Conceptual Dissonance in Peacebuilding Research: Lessons from a Somali Diaspora

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ABSTRACT Scholars recognize the important role that diasporas play in conflict dynamics, including efforts to build peace in conflict-affected communities. Broader academic research emphasizes a focus on local conditions and actors, as well as site-specific understandings of peace and peacebuilding practices. This focus on specific communities and contexts often draws on qualitative, narrative-driven data, predominantly collected through interviewing. This article identifies some of the core challenges related to data collection encountered during semi-structured interviews in a study of Somali diaspora members in Melbourne, Australia. We emphasize how issues associated with cross-cultural and gendered understandings of concepts related to peacebuilding can affect each stage of a research project, from the preliminary collection of data to the analysis and discussion of research implications. Specifically, we address challenges related to instances of conceptual dissonance that occur when researchers employ cross-cultural and gendered concepts—in this case, peace, peacebuilding, and leadership. The findings will benefit conflict researchers who work with socially distant groups and ethnically divided populations more broadly, along with those who employ interpretivist methodologies that focus on how meaning making might ultimately influence peacebuilding practices and outcomes.

Diaspora communities have been increasingly recognized as valuable contributors to the restoration and maintenance of peace in conflict-affected regions. Studies highlight how diaspora communities engage in peacebuilding practices not only in their home states but also within their host states and, at times, contend with new conflicts that arise within the diaspora community (Bokore 2018; Hautaniemi and Laakso 2014; Tiilikainen 2003). The latter practices have received less scholarly attention, and there is a need to better understand how diasporas contribute to peacebuilding at these sites. Peacebuilding practices include a range of activities that aim to prevent violent conflict, ensure physical security, address past traumas and injustices, and improve institutions and avenues for political participation (Novosseloff 2022). Although governments and non-governmental organizations may view peacebuilding practices differently across cases and contexts, many share a common aim

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of "building vibrant civil societies and furthering development, democracy, justice, and the rule of law" (Barnett et al. 2007).

Examining peacebuilding within diasporas can be a difficult task for researchers. These communities often are fragmented along ethnic lines with smaller, less-visible communities within the diaspora. Researching diasporas therefore can introduce methodological challenges associated with ethnically divided groups related to sampling, positionality, and power imbalances, among other challenges (Beauchemin and González-Ferrier 2011; Johansson 2015; Thompson 2009). The boundaries of the diaspora concept can be a matter of contention (Adamson 2019). Conceptual challenges also exist around which practices constitute peacebuilding. For example, Kostić (2017) notes that localized peacebuilders shape how the concept of peace is understood within those contexts and how they produce peacebuilding knowledge. Thus, there has been a growing need for in-depth, qualitative data to examine how these understandings of peace and peacebuilding practices are articulated—particularly in diaspora communities. Yet, within this space, few studies have considered how we ask community members questions about peace, peacebuilding, and the cultural connotations associated with those concepts and practices in the context of diasporas.

Political concepts such as "diplomacy" (Hart and Siniver 2020), the "responsibility to protect" (Odgaard 2020), and "moral panic" (David et al. 2011) illustrate how the meaning of concepts can vary between cultures, differ across contexts, and change over time. These distinct understandings of concepts can exist among researchers, practitioners, and the communities in which they work (Lelkes, Bouch, and Holmstrom 2021). Scholars working within the interpretivist methodology tradition explicitly recognize these moments of dissonance between the everyday usage of concepts by a community of interest and academic specialists (Schaffer 2016), which can create notable research challenges. As Bialystok (2001, 121) points out, the meaning of certain concepts may lack consensus and "invoke assumptions that may never be made explicit" between the researcher and the participant.

The "linguistic relativity thesis" further highlights many of the potential challenges that arise during cross-cultural communication more broadly and questions whether it is truly possible to transfer reliably the meaning of complex concepts such as *justice* and *conflict* across cultural and linguistic divides (Cohen 2004; Collin 2013; Peled and Bonotti 2016). In our own research, discussions about peacebuilding practices undertaken by Somali women within the diaspora relied on the concepts of *peace* and *leadership*. Whether or not the researcher and the interview subject view these concepts in similar or dissimilar ways can have significant implications for the data that researchers collect, as well as their interpretation.

This article draws on our experiences in examining peacebuilding practices among women within a Somali diaspora in Melbourne, Australia. We identify methodological challenges that can emerge when language fails to account for the culturally constructed meaning assigned to the peace, peacebuilding, and leadership concepts. We term these incidents of inconsistency or miscommunication as moments of "conceptual dissonance," a term that refers to the subtle differences in how the researchers and the participant groups interpret central concepts. We examine how this dissonance can create parallel conversations in which participants and researchers might speak past one another. We argue that issues related to cultural miscommunication can influence each stage of a research project, including the research design, participant recruitment, data collection, analysis, and discussion of implications. In some cases, conceptual misunderstanding can further exacerbate other methodological challenges including positionality and the accessibility of target research communities.

We first discuss the broader research project, which is based on in-depth interviews aimed at assessing the role of women-led peacebuilding efforts among Melbourne's Somali diaspora. We then describe how conceptual dissonance can affect the preliminary stages of data collection, from the initial sampling stage to the interview process. Next, we address how conceptual dissonance can affect the synthesis of interview data and illustrate how distinct understandings of key research concepts can influence the transmission of knowledge and experiences during interviews. The article concludes with a discussion of the broader implications of conceptual dissonance during research. The findings from this study will prove especially useful for researchers who employ interpretivist methodologies that focus on how meaning making might ultimately influence peacebuilding practices and outcomes.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

The broader research project investigates strategies for peacebuilding within a Somali diaspora in Melbourne, Australia. Specifically, the study considers localized peacebuilding practices that occur independently from formal state-led channels of peacebuilding and that often fall outside of traditionally patriarchal social structures. It focuses on how diasporas have enabled women to engage in roles as peacebuilding mentors to guide the community in building peace and implementing social-cohesion programs at a local level within the diaspora. Women's behind-the-scenes role in peacebuilding in Somalia has been examined in detail (Dini 2009; El-Bushra 2000; Ingiriis and Hoehne 2013). However, whether and how these roles transfer into the diaspora remains unclear. To shed light on this issue, we examine how these women view the peace and peacebuilding concepts, as well as best practices for building peace within the community. We conducted a series of semi-structured, one-on-one or small-group interviews to better understand the position of women peacebuilders. To improve our understanding of how the community views their role, interview participants included women peacebuilders, male authorities, religious leaders, and other members of the community. Interviews were conducted in English and/or Somali, sometimes using a translator, according to the preference of the participants. Interviews took place in Melbourne and the surrounding suburbs, in a location of each participant's choosing.[1]

CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH CONCEPTUAL DISSONANCE IN THE PRELIMINARY STAGES OF DATA COLLECTION

Our research suggests that the Somali diaspora, like Somalia itself, faces barriers to social cohesion and often remains divided along clan lines. Clan affiliation is central to traditional social structuring, and it guides political discussions, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding (Adam 1992; Bradbury 1994; Elmi and Barise 2006; Ingiriis and Hoehne 2013). This system also exerts significant influence on determining the roles and responsibilities that pertain to peacebuilding. Recruiting participants with knowledge

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about the role of women who facilitate peacebuilding activities can be difficult without the approval of specific authority figures within the community. Reliance on these authorities can introduce sampling biases when attempting to draw representative research data from all clan groups. Interlocutors from the community served an intermediary function to facilitate communication between our research team and other prominent figures in the Somali diaspora community. We adopted a snowball sampling technique in which these interlocutors helped to recruit a representative sample across clan groups and to target individuals knowledgeable of specific women within the diaspora who could inform our study.

A snowball sampling technique is effective for researching hidden or difficult-to-reach groups (Cohen and Arieli 2011; Franks and Snijders 1994). In our study, this technique allowed researchers to identify a sample of women that the community perceived to fulfil prominent peacebuilder roles across different clans without relying on research-team assumptions. There are limitations associated with this approach, such as participants feeling pressure to participate and placing stress on the relationship with the referring party. Our research team built on our preexisting relationships to ultimately locate key participants within the diaspora, but we still faced a common challenge for researchers who employ snowball techniques: these efforts often reveal only a small number of participants (Fujii 2018). In this case, the participants often came from the same clan. To ensure that the participant pool adequately represented all clans, it was necessary to expand the recruitment strategy.

The interlocutors approached other prominent figures within the diaspora to bridge the clan divide. Among the Melbourne Somali diaspora, these individuals were predominantly male community leaders and religious authority figures who also served as gatekeepers in some respect—figures who sometimes make decisions about and control access to parts of the diaspora population. The male community leaders and peacebuilders are more visible than their female counterparts within the Somali diaspora community because the women tend to operate informally and outside of the traditional authority structures. By using interlocutors, researchers are able to reveal new and unexpected participants (Fujii 2018). Interlocutors proved essential in our project for identifying and accessing women who engage in peacebuilding roles. They reached out to participants to discuss the project and gauge their interest, ultimately sharing the contact details of interested parties with the researchers through gatekeepers. The intermediaries bolstered participants' confidence in the research project and reduced distrust and apprehension.

Although we ultimately connected to participants across clan groups, the snowball recruitment and the use of interlocutors introduced new research challenges. By virtue of their existing authority within the clans, interlocutors gave some voices more weight and marginalized others—they chose who within the community would speak and who would be overlooked. Despite being briefed by the research team regarding the aims and scope of the study, the interlocutors held onto their own interpretation of concepts such as peace, peacebuilding, and leadership. Their interpretation ultimately determined who they believed fulfilled this role within the community and, consequently, who was and was not approached to participate. These actors exerted significant control over recruitment that hinged on somewhat distinct notions of central concepts. Conceptual dissonance around key terms such as peacebuilding and leadership crept into the study even before the interviews, thereby potentially affecting recruitment, participation, and subsequent research findings.

THE CHALLENGE OF CONCEPTUAL DISSONANCE IN INTERVIEW DATA CONTENT

Conceptual dissonance not only shaped the participant sample but also influenced data content collected by researchers through the one-on-one and small-group interviews. Power dynamics are present in any interview situation, which forces researchers to consider "positionality" during data collection (Vähäsantanen and Saarinen 2012). The role of gender is particularly important, influencing the interview process in terms of data content and quality (Jansen and Davis 1998). Intersectionality also is important because gender may interact with other factors such as class, age, and education in important ways (Broom, Hand, and Tovey 2009; Manderson, Bennett, and Andajani-Sutjahjo 2006). In light of these considerations, we maintained a degree of flexibility in our study design. During the interviews, participants could speak with a male researcher from the Somali diaspora or a female researcher who was not a part of the diaspora. Participants had the option of speaking both Somali and/or English during interviews. In a few cases, participants prioritized gender over language and social familiarity—that is, some women participants preferred to speak with a white female Australian researcher rather than a male Somali research partner. This required participants to instead be interviewed in English or with the use of a suitable translator. A preference for an unfamiliar language or translator can introduce another layer of power dynamics and bias into an interview. For example, some of the women fulfilling a peacebuilder role within the community had not received formal schooling in English and at times struggled to find the most accurate words to articulate their views of peacebuilding and the roles that they play. The interviewer encouraged participants to use anecdotes to reveal additional details. They assisted the interview subject in finding the right words to effectively articulate their understanding of peacebuilding roles, while also being careful to avoid co-creating the ideas and content behind the response.

The diverse backgrounds of researchers helped to meet the gender and language preferences of participants, but language did introduce a greater likelihood for incidents of conceptual dissonance. The issue of Somali women as leaders in peacebuilding is culturally complex. For example, we learned that there is no word

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for a woman peacebuilding leader in the Somali language, whereas there is one for a male counterpart: *nabadoon.* Participants therefore were asked to discuss a position that does not formally exist within Somali culture. Although we had anticipated that this would prove challenging, we did not expect the overt resistance from some participants—particularly female participants—to the description of their role in building peace as a position of leadership. Most participants agreed that to a certain extent, a few women within the community provide counsel for and lead the peacebuilding efforts. However, they refused to accept that this position was, in fact, a leadership role, even in an informal sense. The research team's understanding of leadership differed significantly from the female participants' interpretation of leadership. In Somali culture, the concept of a peacebuilding leader is a gendered position, occupied almost entirely by male authority figures. During the research, some interview subjects indicated to the female researcher that they preferred speaking candidly with her about their role while also protecting their work from potential scrutiny by Somali men. For some women, the decision to speak with the female researcher allowed them to discuss their role in mentoring peacebuilding and also to avoid the appearance that they sought to challenge traditional cultural norms by creating new leadership positions within the community.

The conceptual dissonance went beyond only how women spoke about their role in peacebuilding. For some male participants, the terminology led to confusion and a degree of apprehension about offering an opinion on the role women play in peacebuilding. A discussion between the female researcher and a male religious elder within the diaspora provides an example. When the researcher asked the religious leader to tell her about how women are operating as peacebuilding leaders within the community, he paused in apprehension and asked, "What answers did other people give you to this question?" Here, the discussion around his interpretation of leaders in peacebuilding stemmed from a cultural norm in which women do not act formally as peacebuilding leaders, and—as such—he had no answer to provide. When the question was rephrased, the discussion continued, and he agreed that women do indeed have a significant mentoring role for community peacebuilding. The terminology used to discuss these concepts proved to be integral and articulating how we referred to peacebuilding practices and practitioners needed to be co-constructed by the researchers and the participant group. Given that *nabadoon* (i.e., peacebuilding leader) is a patriarchal term, it was necessary for the research team—in consultation with the participants—to co-construct the term *nabadoonad* to describe the female position.

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Fujii (2018) notes that interviews are sites where knowledge relating to particular terms and ideas can be co-constructed. Whereas this certainly was true in our case, our experience indicates that the challenge of conceptual dissonance and miscommunication can occur at each stage of a research project. The recruitment process of chain referral and interlocutors shaped the participant sample based on understandings of peace, peacebuilding, and leadership. The interviews provide the site for co-constructing that knowledge—a process that remains critical in ensuring the authenticity of the discussion and the validity of the data. Through the process of co-construction, both parties were able to resolve conceptual dissonance and assemble that knowledge for meaningful interpretation.

CONCEPTUAL DISSONANCE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Peled and Bonotti (2016) advise caution regarding a tendency to approach language as an object of normative political theorizing rather than as a medium of communication. Doing so can perpetuate the misinterpretation of data and may bias research findings. In heeding Peled and Bonotti's warning, we must take care to identify potential points of conceptual dissonance: recognizing how they influence each stage of the research process and ultimately inform the act of knowledge production. For this study, the challenge was in assembling the varying understandings of peace and peacebuilding to meaningfully communicate these findings. The study built on the participant sample provided by the interlocutors and their networks of contacts. However, in doing so, the study prioritized the interlocutors' understanding of peace and peacebuilding. In accessing the community through the interlocutors' networks, pragmatism forced us at times to accept their understanding of peacebuilding—which has significant implications for knowledge production in research. For example, when the research findings are published, the study may contribute to the recognition and the legitimization of particular understandings of peacebuilding. Furthermore, the reliance on and use of the interlocutors' networks reinforced their authority and knowledge, suggesting that the study may reproduce existing (i.e., patriarchal) power structures.

Our findings from this project were shaped by the cumulative layers of conceptual dissonance that began with the sampling process, continued into the co-construction of terminology, and subsequently informed knowledge production and the research findings.

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Deciding on the language to best convey these concepts in research outputs presents additional challenges. The women who undertake peacebuilding leadership roles in Melbourne's Somali diaspora rejected the terminology of leader or leadership position; therefore, the research team must take care in describing their role to others. However, using alternative terms such as "mentor" or "guide" in English risks losing some of the prestige and nuance of the role that they undertake. The research unintentionally may contribute to minimizing or marginalizing the role of women in peacebuilding leadership. This, in turn, raises broader questions about the role of Somali women in peacebuilding and how to ensure that we develop shared terminology to adequately explain their role that minimizes outside challenges to traditional Somali cultural structures.

We recognize that our social positions affect our research practices, including normative considerations, motivations, and expected practices associated with our roles as researchers and/or members of the communities in which we work (Giddens 1984). These moments of conceptual dissonance take place within a broader system of assumed and actual identities and power relations (Henry, Higate, and Sanghera 2009; Rose 1997). The production of knowledge is never a neutral process, and how language and concepts are used has implications for the findings and knowledge that we glean from research. Our findings from this project were shaped by the cumulative layers of conceptual dissonance that began with the sampling process, continued into the co-construction of terminology, and subsequently informed knowledge production and the research findings. Ultimately, viewing the research process and findings through an interpretivist lens required us to acknowledge how distinct conceptualizations of peace, peacebuilding, and leadership are linked inextricably to community practices in this context. "Elucidating" concepts can shine a light on how shared or divergent understandings of these concepts are "created, reproduced, imposed, disputed, and changed" (Schaffer 2016, 7). Through this lens, perhaps researchers can anticipate or correct biases during the recruitment process and provide greater clarity around the meaning of central concepts. However, and more important, perhaps the moments of conceptual dissonance can become important findings rather than simply obstacles to overcome in future research.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTE

1. The team included two researchers from Monash University and a research partner from within the Melbourne Somali diaspora community who works on threats to security in East Africa. This research received approval from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee as Project No. 14460.

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