comes to ethnography, the divergent views of translation mentioned above are extremely important. The way the researcher deals with the information gathered will be framed by the above challenges, and one of the key issues to keep in mind is 'how to deal with the different values and meanings of each language and make it all clear to the final audience?'

This is even more challenging in the analysis of peacebuilding, where, despite the rise of ethnographic studies, there still exists pressure to produce and develop generalizations and theory (MILNE, 2010). This influences the research design of most academic works, including the definition of variables to be studied as well as the concept of development used. How to reconcile the particularism embedded in ethnography with the more general analytical and policy goals of peacebuilding?

As Milne (2010, p. 79) observes, this choice is related to the exercises of 'understanding' (a feature at the core of ethnography) and 'explaining' (a feature at the core of theory development), where "[…] 'explanation' entails absorbing the observable phenomena into one's own terms of discourse, while 'understanding' presupposes acceptance of multiplicity of positions and broadening, if not transcendence, of one's own perspective."

Ultimately, researching peacebuilding entails navigating both these aspects of explaining and understanding, as well as perceiving the process of translation as a delicate exercise of identifying when meanings are similar or diverge between the two systems of communication – the language of the researcher and the language of the actors under analysis. This means that while conducting research, a reflexive posture entails the recognition of two different processes taking place at the same time: on the

one hand, the researcher is trying to understand a set of mostly predefined concepts, for instance, how peacebuilding (as a pre-defined activity) has been implemented or experienced by different kinds of local actors; while on the other, the researcher is trying to grasp local understandings and experiences that may be obliterated by the very theories and concepts that inform the research. Not doing so may lead to unreliable findings that neither 'explain' nor help 'understand' peacebuilding and its success or failure. In the remainder of this section I explore the challenges of this translation process by discussing the concepts of peace and power.

4.1 – Understanding 'peace'

It seems ironic that while peace is a core element pursued in the international agenda, very rarely, if at all, are those who are supposed to be its beneficiaries – the victims of a violent conflict – asked how they unders-tand what peace is or should be. On the contrary, what usually takes place is that a certain definition of peace is 'agreed upon' or implicitly assumed in international reports, which, in turn, is used to guide policy action. As noted in the critical literature of the local turn, this is problematic in many ways. The universalising appeal of peace is not only culturally insensitive, but, more practically, it affects the very expectations and responses of local actors towards the new state of peace.

Responding to this critique, many recent studies have made an effort to move beyond the methodological framework whereby a concept is pre-defined, to one where local actors have the opportunity to provide their own inputs to the peace they live in. Different country studies have revealed that, more often than not, there is a huge discrepancy between assessments from peacebuilders and assesments from local actors, one of the factors to this being the variables used to evaluate the peace achieved.

In Mozambique, for instance, a country long considered a suc-cessful case of peacebuilding, it was noted that the views of many actors li-ving in rural areas were far less optimistic about the achievements of peace compared to most international assessments. In 2012, when asked about what had changed in their daily lives over the 20 years following the Gene-ral Peace Agreement, many villagers stated that, while they no longer had

to run away and could finally produce their own crops and begin families, the scenario was still dire, as many did not have access to drinking water and other basic services. Rarely did any of the villagers refer to the benefits of democracy and multiparty elections. On the contrary, their focus, while thinking of peace, was on issues related to development and the need for jobs and basic conditions to be able to sustain their own families and develop their communities (MASCHIETTO, 2015).

Discussing Southern Sudan, Roberts (2013) found similar discrepancies between the views of the local population and peacebuilders, where the latter placed emphasis on democratic reforms, while most local actors were more concerned with basic needs. Moreover, as also noticed in the case of Mozambique, the very understanding of what democracy entailed varied considerably, as local actors often perceived democracy as extremely connected to development.

Referring to Timor Leste and Nepal, Robins (2013) stressed how the international emphasis on *rights* (framing the concern with human rights as one of the pillars of peace) does not resonate with the more dominant emphasis on *needs* present at the local level. Problems such as the lack of nearby schools to which children could be sent, lack of resources to buy food, and even lack of resources to pay for rituals for those who had died in conflict were the main ones identified by the participants. In Timor this problem was particularly heightened by the local understanding that not performing rituals for the dead has numerous consequences, such as bringing sickness and death to other family members.

Studies in Sierra Leone (MILLAR, 2014) and Indonesia (BRÄUCHLER, 2015) have highlighted the problems related to the concepts of justice and reconciliation imbued in the peacebuilding agenda. In Sierra Leone, for example, the way the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was experienced was often the opposite of what international actors expected, with many local actors claiming that the hearings only reopened old wounds by reminding them of the violence that took place without offering anything concrete in terms of how to improve the ongoing lives of the current population (MILLAR, 2014).

The list of examples of discrepancies in terms of understandings and expectations of peace could go on. The point to highlight here is that a peacebuilding assessment will lead to very different conclusions depending of the variables used to define its success. In the cases illustrated, local actors were given the chance to provide direct input of what they understood as the most important aspects of peace, which, in turn, shaped their expectations regarding change and their responses towards the peacebuilding activities that took place. The intellectual exercise in the cited works was focused on comparing narratives between those that initially framed the researcher's starting point (i.e., the dominant meanings of peace and peacebuilding in policy practice and the assumptions behind these paradigms) and the experiences and understandings of local actors.

As noted earlier, however, the complete process of translation needs to be set in the specific social grammar in order to be more thorough. The discrepancies noted in each of these studies can only be fully understood in light of the history and cultural context that shape each of these societies. For example, in a country like Mozambique, which has a long history of political centralisation, and where tradition plays a strong role in the everyday lives of most of the population, the relationship between the citizens and the state is of a very different nature than that of Western Europe. More than the view that the state should be accountable to the population it serves, there is a predominant view that the state is like a 'father', or a 'provider' (AFROBAROMETER, 2012). This, in turn affects the understanding of what peace entails.

Dynamics of clientelism and patronage have also been widely discussed when it comes to Africa (although they are certainly not exclusive to this continent). From this perspective, the expectations related to peace are intrinsically related to the dynamics that shape such social mechanisms, and stand in contrast to the idea of meritocracy prevalent in the West. As Millar (2014) explains, while discussing the case of Sierra Leone, many people became highly frustrated with the TRC because they expected that some kind of material compensation would arise, especially following the sensitization campaign and the message that the TRC was going to 'help' Sierra Leoneans. This was more than just a different understanding of what 'help' means. It was a friction between

the values imbued in the very idea of the TRC and the everyday social dynamics of the communities in Sierra Leone.

In the case of Indonesia, Bräuchler (2015) observed that some of the challenges of pursuing justice were related to the different logics that shape traditional justice and the formal judiciary system: while justice tribunals and criminal courts are usually based on a retributive justice model and seek the guilt of and sanctions for individual perpetrators, this is often a shock to traditional justice perspectives where the aim is to restore social relationships and reintegrate society. This causes a clash in terms of expectations and explains some of the shortcomings embedded in peacebuilding reforms.

The above examples show that the issue at stake is not only a matter of translating 'words', but understanding their meaning in that specific (cultural, political, historical, etc.) context. In other words, it is the social grammar that helps researchers makes sense of the meaning of local subjectivities and their *raison d'être*.

Still, looking at the examples presented, there is one further issue that needs to be critically assessed. Looking at the two-way process of translation referred to above, the key issue here was making sense of local experiences with the starting point of pre-defined concepts of a broader peacebuilding agenda. For instance, if 'justice' is imbued in the idea of peace fostered by international actors, then the contrast is set between how 'justice' is interpreted and understood in the peacebuilding agenda and the local experiences of the implementation of this agenda. That is, the starting point is still the language of the researcher. This may seem logical from the standpoint of Western dominant methodology, but a practical concern related to this must be pointed out. As peacebuilding has become a widespread international enterprise, the increasing engagement of international actors and NGOs in peacebuilding activities has as a direct effect the internalisation of specific terms at the very local level. This means that unless the researcher reaches a community that has been mostly isolated (which is increasingly more rare), chances are that local actors will be very familiar with terms that inform peacebuilding activities, even if they ascribe to such terms a different meaning. This has several consequences when it comes to translation. More often than not local actors will have a general idea of

what the researcher is 'looking for' or 'expecting to hear'. So, for example, even if local understandings of peace may be eminently related to spiritual aspects, the fact that many people have been exposed to a range of agencies that work with peace as a fairly liberal concept (i.e. peace = democracy + markets + human rights), there is a great chance that while addressing the researcher, participants will switch their register to the language they know the researcher is familiar with.

Noticing such variation in the use of language is extremely important. It may reveal that in many scenarios the participants are actually more familiar with the cognitive world of the researcher than vice-versa. Here is where reflexivity becomes particularly important: is the researcher ultimately just listening to what she or he is expecting to hear? Once more, it is the previous knowledge of the social grammar that will allow the researcher to question the very use of language, or make additional questions that may shift the course of the interaction to a less 'Western-centric' language. The case may be the opposite when the terms used by the researcher are not as commonly used, as discussed below.

4.2 – Translating 'power'

While specific terms (e.g., 'peace', 'participation', 'local development') have become extremely popular in the peacebuilding policy agenda, having been subject to wide discussions and several definitions, others have simply been hidden here and there, appearing in some documents and literature, but far less discussed and problematised.

The concept of 'power' is perhaps one of the most debated in social theory (Sociology, Anthropology, Political Science, etc.), and yet when it comes to peacebuilding it has rarely been addressed in a more systematic way. When it is, it usually refers to 'power-sharing' or, more recently, in the critical literature, it implies the problems linked to post-colonialism. However, not only does power have many different meanings within the 'Western' literature (e.g., HAUGAARD, 2002), but it also has different connotations to local actors.

I would like to refer here to my own experience while conducting fieldwork in Mozambique in 2012 and 2013. While studying empowerment in a rural district, one of my initial objectives was to understand how power dynamics had changed since the end of the war in 1992. In particular, I wanted to see if local actors felt that their own power had increased in any way since the end of the war. I had no strict pre-definition of power, but my general purpose was to understand how people felt about their own ability to control their lives and/or influence local and/or national dynamics.

In my initial guideline for the focus groups, a few of my questions were related to power in the broadest possible way. I wanted to identify in the participants' views of things such as 'who has power in your community?', 'do you feel you have any power to change things [in 'x' domain]?', and so forth. Soon it became clear that, while the idea of peace – and its different connotations – were a fairly easy topic to engage with – the idea of 'power' was much more confused and disperse. Two were the main reasons for such confusion. First, at this level I was dealing with groups of people who spoke a local language and the interpreter had obvious difficulties in translating 'power' as a general word. Second, the responses were also very different in nature: while some participants immediately alluded to the local governance structure to indicate who had positions of power locally, in other situations there was a clear effort by participants to check what exactly I was looking for (what power? power for what?).

I eventually gave up asking some of the original questions, as they brought about more confusion than clarification. At the same time, other questions allowed me to grasp the dynamics I was trying to understand. On the one hand, it became clear that one important power dynamic was indeed related to the very hierarchical way the government is structured, including at the local level, that is, power was understood largely in terms of authority and ability to control and influence. On the other hand, other stories illustrated other dynamics of power – or feeling of powerlessness – in the case of local actors' perceived ability to change things that affected their daily lives.

It is beyond the purpose of this paper to propose an agenda to investigate power in the context of peacebuilding. What I would like to stress here, in the context of the process of translation, is the contrast between the study of peace and power. It is not that peace has a more consensual or universal connotation than power (on the contrary, many studies show how complex and various the interpretations of peace are, (e.g., GALTUNG, 1981; RICHMOND, 2005; DIETRICH, 2012). Nevertheless, in the particular context of peacebuilding, it seems that the widespread use of 'peace' and 'peacebuilding' in the policy agenda has largely influenced the prospects of communication in the realm of ethnography.

This is not necessarily good or bad. In fact, it can be argued that the popularization of the concept of peace, while apparently facilitating the process of communication between the researcher and local participants, obscures the researcher's access to other interpretations and meanings of peace that are not necessarily related to the mainstream pillars of the international peacebuilding agenda. We may see, in fact, a process of foreignization (RUBEL; ROSMAN, 2003), whereby the connotation of the concept has become more aligned with the language of the external actor, distancing itself from more endogenous interpretations, which, in turn, become more difficult to access. Put under perspective, this very process also reflects broader dynamics of power involving the way the research is conducted and the many ways in which the researcher is also limited by its mode of communication.

Whilst presenting more challenges in the process of translation, concepts that are openly more contested and less popularised in the policy realm, such as 'power', also facilitate the reflexive process by forcing the researcher to move away from her own social grammar.

5 – Conclusion

This paper has reflected on the challenging task of analysing subjective aspects in peacebuilding contexts. While there have been a growing number of ethnographic studies expanding our understanding of local subjectivities in peacebuilding settings, much

less has been written regarding the methodological steps to conduct such an endeavour.

With the aim of contributing to this agenda, I focused on the specifics of two interrelated aspects of this process, respectively (1) the need and means to understand the local social grammar and (2) the process of translation of local subjectivities. The point made is that an effective process of translation needs to be accompanied by a thorough understanding of the social grammar that frames the language, actions and attitudes of the society being studied.

The paper further offered two concrete examples of the process of translation by discussing the concepts of 'peace' and 'power' and their subjective interpretation at the local level. In the case of 'peace', the examples show important contrasts between the dominant Western views and local views. In the case of 'power', I highlighted the difficulty of translation as this concept is far less popular in the policy realm of peacebuilding as compared to peace, justice and reconciliation. Reflecting on these different cases, I suggested that the exercise of understanding subjectivities is also informed by the very expansion of peacebuilding worldwide and the respective popularisation of some concepts at the local level. As local actors become more familiar with the internationalised mainstream version of some concepts, the researcher needs to be particularly reflexive in order to avoid (or at least, minimise) a biased narrative.

Moving beyond a 'Westernised' epistemological position requires a constant exercise in reflexivity. Whereas this paper has pointed to some of the challenges related to this process, it is worth stressing that many of the concepts that are imbued in the very way 'we' see the world may also be completely different in other cultural spaces. The conceptions of 'time' and 'space', for example, which inform peacebuilding research, may make no sense locally and so how they inform the researcher's process of translation should also be assessed.

In conclusion, I would like to add that while the turn towards Anthropology and the increased use of ethnography has brought numerous contributions to the analysis of peacebuilding, engaging in dialogue with other fields such as Translation Studies (as this paper has

tried to do), Linguistics and Psychology, may further contribute to the field's development and the researchers' ability to better understand and explain peacebuilding, as well as to the development of a more solid methodological agenda for research in peacebuilding.

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