

Guest Editor's Introduction

Teaching Intersectional Conflict Analysis Through Art

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Abstract: This essay discusses the creation, conceptual framework and pedagogical approaches to the course Arts Approaches to Conflict, offered in the Department of Political Science at Agnes Scott College, and arts-based approaches to teaching intersectional conflict analysis.

Keywords: intersectional conflict analysis, arts and conflict, peacebuilding, intersectionality, pedagogy, Agnes Scott College

Conflict is complex.

That is to say, the conflict domain involves complex, interconnected, and dynamic processes, that includes intrapersonal conflict through to international conflict, from latent conflicts, through stages of escalation and de-escalation of a conflict.¹ Elements of conflict, such as aspects of identity, are increasingly understood to shape diverse experiences of, and agency within, conflict. As such, effective conflict analysis must attend to the complexities and the unique features of the conflict with respect and dignity. In my own research and teaching, I have advocated for the kind of analysis that is able to attend to the nuances of complex conflicts, in order that we might build context-specific peacebuilding initiatives that are home-grown. As Cora Adler has found, “Analyzing how aspects of identity, such as race, class, and religion, intersect and constitute the diverse experiences and forms of agency in conflict leads to a more thorough understanding of conflict dynamics and power relations between actors and groups. Highlighting how conflict affects conflict actors differently, intersectional analysis leads to peacebuilding interventions that are more in-tune with context-specific conditions.”² In order to conduct this type of analysis, an intersectional analysis of conflict, and to be able offer up the insights that come from such an approach, we first have to be able to see the complex processes that come together to create conflict, particularly those invisible power relations.

How then, does one go about bringing this type of approach from the field inside to the classroom? How does one teach intersectional conflict analysis to a group of undergraduate students? How do we cultivate an appreciation for the complex and interconnected processes of conflict in our students? How do we go about integrating intersectionality throughout our students’ analytical process, helping them to craft and hone the analytical tools that will enable our future peacebuilders?

I turned to the Arts and to and to the framework of Intersectionality to build a flexible structure

¹ Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall 2011.

² Alder 2021.

to teach students inductive research methods for conflict analysis and to teach about the role of culture in conflict. The structure of this course was derived from the theories and methods I have utilized for research with artists and marginalized groups in Iraqi Kurdistan. In my own work, I have brought together approaches from the fields of International Conflict Management and Cultural Anthropology to the study of intraethnic and intracultural conflict arising from the politics of ethnicity, movements for social change that resist cultural and structural violence, specifically those movements inside Iraqi Kurdistan, that call for cultural justice as a human right. In Iraqi Kurdistan, the Arts are highly contentious, and artmaking must reckon itself with the politics of the day. At the same time, there is very little literature on the subject to work with. This has led me to ground my own research in the field with the artists themselves. Of course, this also means that one must craft special ways of looking and listening. Over the years, I have had to build my own unique and useful tools to conduct this research borrowing ideas from Art History, Arts-based research, Anthropology, Intersectionality, Political Science, Conflict Management, and Sub-Altern Studies. These idiosyncrasies present in my own research, have informed the structure and spirit of *Arts Approaches to Conflict*.

Kimberlé Crenshaw’s work has contributed the idea of “intersectionality” which understands the interconnected and interdependent nature of social categorizations and the potential for overlapping systems of disadvantage. Understanding the intersectional nature of an individual’s multiple and overlapping social identities, is particularly useful to help students think about the multiple, complex, and particular actors within a given conflict. It also helps students to consider identity politics as a political tool utilized in a conflict and the ways group identities can conflate and ignore contentious intragroup difference, potentially adding tensions by ignoring injustices and exploitations built into a social system that privileges some groups over others, institutionalizing unequal opportunities.³

Arts-based research is well suited to “come at things differently” to ask new questions, develop new insights or to excavate new terrain. “While the arts are worthy unto themselves, purely for the sake of artistic expression and cultural enrichment, they are also invaluable to research communities across the disciplines,” states arts-based research scholar, Patricia Leavy.⁴ Arts-based research is an approach that combines the tenets of the creative arts, involves researchers engaging in art making as a way of knowing and involves the decision to use art as a way to respond to particular questions. In this respect, art is a way of knowing and approached as something that is widely accessible and available to every person.⁵ Arts-based research may involve a range of different disciplines. In doing so, it seeks a broad and varied base of knowledge by which to respond to problems while not being constrained to fixed protocols. Conducting research in this manner, arts-based researchers aspire to dissolve artificial disciplinary boundaries that hinder a researcher’s creativity and ability to problem-solve. Principles in arts-based research align with the dominant principles in qualitative, anthropological methods and perspectives and Leavy notes that Arts-based research practices are holistic and participatory and are particularly useful for research that aims, “To describe, explore, or discover, or that require attention to processes” - able to get at

³ Crenshaw 1991: 1241-1299.

⁴ Leavy 2018.

⁵ Leavy 2015; McNiff 2013; and McNiff 2014.

multiple meanings, and focuses attention on meaning making.⁶

For student research in this course, Arts-based research perspectives are useful because such perspectives are holistic and understands artmaking as a site where meaning is made, understood, and negotiated through processes and through relationships. Arts-based research, like anthropological research, is based in the understanding of holism – that the parts of the whole are in intimate interconnection with one another. These perspectives are highly compatible. This integration of disciplinary perspectives has the potential to expand disciplinary understanding but also to marry practice and theory.⁷ Also for this research, Arts-based perspectives allows us the ability to borrow informative perspectives from the fields of Art –History and Arts-based peacebuilding.

Arts Approaches to Conflict

During the academic year 2022-2023 I had the great fortune to be in residence in the Department of Political Science at Agnes Scott College, a historically women’s liberal arts college in Atlanta, Georgia. During that time, I was offered an opportunity to develop and teach my own course *Arts Approaches to Conflict*. *Arts Approaches to Conflict*, a name inspired by Marian Liebmann’s edited volume of the same name, was a cross-listed course between the Department of Political Science and Department of Sociology and Anthropology and was offered during the Spring 2023 semester. It has been my hope that a course like *Arts Approaches to Conflict* would be able to offer students additional tools to think critically and expansively about the ways in which conflicts are created through our constructed, social, cultural, and political structures - to see the invisible matrices of power that form inequalities.

To be clear, my students are no strangers to conflict. This group of students, all undergraduates, all of whom were born in the early 2000s, in varying degrees, have dealt with complex social problems that they must navigate. They are not naive to the world by any means. If we consider this age group in terms of their contemporary conflicts, there is a seemingly endless list of which I cannot begin to include all. In terms of major international conflicts, we can locate this group in an age that includes the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, 2002 invasion of Afghanistan and 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. If we consider some of the major domestic events of U.S. history since 2000, they might begin with the elections of George W. Bush and Donald Trump, anthrax being sent through the mail, the devastation of hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, the 2008 economic crisis, the rise of public, mass-shootings, the domestic attack on the U.S. capitol, the murder of George Floyd, highlighting police violence, and, of course, the onset of the COVID-19 global, pandemic. My students are no strangers to conflict. They are a hip generation that is highly aware of the injustices present in their world. Some, even at this young age, have already taken this step into activism. Putting theories and methods from the disciplines of Conflict Management, International Relations, and Anthropology into their hands, my students ran with such frameworks as intersectionality, historical particularism, and the concept of culture, and engaged with ethnographic methods and inductive reasoning skills in ways that I am still figuring out and am learning from.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Often in qualitative research such as the work done in this course, the term *conceptual framework* has come to mean different things. For *Arts Approaches to Conflict*, I encouraged my students to think of our conceptual framework as being more inclusive and including the interconnected elements of the research process including review of the literature, use of available theory and methods that cooperate in a synergistic way to form an effective structure to support research on the topic.⁸ Class assignments emphasized student research and encouraged a spirit of exploration that follows from the tradition of grounded theory and ethnographic field research wherein theory is allowed to emerge organically out of the collection and analysis of data. Throughout the semester, I asked the class to partner with me in thinking about the role of culture in conflict and to offer their own insights as firsthand participants in real-world conflicts through the medium of this class-as-thought experiment. In this essay, I will share a brief sketch of the three main concepts, Art, Culture and Conflict, as they were used to form the broad framework that I used to develop the course and guide the course assignments, particularly the “Art Critique Memo” that students conducted in three parts and over the course of the semester. Additionally, I will briefly discuss the ways in which students engaged with historical particularism, stages of conflicts, to also include methods including iconographic/iconological analysis ethnographic methods and bringing in other concepts to achieve an intersectional analysis of conflict. In the chapters that follow this introductory essay, this special issue will present a selection of students’ work from their final projects for the class. The goal of the final assignment was to give students an opportunity to reflect on the different theories and methods we have experimented with over the course of the semester and use them to think about a conflict of their own choosing. Students could choose to either write a research paper or to develop an arts-based project such as a poem, collage, painting, song, dance, or some other medium to help them think about the elements of the conflict they chose. In both cases, whether they chose the paper or the project, students were encouraged to think of their final as an analytical tool for critical thinking and exploration.

The selection of student work that is presented here includes images of student artwork and a curated selection of creative statements and excerpts of longer essays produced by students in the *Arts Approaches to Conflict* course. In addition, some selections herein come from students in my other classes, *Introduction to International Relations* and *Introduction to Human Rights*. The option to have a choice between a research paper and an arts-based research project appealed greatly to my students in *Arts Approaches to Conflict* and seemed to spark an enthusiasm for the work. I was inspired by their energy and so, I offered the same options to the other classes I taught that semester. Students there too were excited by the options and later told me that they enjoyed working through their ideas through an arts-based project and were very surprised that it was not easy at all. In fact, they found themselves able to “see” the complex web of interconnected ideas that we had always talked about in class and were able to grapple with those complexities through artmaking in a way that they could not in an essay. Many of my students commented that they were excited to have assignments that allowed them to use their unique gifts. Every student brought their own unique insights to the work, and I was impressed at how truly vulnerable many students allowed themselves to be, opening themselves up, heart and mind, to a process of critical exploration of important conflicts in their own lives.

⁸ Ravitch and Riggan 2012.

Arts-Based Perspectives, Conflict & Historical Particularism

POL 303 / ANT 303 Arts Approaches to Conflict began with the assumption that Art is a dynamic engagement with the very building blocks of culture, making that which is unconscious, conscious -the implicit, explicit. In this course, class discussions and assignments center artmaking, arts-based perspectives, and methods to think critically about the relationship between conflict, violence, and peace, to include the transformation and prevention of violent conflict. In centering artmaking, we engaged first with the Anthropological concept of culture, emphasizing the importance of meaning making within a culture and how that meaning translates into ideas and behaviors, and how all those things combine to, potentially, produce moments of conflict. Students grappled with the complexities of conflict by utilizing an intersectional approach to conflict analysis.⁹ The course highlighted the role of culture in conflict and engaged students with the unique perspectives that the arts offer and ways of looking at and understanding the world derived from the arts that can offer “other” creative solutions to complex problems.

The question remains, why bring Art to the study of conflict, and why encourage the explicit convergence of the arts and peacebuilding? The literature on art and conflict argues that the arts offer a unique place to gain insight into conflict.¹⁰ Because of their elicitive nature, arts-based perspectives allow for the sharing of cultural knowledge that both describes and aids the understanding of the process of conflict. Much of the literature demonstrates the effectiveness of arts-based perspectives for the mediation and understanding of conflict in a manner that is elicitive and culturally appropriate.¹¹ Though the arts do indeed offer unique tools for understanding conflict, arts-based perspectives remain underutilized in peacebuilding.¹² Considering the literature on art and conflict, it seems that there is an implicit understanding among these authors that it is critical to the peacebuilding process for peacebuilders to work within the culture, thereby eliciting cultural knowledge from participants that will impact and shape the peacebuilding work to come. However, what is less articulated is the fact that peacebuilders working with arts-based perspectives regularly trade in the currency of culture itself. While this may seem to be self-evident, it is an important fact that is not often made explicit. Art is both created and received.¹³ Art, as an expressive cultural outlet, is both created and perceived within a system of power relationships that intersect at points of race, class, sexuality, and economics. Herein lies the unique value of arts-based perspectives for understanding conflict. Art is a dynamic engagement with the very building blocks of culture, making that which is unconscious, conscious.¹⁴ Arts-based perspectives deal in those particular aspects of a culture where human beings express themselves creatively and interact meaningfully through the visual, written, movement and aural arts.¹⁵ Peacebuilders working in and with the arts understand the importance of meaning making within a culture and how that meaning translates into ideas and behaviors, and how all of those things combine to, potentially, produce moments of

⁹ Liebmann 1996.

¹⁰ Cockrell-Abdullah 2023, 2020, 2022a, 2022b, 2018a, 2018b, and 2018c.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Guest 2014.

¹⁴ Ibid: 675.

¹⁵ Ibid: 658.

conflict.

Over the course of the semester, students were responsible for three separate assignments that were known as “Art Critique Memos” in which they critiqued a piece of artwork they had chosen from the Agnes Scott College permanent collection from three different analytical sites, the *Site of Production*; the *Site of the Image* itself; and the *Audiencing*. Influenced by art historian Erwin Panofsky’s work on iconographic/iconological analysis, this approach was designed in order to use the artwork itself as an ethnographic moment so that students could think about the agency of the image, consider the social practices and effects of its viewing, and reflect on the specificity of that viewing by various audiences.¹⁶ Visual imagery is never innocent; it is always constructed through various practices, technologies and knowledges. To uncover this information, we must engage each work of art as a visual event at these three important stages. The *Site of Production* is where an image is made, and the circumstances of the work’s production may contribute towards the effect it has. Secondly, the *Site of the Image* itself, which is its visual content; its symbols but also the technologies and social practices that have created it. Finally, the site where the image encounters its spectators or users is referred to as its *Audiencing* – where an image’s meanings are made, negotiated, or rejected.¹⁷ In considering these three sites, we must also consider the modalities within each of these sites including an image’s technology, composition, social relationships and its author.¹⁸ It is tricky to pull apart each of these sites and modalities as they are exceedingly intertwined and categories overlap with each other.

Applying a three sited analysis to their images, including a concern for the *Site of Production*, the *Site of the Image* and its *Audiencing*, to include the modalities within each of these sites including an image’s technology, composition, social relationships and its author, we must consider who, what, when, where and how.¹⁹ Said another way, in applying a three sited analysis to a given piece of work allows us insight into the backstage machinations from which the work was formulated. In this way, we are able to go beyond the visual expression at the *Site of the Image*, and tap into the work’s context, particularly those relationships of power held between individuals and within groups but also those relationships with ideologies and institutions. I constructed this assignment in this way because this course is grounded in the idea that successful conflict resolution has a foundation in culture and I have been preoccupied with helping my students to generate a deeper, more nuanced understanding about how and where the real, practical, work of politics is done namely, through social and cultural channels. Approaching the visual in this way is incredibly helpful for research since we must consider the context as well as the agency of the image. In this way, the critical visual analysis of the artwork not only allows us glimpses into the interior of a belief system but also to afford us the opportunity to consider the carefully cultivated intersections of ethnicity, class, gender, age grouping and other social forces that come together to produce the work. Recognizing that the artwork was embedded in a larger system of interconnected processes and power relationships significantly expanded the perspective of my students to consider that the truly interesting stories were embedded in the context.

Historical particularism as a perspective that places a high value on conducting research

¹⁶ Panofsky 1972; D’Alleva 2012; and Rose 2012.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Rose 2012.

¹⁹ Ibid: 20-26.

through fieldwork, where cultural traits can be explained in specific cultural contexts instead of in broad reference. Students chose a piece of art from the Agnes Scott College permanent collection to research over the course of the semester. However, not every piece in the collection has been well documented yet nor is there often a great deal of information about the artist who created it. This created a perfect starting place for students to work on inductive reasoning and research skills. Students utilized the visual arts, mostly paintings, photographs, collage, woodcut, and etchings that they had chosen, as a lens for exploration into the historically particular expression that their artwork represented. Informed by the work of anthropologist Franz Boas, our conceptual framework recognized that the practices of the artists who created these individual works were each operating within a context that was historically particular and located within a unique set of historical events that have produced particular artistic expressions.²⁰ As such, students were encouraged to think about their work of art as a dynamic and vital thing that was living and interacting in the world, a product of dynamic processes of social, cultural, political and economic relationships - an ethnographic moment that would allow one the opportunity to study a society within a particular historical moment in time.

In this way, and with their study being constrained to focusing on one work of art over the course of the semester, students came to see that the moment in time in which their piece was created was unique, not only to a particular community, but to a specific social, geographical, and political context and a unique historical process. Students' individual studies, necessarily, took on a highly local quality wherein students had to construct their own analytical frameworks to be able to excavate information from their piece of art so that each might illuminate themes and concepts that could suggest the next path to take in their research. With this frame, students were able to begin to see outlines of the intellectual activity that framed the artist's thinking about the creation of the works of art that were precursory to the expressions of the art presented.

It cannot be said enough that students in the course benefited enormously by having the Dalton Gallery and the Agnes Scott College permanent collection available to them to access for study. The Agnes Scott College permanent collection began in 1965 as a gift from Harry L Dalton. Since that time, the permanent collection of the college has grown to a robust collection and selections are on view across campus and are available to the public.²¹ Within the permanent collection is an ongoing archival project to document and research each of the pieces in the Agnes Scott Collection that is directed by Rebecca Bivens, Kirk Visiting Assistant Professor of Art History and Collections Manager, to whom our students and I owe a great debt.

Culture

Understanding the important roles that art plays in society, the *Arts Approaches to Conflict* course has been founded on the supposition that meaning making on the part of the actors within any given conflict scenario is the site for those socially and situationally formulated set of interpretive frameworks to intersect and to, potentially, conflict. Art, then, becomes a way of tapping in to and

²⁰ Boas 1966.

²¹ Dalton Gallery at Agnes Scott College, Permanent Collection <https://daltongallery.agnesscott.org/permanent-collection-on-view/>.

revealing the unconscious “stuff” of culture. Yet, understanding the concept of culture is a crucial prerequisite for effective conflict analysis.²² Of course, immediately following a discussion on the place of Art in the analysis of conflict, one might suspect that a discussion of the place of Culture in the analysis of conflict may be a conversation about, as Raymond Williams put it. “culcha” or “high” art, superior knowledge refinement, or “taste.”²³ However, “culture” as a concept is rather complex. Anthropologists and other social scientists have defined the concept, yet the notion is used differently across these disciplines, in turn, influencing their contributions to the study of conflict.²⁴ Yet, this difference of definition is only part of the challenge to the use of the concept in conflict analysis. The problem comes with different meanings of the term and the meanings that are attached to political agendas.²⁵

So then, how has “Culture” been defined in a course that centers the role of culture in conflict and in conflict analysis? As a starting place, the class began with a definition of “Culture” in the way that cultural anthropologists have defined the concept, as “a system of knowledge, beliefs and patterns of behaviors that are created, learned, and shared by a group of people”.²⁶ Culture then includes shared norms, values, and symbols as well as mental maps of reality and structures of power. Our understanding of the World is shaped, reinforced, and challenged through culture.²⁷ In utilizing such a definition of “Culture”, students were encouraged to view “Culture” as being both socially learned and inherited. It must be pointed out that this definition emphasizes the human-made nature of culture. In class my students have often heard me say, “If it is human-made, it can be human un-made”, a rough-hewn attempt to help students see that culture is not a natural phenomenon but instead a socially constructed thing. Students were encouraged to explore the width and depth of the concept of culture and to form their own working definitions for the concept. Class discussions and assignments highlighted the ways that definitions of culture tend to proliferate and contend with one another and that definitions of “Culture” often do not address notions of cultural homogeneity (culture as all one thing), cultural stability (culture is timeless) or cultural singularity (culture is characterized by a single trait).²⁸

Our class definition of “Culture” was then supplemented to include four other important observations, namely that: culture is plural and an individual may possess several “cultures” at any given point in their lives; individuals in societies are distributed across many sorts of social groupings and any complex society is very likely “multicultural”; culture is psychologically distributed within individuals across a population and members of the same social grouping do not internalize cultural representations equally; culture is derivative and is to some extent always situational, flexible and responsive to the demands of the worlds that individuals confront.²⁹ Over the course of the semester, students developed and expanded their understanding of “Culture”, utilizing a framework that understands culture as socially learned and shared, plural, distributed

²² Avruch 2008: 167.

²³ Williams 1989: 18, 401-444.

²⁴ Avruch 2008.

²⁵ Avruch 1991: 16, 22-45

²⁶ Guest 2014: 35-36.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Avruch 2008: 168-169.

²⁹ Ibid: 168-169.

across social groupings and derivative, but one that was flexible enough to amended as students refined their understanding.

How then, does the concept of “Culture” help us to think carefully and in a nuanced way about conflict? Firstly, understanding that culture is socially learned, shared and derivative allows us to view culture, as anthropologist Kevin Avruch has noted in his work on conflict, “as an evolved constituent of human cognition and social action. It constitutes social worlds for individuals, as it is in turn constituted by those actors in those worlds”.³⁰ In understanding this, it can be understood that culture is the lens through which “differences are refracted, and conflict pursued.”³¹ Culture frames the context in which conflict occurs. Culture then, can be a set of interpretive frameworks through which individual actors interpret behaviors, assess value, communicate and even understand how they might fight with each other.³² Avruch further points out, “The key point here is that social categories such as ethnicity, race, or nationality have a peculiar relationship to culture. They are culture “objectified”, projected publicly, and resourcefully deployed by actors for political purposes”.^{33,34}

Inductive Research & Grounded Theory

The most important thing to understand about your conceptual framework is that it is primarily a conception or model of what is out there that you plan to study, and of what is going on with these things and why – a tentative theory is to inform the rest of your design – to help you access and refine your goals, develop realistic and relevant research questions, select appropriate methods, and identify potential validity threats to your conclusions. It also helps you justify your research.³⁵ *Arts Approaches to Conflict* was imagined as a course that would focus on the role of culture in conflict, teach students about intersectional conflict analysis and highlight the important ways that artmaking and arts-based perspectives engage with conflict. The conceptual framework for the course was further informed by the work of conflict transformation scholars like John Paul Lederach and recognizes that conflict is both man-made and dialectic in nature. Class discussions included consideration of how conflict often transforms perceptions by focusing attention on the differences between people and interests. Understanding the continuous cause and effect nature of conflict, students were prompted to consider how they might transform conflict through greater understanding of the nuances of a conflict so that important social relationships are not irrevocably harmed.³⁶ Thusly, students worked from the presumption that an increase in the quantity of information generated, paired with a deeper, more nuanced understanding about how and where the real, practical, work of politics is done namely, through social and cultural channels, would help to modify or transform conflict for the better.

³⁰ Ibid: 170.

³¹ Avruch 1991: 16, 22-45; and Avruch and Black 1993.

³² Avruch 2008: 171-172.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Avruch 2003: 351-371.

³⁵ Maxwell 2005: 33-34.

³⁶ Lederach 2005; Ramsbotham 2011; and Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall 2011.

Above all, it was my hope to encourage a sense of independence in my students and offer them an opportunity through the architecture of the course in which they would be allowed the freedom to explore and experience, to think and probe, in a way that was directed by their own research interests – to generate real excitement and desire for independent inquiry. Throughout the course, we utilized qualitative methods from ethnographic, narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, and case study approaches. In the quote above, Maxwell seems to emphasize that one’s process for research and the interlinking components of one’s research design, the research question, the objective of the research, conceptual framework, and the trustworthiness of the results, interact with each other in a fluid, flexible and iterative manner. In my experience it has been the ambiguity that surrounds this “tentative” nature of the process of this type of exploratory, qualitative research and the inductive reasoning that characterizes such experiments that students find frustrating. There always seems to be in a rush to get to the “right” answer, often missing the deep knowledge that struggling through the research process can offer.

In framing the need to know what to look for and where to look for it, it seems self-evident that one would utilize the prior, collective expertise of a variety of experts in order to structure one’s research.³⁷ Drawing knowledge from a variety of disciplines, the approach of this course was interdisciplinary and utilized approaches from the fields of art history, international relations, conflict transformation, arts-based research and anthropological perspectives and methods including historical particularism, grounded theory and ethnographic methods. A more deductive research design that might rely on a substantial review of the literature which would lead to the formation of a theoretical framework and subsequent hypothesis which would then be tested in the field did not lend itself well to the understudied art work we were engaging with, that was not well documented, nor to the often unseen, unspoken, invisible or ignored aspects of culture, that only art is able to expose – making the unconscious, conscious.³⁸

Developed by American sociologist and anthropologist, Barney Glaser and Levi Strauss (1967), grounded theory is an appropriate and useful approach in situations where there is little research or information regarding the subject area as in own case.³⁹ Creswell has noted the appropriateness and the usefulness of utilizing grounded theory in situations where there is little research or information regarding the subject area and allows for developing theories from research that is grounded in data rather than deducing testable hypotheses from existing theories.^{40 41} As a methodological approach, it is useful for uncovering patterns in the data for the interpretation of that data for the potential development of theory. Interpretation, then, is key.

Following developments in qualitative research over the past two decades including the narrative turn, the emergence and growth of creative nonfiction as well as “artists turned qualitative researchers” and researchers with art backgrounds, have promoted the power of artistic practice in service of qualitative research.⁴² Arts-based research, or, as scholar Patricia Leavy describes it, “the process of inquiry that involves researchers engaging in art making as a way

³⁷ Ravitch and Riggan 2012: 3.

³⁸ Guest 2014: 675.

³⁹ Creswell 1998; Ravitch & Riggan 2012.

⁴⁰ Charmaz 2006: 4; Creswell 1998.

⁴¹ Glaser and Strauss 1967; Bryman 2012: 387.

⁴² Leavy 2018: 3 of 736.

of knowing” allows researchers to tap into the power of the arts in order to create new ways of seeing, thinking, and communicating.⁴³ The use of grounded theory and arts-based research are uniquely suited to reflect the idiosyncratic nature of our study of the arts and the role of culture in conflict and are approaches that are able to be flexible and responsive to emergent phenomena and new understandings encountered in the field. Culture can be considered as a set of interpretive frameworks. Through these interpretive frameworks, individual actors interpret behaviors, assess value, communicate, and even understand how they might fight with each other.⁴⁴ Understanding that interpretation of meaning in conflict situations is critical, and meaning making on the part of the actors within any given conflict scenario is the site for those socially and situationally formulated set of interpretive frameworks to intersect and to, potentially, conflict.

Grounded theory and ethnography are two research methodologies that both emphasize the importance of observation within the process of fieldwork as a tool for gathering data and were natural tools for students to use as they worked with inductive styles of research. Charmaz suggests that there is a difference between the two and that observation in ethnography allows for more inclusive and holistic views whereas the observer in grounded theory is concerned with the details of only one aspect of the research. Said another way, grounded theory allows for the narrow study of a relationship or process whereas ethnography concerns itself with “the round of life”.⁴⁵ Ultimately, both utilize observation in the field and are often used to understand relationships in terms of action-interaction as well as process. For student research, concepts from both grounded theory and ethnography were utilized in tandem for their shared ability to observe in order to gather data to understand relationships. Grounded theorists start with data, presumably collected through ethnography, through observations and interviews, which are then used to draw conclusions about how societies and individuals function. As patterns began to emerge, research foci were narrowed and refined – ethnography and grounded theory operating in tandem and referring each to the other. Rooted in first-hand observation, ethnography has given a broad context for student research while grounded theory has helped students to recognize patterns and to develop categories and concepts from questions firmly grounded in the data itself.

Arts-based Peacebuilding and Conflict Analysis

In this essay, I have discussed a diverse grouping of theories and perspectives that students utilized throughout their coursework to access their work of art as an ethnographic moment, to consider the carefully cultivated intersections and social forces that came together to produce the work, recognizing their artwork as a witness to a larger system of interconnected processes and power relationships. It bears repeating that the course highlighted the role of culture in conflict and engaged students with the unique perspectives that the arts offer and ways of looking at and understanding the world derived from the arts that can offer “other” creative solutions to complex problems. This goal is predicated on the belief that art can bear witness to political action and that it is valuable to explore the “political-ness” of artistic witnessing and witnessing through art as a

⁴³ Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006 and 2008; Leavy 2018; Shank and Schrich 2008.

⁴⁴ Avruch 2008: 171.

⁴⁵ Charmaz 2006: 21.

kind of political activity.⁴⁶

Finally, students utilized four approaches described in the article “*Strategic Arts-Based Peacebuilding*,” by Michael Shank and Lisa Schrich, “as a way to frame an analysis of Art and art making as it reveals patterns of socio-political events and behaviors. The four distinct, arts-based approaches to peacebuilding are presented as methods to be applied to a given conflict scenario that would help people to prevent, reduce or transform the effects of violent conflict. The authors meet those engaged in peacebuilding work at the moment of intervention and aim to strategically categorize approaches utilizing the arts into themes and tasks while helping peacebuilders to decide what approaches are most useful and when.⁴⁷ The Shank and Schrich approaches then, are, inherently, prescriptive in nature. As stated earlier, *Arts Approaches to Conflict* was founded on the idea that culture is the foundation for conflict and that meaning making on the part of the actors within any given conflict scenario is the site for potential conflict. For student research within this course, the approaches the class engaged with were inherently elicitive, seeking to gather, understand and interpret. Scholarly work on prescriptive and elicitive approaches have often represented these approaches as an opposing binary. However, there is certainly room for mutual, beneficial interaction between the perspectives that can inform every stage of conflict analysis, resolution, and peacebuilding.

In particular, what about those looking to understand a conflict in a nuanced manner that might be useful for work in resolution and peacebuilding? Can research that recognizes the existence of distinctive cultural understandings of conflict and those that also look to its resolution through the clarification, elucidation, and enhancement through reflection and dialogue be informed by those approaches that assume universal modes of conflict resolution?⁴⁸ Of course, in practice, prescriptive and elicitive approaches have elements of the other within them. In the case of student research, the intent was not to teach students how to diagnose and prescribe solutions to conflict, but to better understand the complex set of variables that have come to create the present situation and the multiple levels of conflicts one might find there. In other areas of my work, I have argued that these four prescriptive approaches are contextually ambidextrous and may be utilized as theoretical models for the analysis and interpretation of conflict.⁴⁹

Here I will give you an example using the *Reducing Direct Violence* approach articulated by Shank and Schrich.⁵⁰ This approach, predominately focuses attention of efforts on the part of state-based legal and judicial systems and the military, as well as civilian peacekeeping efforts. The intention of programs that seek to reduce direct violence is, ultimately, to interrupt the cycle of violence and lay the foundation for peacebuilding by preventing victimization, restraining offenders, and by creating safe space.⁵¹ Finally, efforts that reduce direct violence seek to create safe space for cooling down and for preparing for other approaches to peacebuilding.⁵² The *Reducing Direct Violence* approach emphasizes efforts on the level of state-based legal and judicial systems and the military,

⁴⁶ Lindroos and Möller 2017.

⁴⁷ Shank and Schirch 2008: 3.

⁴⁸ Young 1998: 211.

⁴⁹ Shank and Schirch 2008.

⁵⁰ Cockrell-Abdullah 2020, 2018a, 2018b, and 2018c.

⁵¹ Schirch 2014: 365-368.

⁵² Schirch 2014: 380-386.

however, civilian peacekeeping efforts can also be implemented. Shank & Schrich find that, “Artists working to reduce direct violence can interrupt the cycle of emotional, spiritual, physical, and/or psychological violence through visual, literary, performance, and/or movement art forms.” Using the arts, advocates can create a safe space for victims of violence as well as create the potential to curtail further conflict.⁵³

If we are going to use this approach to elicit instead of prescribe, we must first go about distinguishing the main elements, considering the intended outcomes first and ask ourselves, if, where and when do we see these elements. *Reducing Direct Violence* attempts to interrupt the cycle of violence and lay the groundwork for future peacebuilding by restraining, preventing, and creating. These peace-building processes aim to interrupt the cycle of violence by 1) restraining perpetrators, 2) preventing further victimization and by 3) creating a safe space for peacebuilding activities or alternative approaches.⁵⁴ It is interesting, most of the literature on art and arts-based perspectives in conflict, including the work of Shank and Schirch, come from a prescriptive approach and meet the conflict at the point of intervention. These focus on utilizing arts methods to enable participants to progress their own conflict resolution process through increasing their skills and capacity, often for therapeutic ends, and only elicit cultural information from those impacted by conflict insofar as there may be intercultural conflict between trainer/facilitators and participants.⁵⁵ Lesser discussed, in the literature, is how one might use the arts as a microscope to look inside a culture, at the cellular level, to see intracultural conflict. On this aspect, Shank and Schirch offer more hidden gold to be mined. Within their article, the authors offer a number of examples of groups and organizations that, “Illustrate the intersection between the arts and peacebuilding”.⁵⁶ All of these examples, like public murals in Mexico, hip hop activism in the United States and Tanzania, point to the work of art and artists that address intracultural conflicts within their own societies like corruption, class difference and joblessness. Though that feature is not explicitly articulated in the article these examples demonstrate this important element and offer an opportunity to consider the alternative. Finding these additional aspects was a pleasant bit of serendipity in the way that Lederach describes serendipity within the peacebuilding journey as a flow and adaptability that allows for the possibility of gaining insight and understanding from unplanned occurrences while keeping our goals in mind.⁵⁷ This bit of serendipity has allowed this research to modify the tools Shank and Schirch offer and to use them as framework to describe and analyze the phenomena presented.

Why would I intentionally use the Shank and Schirch approaches in these clearly unintended ways? In many ways, the situation I describe was came out of the lack of theoretical tools to guide my original research in the context of Iraqi Kurdistan. This in itself presented its own kind of conflict. However this conflict also presented a moment for me to recognize new possibilities in order to create what does not yet exist.⁵⁸ I was further informed and encouraged by the arts and arts-based perspectives and the work of social scientists, like John Paul Lederach, that recognize the

⁵³ Shank and Schirch 2008: 5.

⁵⁴ Shank and Schirch 2008: 5; and Schirch 2014.

⁵⁵ Loode 2011: 56-68.

⁵⁶ Shank and Schirch 2008: 1.

⁵⁷ Lederach 2005; and Maiese 2016.

⁵⁸ Lederach 2005.

need for multiple lens with which to see past the immediate problems to be able to view the deeper relationship patterns that form the context of the conflict. In the classroom, this bit of innovation in my own research has allowed me to talk with students about realities of real-world research and to reinforce the idea that it is the process of doing research that yields results. It has also allowed me to encourage a generation of students who have learned that they cannot, must not fail, that conflict, framed as struggle, can also yield unexpected opportunities for learning and for change. It is in addressing these deeper relationship patterns that we might create a platform to address the content, the context, and the structure of the relationship in order to find creative responses and solutions.⁵⁹

Let me expand a bit more on the creative use of tools with another example that I have often used.⁶⁰ If we consider our day to day lives and the everyday tools we use, it is not so strange to consider using a tool, in this case, a theoretical tool, in a different or unintended manner. For instance, let’s say that there is a glass sitting on my desk in which I keep multiple pencils. The glass was intended to hold a beverage, perhaps, but in this case it is holding pencils. I take one of those pencils out of the glass and, quickly wrapping my long hair on top of my head, use that pencil to secure my hair out of face. With my hair now out of my face, I notice an insect racing across my desk. I quickly grab the glass, spilling out all the pencils and squash the insect with the heavy bottomed glass. It is doubtful that any of these situations seem exceptional and I do not imagine that anyone would insist that I could only use the glass for holding beverages. We could certainly argue that the intended purpose of the glass is to hold, contain, enclose, collect, and restrain. However, the glass has also demonstrated an alternative nature as an effective tool to kill insects.

Though I have used the Shank and Schrich tools in a manner not originally intended by its creators, by first teasing out the main elements of the approach, we can remain true to the nature of approach. Using these approaches in an “upside down” manner, not as methods to be applied in a prescriptive manner but as theoretical models, reveals that activities and characteristics that can be utilized as a model to consider conflict. Utilizing the Shank and Schirch approaches in an unintended manner helped to further highlight interesting potential sites to consider within the research and demonstrate to students one way that theory can be used as a flexible tool for critical thinking and innovation.

If we consider further some of the differences between prescriptive and elicitive approaches, we know that “In the prescriptive model, knowledge transfer is vested in an “expert” trainer, who is responsible for the content and process of the workshop and transfer of this expert knowledge to the participants. Their main responsibility is to receive the knowledge and to improve their own conflict resolution skills through practicing the models and processes presented by the trainer.”⁶¹ Prescriptive models are not preoccupied with understanding and interpreting and are not suited to rapidly changing contexts. In addition, this type of approach to peacebuilding often only acknowledges cultural difference as an add-on to the process model presented, instead of acknowledging it as the ground in which potential conflict is rooted as is acknowledged here in this research.⁶² Elicitive models validate the knowledge of participants and recognizes that the

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Cockrell-Abdullah 2020, 2018a, 2018b, and 2018c.

⁶¹ Loode 2011.

⁶² Ibid.

“implicit indigenous knowledge about ways of being and doing is a valued resource for creating and sustaining appropriate models of conflict resolution in a given setting”.⁶³ Subsequently, we are presented with an opportunity to engage with these conceptual tools in a new and creative way that allows us to observe work in the arts outside of formal organizations and ask – what does this work reveal about conflicts within this society and what aspects of this work lends itself to potential peacebuilding? Utilizing these approaches as theoretical models, we can engage artmaking to look beneath the surface of political and social rhetoric. In doing so, we can recognize that social, political, and economic relationships have been deeply impacted by protracted conflict in the region and that there are multiple latent, local conflicts present.

Student Work

The selections presented here are highly subjective and express a concern with a wide range of conflicts and diverse stages of thinking about those conflicts. They act as starting points for future inquiry. The subjects addressed reflect each author’s own, sometimes incongruous, dialogues with several categories of identity, marginalization and injustices that have come to define them in some important way. These pieces include ruminations about racial identities and racism, what it means to be young, being female, struggling with sexuality, fear of gun violence, fear for the destruction of the environment, violence in our society and much more. *Teaching Intersectional Conflict Analysis Through Art* was created to share one approach for teaching about conflict and to bear witness to these students’ journeys with intersectional conflict analysis. It is laid out in a way that allows each author to contribute individually but that maintains continuity through overlapping themes, to include our frames of intersectionality, culture, conflict, and art across the broader scope of the special issue. It is intended that the reader should do the work of piecing the essays of this journal together themselves. We hope that you will enjoy connecting the dots, where you may find them, in this journey of discovery.

⁶³ Lederach 2005; and Loode 2011.

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