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Short Methods Note: Operationalising Agency and Uncertainty in a Peace and Conflict Studies Research Project – Sri Lanka

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Introduction- Researching questions of peace with justice, within environments that restrain researcher agency, and which evoke uncertainty, requires the adoption of long-term perspectives and a good dose of patience. From the restrictions placed upon the researcher by external institutional structures to the relationships established between researcher and participants during data collection, agency and uncertainty remain factors in post-positivist scientific projects. Critical and contemplative analysis of the data, and importantly of the structures, within which knowledge is acquired as well as a preparedness for processual adjustments over time, help to underpin research trajectories. In my own experience, these factors demand not only a cautious restraint, by way of the researcher's own framing of process, but elevated commitments to the principle of 'do no harm', the recognition of the positionality between researcher and participants, the acknowledgement and mitigation of bias and action to promote researcher and participant agency. Researchers themselves should acknowledge the limits by which their methodologies are constrained; and how, by modifying methods and observing limits, transparency and accountability are enhanced, participation and subjectivity substantiated, and bias and harm mitigated.

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I. Introduction

Researching questions of peace with justice, within environments that restrain researcher agency, and which evoke uncertainty, requires the adoption of long-term perspectives and a good dose of patience. From the restrictions placed upon the researcher by external institutional structures to the relationships established between researcher and participants during data collection, agency and uncertainty remain factors in post-positivist scientific projects. Critical and contemplative analysis of the data, and importantly of the structures, within which knowledge is acquired as well as a preparedness for processual adjustments over time, help to underpin research trajectories. In my own experience, these factors demand not only a cautious restraint, by way of the researcher's own framing of process, but elevated commitments to the principle of 'do no harm', the recognition of the positionality between researcher and participants, the acknowledgement and mitigation of bias and action to promote researcher and participant agency. Researchers themselves should acknowledge the limits by which their methodologies are constrained; and how, by modifying methods and observing limits, transparency and accountability are enhanced, participation and subjectivity substantiated, and bias and harm mitigated.

The research I conducted in the difficult social and political environment that was Sri Lanka was to excavate the unseen conflicts beneath the carapace of popular discourse. It was here in this more hidden world I delved, where marginalisation of people translated into invisibility and for whom agency and uncertainty was at a premium. Such a research agenda demanded commitments to both interrogative and temporal parameters that complimented the environment under investigation with a view to executing the research agenda to a satisfactory conclusion. As a cross-disciplinary scholarship, peace and conflict studies opens itself to new and creative opportunities for the application of methods. Overarched by intersectionality, my research sought to bridge the existentialism of the mid- 20th century, and its emphasis on individual freedoms, with the inter-relational role between the individual's own subjectivities, desires and purpose, and the inherent impositions and constraints of the social and political structures surrounding them. Such an approach enabled a multi-dimensional understanding of both identities and subjectivities. Consistent with critical and phenomenological approaches, I constructed my methods through an inductive lens, deconstructing the process into specific considerations of: safety of participants, researcher positionality, and bias. Addressing these parameters, in my research experience, helped to elevate agency and mitigate uncertainty. I discuss these issues in both papers noted in the Reference list and I review them again below in short summary.

II. Operationalising Agency and Uncertainty

a) *Safety & Doing No Harm*

Researchers should adhere to a principle of doing-no-harm to participants or else unwittingly expose the research to processes and methods that are 'exploitative' [Cannella and Lincoln, 2009, 55, 57]. For reasons of participant safety and harm mitigation, as well as related ethical conditionalities imposed by the research institution, interviews were largely conducted remotely, often across large geographical distances. Participant identities were concealed. During many interviews, both participants and I were in different countries outside of Sri Lanka. We employed alternative telecommunication facilities, with sometimes uncertain degrees of connectivity across different time zones. Accordingly, planning, efficacy and efficiency were necessary. Needless to say, the agency of the participants, and myself, were often challenged elevating uncertainty.

I had originally intended to ensure access to non-English (Sinhala and Tamil) speaking people, with an expectation of engaging translators. However, I was not only unable to satisfy myself that a secure environment of information flow was possible, but that without participants' own sense of security assured, the information they might be willing to share could be unconsciously biased, distorted or even incomplete. Breakdowns in privacy in a small city under military rule,

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such as Colombo was, in which many people's identities were easily known or traceable, and in which trust had been severely eroded, was not conducive to achieving a sufficient level of security. I could not ensure that participants' identities or their stories were sufficiently secure in country.

b) Positionality

I developed an understanding of my position in the context of both the research overall and, in particular, the participants. 'Positionality is critical in the relationship between inequalities, power, and the production of knowledge' and I was conscious that my presence, and my status - as understood by those being interviewed - could impact upon both the interview process and the data gleaned. [Mary Romero, 2018, 54] I understood therefore that the interviews and analysis of data were affected by my 'position' in relation to the 'others'. They were also influenced by the continuum of past 'interaction' with some of the communities from which certain participants came. My relational history to some of the participants and the knowledge I acquired whilst interacting with them helped strengthen how I contextualised my interpretations of knowledge. I realised that my own history helped to enhance the intersubjectivity between me and the participants and was conscious that the information obtained from those with whom I shared a pre-existing relationship strengthened the acquisition and interpretation of knowledge. On this basis, and as I have previously argued elsewhere, this aspect of my methods borrowed from circumstances which I felt as comparable to formal interactionist settings which scholars such as Roger Smith has argued, provide 'the prospect of being able to identify, record and analyse the behaviour of individuals and groups in 'natural' settings.' [Roger Smith, 2009, 114] Norman Denzin also supports the notion that 'interactionism best fits the empirical nature of the social world,' and thus is conducive to more meaningful interpretations of interviews. [Norman K Denzin, 2009, 5].

As I chose to interpret and analyse each participant's experience using an Interpretive Phenomenological approach (IPA), I also was conscious that the impacts were reciprocal. Such reciprocity meant that any interpretations I made about participants' experiences may also be affected by the interviewee's own positionality, with regard to me. [Jonathon A Smith et al., 2009, 34-37, 41] Accordingly, I tried to modify my approach informed by the warnings of scholars such as Romero who states, 'Social science has a long tradition of studying the powerless and normalising unequal relationships between the researcher and the participant.' [Romero, 2018, 55] The principal issue arises in how 'the other' is situated, understood, interpreted and represented in circumstances in which a researcher does not share the same 'axis of oppression but rather have race, class, and gender privilege.' [Romero, 55].

c) Bias

A normative peace with justice framework acknowledges certain inherent biases which should also inform the methods selected. A suite of methods should complement the substantive multi-disciplinary scholarship found in the peace and conflict studies academy and support participants' own agencies by seeking to mitigate the very same biases that frustrate people's social and political participation beyond the research. They should enable reflection and, for example, look favourably upon concepts of democracy and rights-based approaches, paralleling similar biases in favour of collective 'participation', such as that discussed by the scholar of strong democracy Benjamin R. Barber. Similarly, Hilary Cottam asserts the need for 'participatory' approaches in resolving 'the big global challenges of our time' [COTTAM, 2010, 50, 50-55]. In aiming to give effect to these emancipatory visions, the methods are underpinned, as Roger Smith posits, 'by principles of rights, participation and social justice' [Smith, 2009, 12]. Participants from marginalised communities in Sri Lanka, including people who identified with sexual minority and gender diverse communities, with Tamil, Sinhala and youth communities, as well as other marginalised communities were afforded a voice in this research.

d) Agency – Researcher and Participants

Whilst researching the agency of marginalised communities in Sri Lanka, I became conscious of, and was confronted by, the limitations of my own agency. Common structural barriers which frustrated access to peace with justice, the illiberal exercise of democratic and human rights-based entitlements and the limited or absent space for advocacy, reached beyond the experiences of ordinary Sri Lankan citizens but impacted upon others. As I grew to learn, the structural restrictions imposed upon local people could impinge my own agency as a researcher. Curiously, and ironically, these barriers, whilst on one hand seemed unhelpful, in fact, provoked me to confront, with greater clarity, both their suffocating impact and, concomitantly, contextual subtleties. I learnt that a nebulous labyrinth of potentialities existed. Some led to other corridors of opportunity, such as collegial advice from academics in equally if not more difficult circumstances, but most, were structurally finite dead-ends. Yet, these corridors, whether opened or closed, needed some form of navigation to understand them. Thus, they too became a part of the research project.

In my article concerning agency [Hearnden, 2023, 31-39] I discussed my frustrated experiences with several institutions in Sri Lanka including: civil society organisations, the University of Colombo, the Sri Lankan Ministries of Higher Education, Official

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Languages and Social Integration, and Defence as well as the United Nations Country Team. I was able to compare these experiences with my earlier experiences, including the creation and execution of a major international conference, which helped to provide context for the research project. My direct involvement was in partnership with a regional non-governmental organisation, with several local civil society groups, state actors and UN partners. It created an open, democratic, rights-based space for regional cross-sectoral dialogue amongst them including politicians and policy makers, civil society (local and international) stakeholders, advocates who identified as belonging to domestic and international marginalised communities, media, academia and other representatives from the multi-lateral sphere.

III. Conclusion

My own experiences in Sri Lanka, demonstrated that ordinary Sri Lankans sought to realise their democratic entitlements and exercise those entitlements in a rights-based environment. Within a peace with justice framework, such as was provided through the conferencing exercise, dialogue based participatory engagement sought to achieve progressive outcomes. Contemporaneously, outside the relative safety of the conference space: conflict and violence (direct and structural) persisted; democratic entitlement and rights-based frameworks were absent;, and people's agencies were challenged. In such a climate, and beneath the carapace of popular discourse less visible, latent or invisible conflicts persisted. (Hearnden, Social Alternatives, 2023, 31-9)

To unearth these 'other' conflicts, I embarked on a research project that revealed the structural barriers that most profoundly impacted upon marginalised people's purposive desires to advocate for justice and to fulfil their self-determinative existences as human beings.

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