

When Significant Experiences Aren't Statistically Significant: Feminist Storytelling As Critical Social Science in Peace Research

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“This can feel like an almost unbearable compromise. Welcome to a practice of peace. It is messy. It is not easy. It is fragile and thin and breakable. It is a verb, not an achievement. It needs to be conjugated regularly. It is the experience of having been torn. And, having been torn, staying with that new shape and finding dignity in language, in protest, in lamentation, in justice, in re-ordering, in catharsis.

It's not a landscape; it's staying alive.”

-Padraig O-Tuama, *The Place Between*

What is peace? What are the characteristics and contours by which we know peace? What does the scientization and quantification of peace studies (*peace science*) do to the ways in which we both understand peace and pursue it in the world? These are the questions that motivate my current research agenda. In particular, I am interested in better understanding the ways that peace (and, relatedly, war) are felt and lived in everyday lives, and what an ontology of peace might look like when it reflects those grounded experiences. Exploring everyday peace narratives in post-conflict communities in Northern Ireland and Burundi, I make the case in my dissertation that experience and anecdote are actually crucial pieces of the peace puzzle and are central to knowing and pursuing peace in a meaningful and intimate sense. On those terms, I specifically offer storytelling as one method by which we might know peace more intimately and grow a grounded ontology of peace which reflects lived experiences.

On Story

Storytelling has long been a mainstay in feminist research, particularly building off a strong history of storytelling and narrative in Black Feminist Thought. As a method, storytelling invokes a distinct kind of descriptive research, one where the particular is brought into focus and experience becomes central to knowledge production. Feminist storytelling expands the typical frames of social science to consider the lived and meaning-making experiences of people whose lives are often excluded from or distorted by the quantifiable manipulation of social life. And, as Sarojini Nadar suggests, storytelling accomplishes a number of post-positivist feminist goals, including: (1) objecting to objectivity, (2) reflexivity, (3) disturbing master narratives, and (4) opening up possibilities for transformation and alternative ways of knowing and being.¹

¹ Nadar, S. (2019). “Stories are data with soul”: Lessons from Black Feminist Epistemology. In *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Feminism* (pp. 34-45). Routledge.

In reference to peace—how we ‘know’ it, conceptualize it, and measure it in political science—I specifically argue that storytelling achieves the above goals laid out by Nadar, and moreover, bridges an important gap identified in the peace literature between top-down approaches to knowing and growing peace and what peace studies scholars have labeled ‘everyday peace.’² I begin here by briefly discussing Nadar’s major goals for storytelling in relation to studying peace, and then develop a fifth goal: that storytelling makes possible sustained, visceral engagement with peace as a lived experience and daily practice negotiated and challenged between everyday people.

Stories are Data with Soul, And We Need More Soul-Ful Data on Peace

Sarojini Nadar, tracing the work of Black feminist scholars like Patricia Hill Collins and Obioma Nnaemeka, makes the case that narrative knowing is an effective feminist approach to putting a human face to scientific research. Arguing that feminist epistemologies take seriously both the science and art of storytelling as knowing, Nadar specifies several ways that storytelling teaches scholars how to remain accountable in theory-building and research:

I. Objecting to Objectivity: Storytelling troubles positivist assumptions around unbiased ways of knowing by centering subjectivity. By its very nature, storytelling presents experience as epistemology—that our subjectivities are essential to understanding social reality as a *social* experience. Feminists have written extensively about the subject/object divide in social sciences, but storytelling specifically lends itself towards deconstructing this binary in two key ways. First, storytelling centers dialogue insofar as storytelling as method invites researchers to be in conversation with participants. Second, it insists that people and their experiences are more than objects to be analyzed and tallied up.

On peace, centering subjectivity through peace stories rejects the fetishization of quantitative science in peace research and demands attention towards peace experiences as meaningful and meaning-making. Specifically, exploring peace through stories brings into question two key ways that peace is known in political science: the counting of dead bodies (peace as a lack of enough dead bodies) and peace as the empty side of a binary variable (peace as ‘0’ across war databases). Peace stories push us to re-consider the extent to which casualty counts are unbiased, whether knowing peace through casualty counts reflects lived experiences, and also what it means for peace to be marked as a non-event in peace science literatures.

II. Reflexivity: Related to the goal of ‘objecting to objectivity,’ storytelling invites researchers to practice reflexivity because it demands embracing emotions and reflecting on the process of gathering and telling stories. In narrative research, the research process becomes as integral to the work as the research product. On this, Nadar writes, “Instead of presuming this omniscient, omnipotent invisible researcher, one gets a glimpse of the flesh and blood researcher.”³ And in many ways, storytelling requires sustained navigation between the researcher’s personal voice and the voices of participants in profoundly important ways.

The reflexivity demanded by storytelling as method spotlights how peace research has long been constructed by and defined through Western perspectives. From top-down, State-centric understandings of peace to more recent emphases on liberal peacebuilding, peace research is often theorized from Western lenses and uncritically offered as a universalizing concept—that ‘peace’ is known and measured, or should be known and measured, the same way across all contexts. Storytelling, however, nurtures attention towards researcher positionality, and specifically encourages engagement with emotion as an indicator of credibility. In other words, storytelling sheds light on peace research as meaning-making in itself, rather than discovering meaning, thereby opening up multiple ways of knowing peace across contexts.

² See: Mac Ginty, R. (2014). Everyday peace: Bottom-up and local agency in conflict-affected societies. *Security Dialogue*, 45(6), 548-564; Berents, H. (2015). An embodied everyday peace in the midst of violence. *Peacebuilding*, 3(2), 1-14; Mac Ginty, R., & Firchow, P. (2014). Everyday Peace Indicators: Capturing local voices through surveys. *Shared Space: A Research Journal on Peace, Conflict and Community Relations in Northern Ireland*, 18, 33-39.

³ Nadar pg 26

III. Disrupting Master Narratives: When narrative research centers the stories of vulnerable people and communities rarely attended to by academic research, it offers an avenue for recovering narratives that disrupt and/or draw suspicion of the ‘master narrative.’ Nadar argues that the master narrative in academia claims to construct facts about the world that are often troubled by the gathering of stories and a focus on lived experiences. These generalizable master narratives necessarily erase, in particular, stories from vulnerable and marginalized peoples, and erroneously package themselves as universal.

What is the master narrative in peace science? I argue in my work that the master narrative is the war/peace binary—that peace is the inverse of war (an absence of war) and that the violences of war are distinct from the (unremarkable) violences of peace. But peace stories disrupt this narrative insofar as they obscure the bright line between war and peace and bring into focus the myriad ways that peaces are marked by violences (and those violences are often connected to and/or becoming of war). Moreover, the master narratives in peace science, especially that peace can be measured by a lack of battle-deaths, are called into question when stories reveal the complexities and nuances of lived peace experiences. In fact, these grounded stories often trouble peace research which defines certain peace settlements as ‘successful’ or having ‘built peace’—conclusions that are typically drawn based on this peace-as-lack-of-battle-death conceptualization. That is, the very people who share their stories in post-conflict communities tend to see peace and the extent to which their community experiences peace on very different terms than the master narrative we find in political science.

IV. Possibilities for Transformation: Storytelling creates possibilities for thinking otherwise, thereby nurturing potential pathways towards transformation. On this, Nadar writes, “Stories are not just told for the sake of telling a story, but for their power to invite us all to call deep on our courage to transform. The research we do is never solely for the sake of theory building but for the sake of community building.”⁴ In other words, stories are intended to draw out emotion, to evoke a desire to see the world differently.

Telling peace stories invites us to re-think possibilities for peace and peacebuilding in the world. By rejecting objectivity, fostering reflexivity, and disrupting master narratives, peace stories get to the core of how people think, do, and challenge peace in their daily lives. These stories draw us into meaningful conversation around what it means to have peace or feel peace in the world and cracks open the sterile and detached ways that peace science conceives of peace so that we might think and pursue it otherwise. One cannot sit with the stories of everyday people in Belfast, for example, as they speak about 40ft tall walls topped with barbed wire, and not be moved to think about peace differently.

Stories and Everyday Peace

V. I also add here to Nadar’s specification on the effectiveness of narrative research. Storytelling is crucial to peace research because it offers a valuable tool for explicating ‘the everyday,’ which has become a central concept in critical peace studies in the last decade. According to Mac Ginty, “The focus on everyday peace means that our gaze looks away from peace accord signing ceremonies and other ‘big peace’ initiatives. Instead, the focus is on how peace becomes manifest on a daily basis in the micro- encounters that constitute everyday life in deeply divided and conflict- affected societies.”⁵ Presently, everyday peace research has employed a variety of research methods, including everything from focus groups and surveys to the re-reading of war memoirs. Stories, I argue, offer an additional and crucial tool in the everyday peace research toolkit.

⁴ Nadar pg 26

⁵ Mac Ginty, R. (2021). *Everyday peace: How so-called Ordinary people can disrupt violent conflict*. Oxford University Press.

The 'everyday' as a site for politics, violence, contestation, and peace has also long been examined by feminist scholars.⁶ A natural development of the personal is political (is international) theory,⁷ feminist research exploring the everyday centers lived experiences and reveals the ways that dominating binaries in our social and political lives—public/private, international/domestic, international/local, war/peace—obscure our day-to-day realities and privilege certain locations, viewpoints, and issues as extraordinary versus ordinary. Black Feminist Thought, especially the works of Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks teaches us that hegemonic narratives about our world can be and are upended through sustained attention with lived experiences from the margins,⁸ and Harding follows a similar line of thought when she offers feminist standpoint epistemology as a tool through which we can better capture reality(ies).⁹ By taking our lens to the ground and listening to marginalized groups, feminist standpoints offer a privileged vantage point from the peripheries.¹⁰ In other words, the situated knowledges of marginalized people, their *lived experiences*, tell us important truths about the world that we cannot locate through the knowledges of hegemons. In my work, I take up ordinary people and their stories as one such vantage point. That is, my research sets aside the liberal, institutionalist, and elite narratives that have traditionally occupied the imagination of political science research and looks to grounded stories from people who live, fight, love, hate, and hope through conflict in their day-to-day lives *as a means through which* we can understand peace and violence in post-conflict spaces more intimately.

Feminist approaches to everyday peace build on standpoint epistemology and position ordinary daily practices and habits as a crucial part of the peace puzzle. Chan Shun-hing argues that harnessing a dual focus on the everyday and women reveals unique insights about women's resistances to and resolutions for violence.¹¹ Further, feminist peace scholars argue that rooting peace research in lived experiences means gender sensitive responses to violence and insecurity are more likely to grow.¹² Through stories, we can approach everyday/routine stories, practices, and the people who embody those stories and practices as profound sites of knowledge and resistance.¹³ That is, using grounded stories as a way to build arguments: (1) acknowledges "the various infinite possibilities of thought and ways of, and reasons for, sharing one's thinking in the world," (2) undermines Eurocentric epistemological arrogance, and (3) reveals and undoes the work of power in significant ways, especially by bringing into focus the very people who have routinely been erased in the study of and top-down building of peace after war.¹⁴

Through stories, I center the everyday out of both a feminist prerogative to see and hear people in the building of peace¹⁵ and an epistemological desire to see and know peaces and violences under more holistic terms. It is in our day-to-day interactions and behaviors that peace is rendered (im)possible, and these daily

⁶ See Enloe, C. (2014). Bananas, beaches and bases. University of California Press; In Enloe's piece "The Mundane Matters" she expounds on the feminist curiosity and drive to explore the everyday. She writes: "The kinds of power that were created and wielded—and legitimized—in these seemingly "private" sites were causally connected to the forms of power created, wielded and legitimized in the national and inter-state public spheres." Enloe, C. (2011). The mundane matters. *International Political Sociology*, 5(4), 447-450.

⁷ Enloe. Also Ahall (the everyday is constitutive of global politics)

⁸ Patricia Hill Collins. *The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought*. 1989. *Signs*; Audre Lorde. (1995). *Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Re-Defining Difference*. Routledge.; hooks, b. (2000). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. Pluto Press.

⁹ Harding, Sandra. 1986. *The Science Question in Feminism*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press.

¹⁰ Hartsock

¹¹ Chan Shun-hing. (2011). Beyond War and Men: Reconceptualizing Peace in Relation to the Everyday and Women. *Signs*, 36(3).

¹² Naomi Cahn, Dina Haynes and Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, 'Returning Home: Women in Post-conflict Societies', *Baltimore Law Review* 39 (2009–2010): 339–69.

¹³ Berentz An embodied everyday peace in the midst of violence (2015)

¹⁴ Choi, summarizing Trinh 1998

¹⁵ Or, to bring ordinary people out of the shadows of peace research, similar to the call Christine Sylvester made to re-people the study of war and treat war as a peopled experience. Sylvester, C. (2012). War Experiences/War Practices/War Theory. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 40(3).

routines tell us something crucial about the structures within which they exist. The choices, practices, and lived experiences of people in the post-conflict space are meaningful and meaning-making in our efforts to understand and build peace.

Final Thoughts

To the extent that a feminist working in the political science field wants to be considered a *scientist* (certainly this is not a universal priority, nor should it be), the question of what constitutes ‘science’ and the role storytelling can or cannot play in a field of science is important. Using my dissertation research as a starting point, I suggest that storytelling as a descriptive research tool is crucial in growing strong, holistic understandings of the social world and the concepts we use to describe it. Specifically, I explore ontologies of war and peace in International Relations (IR) and make the case that, without sustained attention towards everyday stories, these existing ontologies which are crucial to IR as a discipline are empty and lack clear insights into the way people live war and peace in their day-to-day lives. By tracing peace stories, my research aims to demonstrate that IR’s treatment of war and peace, each rooted to an ontology of death and the counting of dead bodies, marks a serious failure in *knowing* war and peace. The further reduction of war and peace to a binary variable, where war is ‘1’ and peace is ‘0’ or a non-event flattens the very real and very crucial experiences of people living amidst and in the aftermath of violence in unsettling ways. In turn, I use stories to offer a different conceptualization of peace, one that is built on an ontology of life, with all its messiness, beauty, joy, and pain. It is only through the stories of everyday individuals that this grounded conceptualization of peace is recoverable. Ultimately, I use stories to illustrate that to know peace is to know that the scars of war run deep, run through society, and mark everyday lives in remarkable ways. That is, if the science of war and peace is to mean anything at all to real people out in the world, it demands attention towards story.