



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT
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International Development
Department

**Stitched Voices: Knowing peace and conflict through textiles
End of exhibition report and personal reflections**

Jonathan Fisher, University of Birmingham

The Exhibition:

The *Stitched Voices* exhibition was launched on Friday 17th November 2017 at the Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC). It ran for one month and was accompanied by a range of workshops and associated events organised by local activists and artists, as well as PhD candidates based at the University of Birmingham.

In total, around 1000 visitors viewed the exhibition and around 65 people participated in the events programme, including the launch evening. More information on the events, and details on the textiles displayed, can be found at the exhibition website: <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/search-quilts/fullevent/?id=175>

The Seminar Series:

The exhibition was part of an ESRC Seminar Series on “From data to knowledge: Understanding peace and conflict from afar” (<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/government-society/departments/international-development/events/from-data-to-knowledge/index.aspx>).

The Series – which has brought together scholars, practitioners and policy-makers from across the world – is concerned with a growing paradox in the ways in which international actors interact with the Global South. On the one hand, there has been an ever-expanding focus among Western donor countries on focusing aid and intervention on so-called ‘fragile and conflict-affected states’. On the other hand, though, this focus has been accompanied by a growing reluctance by these Western powers to allow their citizens to travel or work within these contexts. Western diplomats, NGO personnel and researchers live an increasingly ‘bunkerized’ existence – to use a term coined by Mark Duffield – in many parts of the Global South, engaging with local communities often only at a distance or in highly securitized settings.

The aim of this Series has therefore been to build a network of researchers and practitioners interested in exploring questions which emerge from this, such as: how do we know what peace and conflict looks like? How do we know how it is experienced, particularly in putatively remote or dangerous contexts? How should we understand the experiences of those involved and affected or, perhaps, respond to them?



Throughout 2016 and 2017, in Birmingham, Manchester, Bradford, Aberystwyth and Nairobi, our discussions have focused around these questions. Debate has, however, been based primarily around how knowledge is produced on peace and conflict through the spoken or written word – whether that be in interviews, discussions, reports or academic articles. The purpose of *Stitched Voices* was to challenge participants further by asking them to reflect on how the medium in which experience of peace and conflict is communicated influences our understanding of it, and, indeed, to consider how far artistic works can help us to better understand personal and community experiences of conflict and insecurity.

The following is a brief set of personal reflections on this from Jonathan Fisher, Principal Investigator of the Seminar Series.

Reflections:

The first thing that struck me about *Stitched Voices*, and the community that developed around the exhibition, was the **gendered nature** of the network and discussions. In one workshop, I was the only non-female participant and many of the textiles – including those produced in Chile during the 1980s – primarily portray the experiences of their female creators, many of whom lost relatives during the abusive rule of Augusto Pinochet. Many participants reflected on these issues and linked this to popular associations of textiles and craft with women. What was particularly striking, though, was the frustration many scholars and activists expressed at having textiles not taken seriously as a means of knowledge production within wider scholarly and policy fields. Many participants felt that few academic journals, for example, would consider publishing work on this theme and this arguably speaks to wider debates on male bias and the privileging of certain forms of knowledge over others in the social sciences (see, for example, this recent piece by KCL's Alice Evans <https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/the-perils-of-male-bias-alice-evans-replies-to-yesterdays-sausagefest/>).

This is a significant loss to conflict studies because, as I increasingly came to appreciate throughout the exhibition's run, textiles and other visual pieces can communicate elements of experience that words and texts often cannot. What I found particularly exciting was coming to appreciate the **open character of textiles**. Unlike texts, which often seem closed and complete, textiles represent a very different form of communication, one which invites those engaging with them to reflect on their contemporary relevance and meaning, as well as on the experiences and perceptions of those who created them, and their immediate context. There is also an immediacy to many of the textiles displayed in the exhibition which it would be very difficult to capture and express through words.

I was also struck by the degree to which textiles, and other images used to communicate peace and conflict experiences – including photographs (http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/mediafiles/1037_Stitched-Voices-2017-Bozambique-report111217.pdf) - resonate **emotionally** with those viewing them. The workshops



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where scholars and activists displayed and talked about their textiles, and those produced by members of their families (http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/mediafiles/1030_Jonathan-Fisher-report-of-November-17.pdf) were deeply personal and allowed those present to draw-upon emotional, as well as intellectual resources in reflecting on and understanding the experiences and contexts being discussed. As Dr Christalla Yakinthou (University of Birmingham) noted in one of the workshops, scholars of conflict studies often try and portray themselves as 'objective' and dispassionate when analysing key issues but, in fact, very few of us can engage with issues of injustice, violence and insecurity without engaging our feelings and emotions.

Finally, I found it fascinating to learn how **community-owned** and **–created** many of the textiles displayed were. Many were the product of several peoples' handiwork – even, in one case, of a whole community – and each therefore represents not just an individual's perspective on an experience of injustice but a wider community's perspective.

Jonathan Fisher, University of Birmingham

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