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facing the dilemmas, exploring the challenges

Conflict, Intervention and the Politics of Knowledge

Humanitarian & Conflict Response Institute
University of Manchester
ESRC Seminar
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This two-day event organised by the Humanitarian & Conflict Response Institute (HCRI) and funded by ESRC brought together a wide range of scholars and practitioners with interests in peace studies, security studies, international relations, humanitarianism and the aid system, education and community services.

Building on previous ESRC/HCRI seminars; "Who are the Humanitarians now?" (Nov 2009) and "Darfur: Assessing the Assessments (May 2010)", the seminar explored some of the factors at play in the epistemology of conflict response.

Through a series of panel discussions and plenary addresses, participants explored conceptual frameworks, practices of knowledge production and the role of knowledge and expertise in conflict settings.

Knowledge and DIscourse in the Field of Conflict and Humanitarian Response

The discourse of conflict and humanitarian response is framed by diverse, sources and artifacts of knowledge including, on the formal side, academic reports, needs assessments, practitioner reports, policy guidelines, educational resources and expert opinion and, less formally, conversational exchange, lessons learned processes, context specific "intelligence", teaching and learning activities, urban myths, rumours, gossip and improvised news.

Essentially pluralistic and dogged by questions of the validity of the unique (context specific) versus the universal (context general), the field of conflict studies produces a wide range of discourses and many differing views on the purpose, validity and politics of knowledge. With participants coming from a wide range of disciplines including, politics, international affairs, medicine, humanitarian affairs, development studies, education and peace studies and examples presented from a wide range of conflicts, including; Israel/Palestine, East Timor, The Caucuses, Northern Ireland, Cambodia and Sudan, the seminar provided a forum for a broad range of work and opinion on the theme.

Whilst the conceptualisation that "expert-led" knowledge is dominant in the system went largely unchallenged. A variety of types of knowledge producers were elucidated and categorised with reference to differential "traditions" of knowledge practice, such as academic vs professional, formal versus informal and local versus international. Questions of power surfaced in discussions around the categorisation of "popular" and "traditional" versus "elite" and "expat" knowledge practice.

This basic tendency to dichotomise brings forward certain intellectual challenges specifically how to consider the cosmopolitan interaction of local and international knowledge and how to accurately understand the privileging of different sources of knowledge in different contexts.

Power and Responsibility

Conflict is, of itself, a product of contestation and it is no surprise that a number of alternative understandings of the politics of knowledge emerged. As shown by the contestation of the validity of the "human terrain system" and many of the knowledge processes at play in the promotion of the "War on Terror", the standard ontology of any of the individual systems involved in conflict response, alongside the predominant modes of operation, heavily influence the types of knowledge produced by (or taken up by) that system. This proposition holds true in humanitarian response as much as in the political dimensions of conflict, here the grammatical constructs of humanitarian actors proscribe the way in which both information and language are used to problematise issues and to call for action.

Various motives were put forward to explain or expound the power processes at play in the production of knowledge. Whether knowledge production supports or challenges particular discourses, there is always at least one possible motive, some of the "grand narrative" motives suggested included; ideological ("colonial","Stalinist"), political ("nation-building") economic ("business-building"), social ("group-formation and maintenance") and practical (supporting the action-orientated needs of specific actors or groups of actors), however, it is perhaps the micro narratives that should be further studied; to what extent do distinct knowledge production processes have the power to perpetuate or challenge the current system?. If, as one questioner suggested, we are in the business of positive change, where does the locus of this transformation lie and how can the knowledge production process best contribute?

Key speakers in the debate recommended hyper awareness of the both the politics and the craft of knowledge production, promoting what was described as an auto ethnographic approach, to mitigate against personal bias about, not only the subject under discussion, but also the method of choice. For those engaged in knowledge production there should be a requirement of, at least reflexivity, and engagement with the politics of knowledge at the outset.

Perhaps the most interesting question to emerge from this aspect of the discussion relates to the question of what role knowledge plays in the forming of discourse and what, in turn, is the role played by discourse in the process of change? Do shifts in discourse play a formative role in change or are they simply reflections of the transformations.

The Uses and Abuses of Knowledge

The creation of knowledge is not in solely in the hands of those who speak, write and publish. Knowledge production has repercussions beyond the intentions of the knowledge producers. Several examples of (mis) appropriation of research findings and misuse, mis translation or manipulation of information were shared and discussed. On a less cynical but non the less self-serving level, questions of the normalisation of terms

such as "failed state", "humanitarian crisis" can, it was suggested, create a climate of opinion based on the denial of agency, disempowerment and disillusion.

In the same way technical concepts such as "fact finding" and "truth and reconciliation" appear to make grand claims without adequately addressing the epistemiological issues; is truth objective, subjective, intersubjective? or is it the interplay between these concepts that "creates" the truth?

Some speakers talked about the negative effects of metaphorical and conceptual appropriation and urged the responsible use of concept and language that engages, on an ethical level, with the knowledge transfer process and its relationship to social transformation.