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Elisabeth King on Researching Conflict in Africa : Insights and Experiences. Edited by Elisabeth Porter, Gillian Robinson, Marie Smyth, Albrecht Schnabel, and Eghosa Osaghae. New York : United Nations University Press, 2005. 160pp.

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Abstract

A review of:

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Keywords

Human rights, Africa, Conflict

Researching Conflict in Africa : Insights and Experiences. Edited by Elisabeth Porter, Gillian Robinson, Marie Smyth, Albrecht Schnabel, and Eghosa Osaghae. New York : United Nations University Press, 2005. 160pp.

Researching Conflict in Africa: Insights and Experiences, edited by Elisabeth Porter, *et. al.*, discusses the methodological and ethical choices facing researchers of violently divided societies in Africa. This collection arose from a workshop held at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria in 2002. The volume begins from the premise that many researchers consider Africa a good laboratory for conducting investigations of the causes of ethnic conflict and conflict management techniques. However, researchers of conflict are left inadequately prepared, since most texts on research methodology do not deal with the special challenges of researching conflict in Africa - from accessing war-affected populations, to safety, to a plethora of ethical considerations. Drawing on the experiences of researchers with diverse backgrounds, this book successfully begins to fill this gap.

A particular strength of this book is that it serves, in itself, as a model of some of the methodological and ethical values that it advocates. In introducing the volume, Eghosa Osaghae and Gillian Robinson note that African researchers based in Africa are often "bypassed and ignored in the production of knowledge about their societies" (4). Later chapters propound the value of collaborative work. The location of the workshop, as well as the partnership of African and non-African researchers that produced this book (chapters 3 through 7 are authored by indigenous researchers) are responses to this important shortcoming in current scholarship.

Following the general introduction, Marie Smyth explores the layered experiences of insider and outsider researchers of violently divided societies, analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of each position, and suggesting insider-outsider collaboration as particularly fruitful. Albrecht Schnabel contemplates the researcher's role in the alleviation of violence and the moral responsibility to conduct and present research so that it improves the situation on the ground. Collectively, these chapters raise questions about the reciprocal relationship between researcher and those being researched.

Building on this foundation, Part II (Chapters 3-9) presents seven case studies authored by academics and practitioners working on issues related to ethnic conflict in Africa . Geographically, the contributions stretch from South Africa to Nigeria , and from Angola to the Democratic Republic of Congo. The case studies cover such wide-ranging issues as: accessing populations in violently divided societies; weighing polarized perspectives; social and economic power discrepancies between researchers and researched; researcher credibility; funding constraints; using information gathered in other capacities for academic purposes; including marginalized groups' voices to obtain a holistic picture of ethnic conflict; questioning writings and media sources produced out of conflict; mobility in war; responsible dissemination of research results; and flexibility in the face of conditions on the ground.

The richest contributions in the second part are detailed personal experiences: J. Zoë Wilson, for example, writes practically about the benefits and drawbacks of U.N. association; Erin Baines discusses the significance of silences in Rwanda ; and Dominic Agyeman shares the fears of repatriation of Liberian and Togolese refugees and the consequent amendments in methods for

interviewing them. While the diversity of issues and experiences makes this collection a fascinating read, more systematic discussion of the same issues in each chapter would also have been useful for comparability and research planning.

Given its emphasis on ethics, this book's neglect of Research Ethics Boards (REBs) is peculiar. Such an addition could usefully examine the basic underpinnings and justifications for REBs, general issues covered in ethics reviews, and how the current practices of REBs fit and misfit the needs and challenges of researching conflict in divided societies.

Readers wearing a variety of hats could gain insight from this concise volume. Scholars planning research in Africa or other conflict zones would do well to reflect upon the experiences of the contributors to this collection-I would have welcomed the opportunity to read this book prior to my research in Rwanda . Those studying the specific African states covered in this book may find good ideas in the relevant chapters. Instructors of methods courses may find thought-provoking examples of conflict research for analysis by students. Those doing secondary research on conflict may be urged to more deeply consider the production of knowledge of their academic sources. Policy-makers may also glean new insight on research and policy-making in conflict zones. Overall, this is not an explicit how-to book, but a contribution that promotes much needed reflection on methods and ethics in conflict research.

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