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Critical Theory and Participatory Action Research: In Retrospect of Conducting Fieldwork in Conflict-Afflicted Mindanao, Philippines

The application of critical theory and participatory action research in a complementary manner provides an ideal approach in conducting field research in the conflict driven areas of Mindanao. The inclusion of the research respondents in the research process through a series of deliberative discourses with the researchers, anchored in emancipation and reflexivity, may contribute a more comprehensive analysis in understanding the multifaceted issues of conflict and peace in Mindanao. However, this convergence is not immune from limitations, and thus should be perceived as an additional point of reference to continue exploring interdisciplinary and adaptive field research approaches, *writes Jonathan Eli Libut*

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The violent conflicts in Mindanao, the southern part of the Philippines, have become intractable and protracted. According to Judd and Schiavo-Campo (2005), the roots of the conflicts have been the collision of interests in land ownership, the unjust allocation and distribution of social welfare by the central government, and the constructed stereotype of people in the south as second-class citizens that can be traced back to the Spanish and American colonial period. The violent conflicts have also been described by some scholars, peacebuilding practitioners, and the media as a "religious war." Buendia (2006) explains that in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, verbal aggressions through the media between Christian and Muslim Filipinos were common which gave the notion that the violent conflicts are dominantly influenced by religious differences. This perception may have been motivated by the embedded prejudices between Christian and Muslim Filipinos that were constructed by the Spaniards during Spain's colonisation of the Philippines (Ferrer, 2006). Buendia (2006) notes that the violent conflicts are neither simply a result of material contestations nor a

religious clash between Christian and Muslim Filipinos, but a combination of economic, political, social, and cultural factors. Ferrer (2006, p. 461) resonates with Buendia's points and states that "the causes of the armed conflicts are multiple and complex."

Conducting field research in conflict driven areas in Mindanao and directly seeing the tragic impact of conflicts on the communities' welfare and livelihoods would instinctively lead you to ask yourself: How to de-escalate the existing conflicts? What are the ways or ideal conditions that can prevent the recurrence of conflicts? The theoretical and methodological approaches to address these inquiries have been anchored mainly in critical theory and participatory action research, respectively. The academic researchers' as well as peacebuilding actors' application of critical theory and participatory action research was motivated basically by the drawbacks of the government, both at the national and local levels, to address the diverse root causes of conflicts. For decades, the government's perception and instruments to resolve the conflicts in Mindanao have been reliant on peace enforcements and conventional forms of mediation.

A two-hour boat ride to reach another community that has been disrupted by the region's conflicts. Due to inadequate transport infrastructures, the logistics for local-led humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding resources are primarily dependent on boats. Photo taken by the author.

These mechanisms that the government continues to implement are remnants of Cold War-era research discourses on conflict analysis and resolution that had inclinations with the theoretical perspectives of realism and liberalism. The majority of the previous field research in conflict driven areas in Mindanao was focused on elite interviews (particularly with high-level government officials or organization representatives), documentation of speeches or joint statements, and observations of actual mediation processes. There were only a few researchers that would recognize immersion with people who have been directly affected by conflicts as a significant source of data. Most of the research works on conflict and peace in Mindanao were heavily associated with the units of analysis and conceptual discourses in the field of international relations (IR). This is understandable since conflict and peace research was prevalently aligned within IR scholarship, until Filipino scholars Abinales (2000) and Buendia (2005) integrated sociological and ethnographic approaches, and took into account micro-level demographics. These initiatives were strengthened when fellow IR scholars Richmond (2015) and Paffenholz (2015) emphasized the value of including the "local turn" in conflict and peace research. Moreover, Mac Ginty (2019, p. 5) asserts that conflict and peace research "has seen a significant number of publications that very consciously draw on feminism, anthropology, sociology, and geography."

Hence, these initiatives paved the way for critical theory and participatory action research to gain an increasing attention within IR scholarship. One of the prominent proponents of critical theory in IR, Andrew Linklater, explains that critical theory focuses attention to the social construction and effects of knowledge, especially the way in which unfair social arrangements are produced and reproduced. Even if this theoretical approach is rooted in historical materialism and the "Frankfurt School," Linklater adds that critical theory learns from, and overcomes the limitations inherent in Marxism, not by rejecting class or the mode of production as fundamental to social exclusion, but by extending the analysis to include various forms of exclusion such as gender and race (Lawson, 2017, p. 77). Participatory action research has also been in a reticent use in IR, described as a methodological approach that entails the collaboration between the participant and researcher in the analysis, design, and implementation processes of the research. This approach aims to create a flow of continual feedback and a synergy between the participant and researcher in order for research tests and questions to be improved on and developed (Callan and Harrison, 2013, p. 2).

Both critical theory and participatory action research complement each other with their general view of the pursuit of critical reflections, reflexivity, and deliberative dialogues in conducting conflict and peace research. Guba and Lincoln (1994) explain that the aim of critical theory is the occurrence and continuity of restitution and emancipation over time. Shapcott (2008, p. 328) defines emancipation, in the context of conflict, peace, and development research, "as freedom from

unnecessary suffering and freedom to partake in dialogue, consent, and deliberation concerning matters that affect everybody." The application of participatory action research entails the participation of peace engagement stakeholders with the researchers during the entire research process. The stakeholders are not only research respondents or simply samples from a population, but they are also involved as consultants in the implementation of the research agenda, and the interpretation of research results. Chambers (2015) suggests that the participants are often capable to contribute to the formulation and refinement of research questions and hypotheses. The convergence of critical theory and participatory action research provides a platform where every phase of the research progress is attuned to the insights and feedback of the stakeholders.

However, the convergence is not immune from any critique or scepticism. The limitation of their convergence stems out from the inevitable asymmetrical relations of power and expectations between the stakeholders and the researchers, especially when the research funding is directly dependent on a specific donor commonly from the private and non-academic sector. Cornwall (2008, p. 278) states that "being involved in a process is not equivalent to having a voice. Voice needs to be nurtured. People need to feel able to express themselves without fear of reprisals or the expectation of not being listened to or taken seriously." Cornwall's statement encapsulates the aim of the convergence of critical theory and participatory action research. However, donors often have a higher leverage to set the rules of the game and dictate the research agenda, and when such a scenario happens, the researchers are burdened with the responsibility to address potential conflicts of interest. Moreover, the convergence of critical theory and participatory action research is highly collaborative in nature, and thus research works, especially when a large sample size is required, can be vulnerable to a relentless extrapolation of ideas, often causing distraction, confusion, and delay in the research progress.

The approaches in conducting field research in conflict driven areas in Mindanao are in a constant state of evolution as the issues also continuously evolve from one dimension to another. The convergence of critical theory and participatory action research is a commendable attempt to value the people's narratives of survival, hope, and resiliency that are vital in understanding the diverse issues of conflict and peace in Mindanao. This convergence also raises the necessity for researchers to approach with prudence and vigilantly attend to the inclusion of the participants' various perspectives and input into the research, as well as the power relations that exist and the frictional encounters that may emerge.

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