Book Reviews / Comptes rendus de livres

Kenneth Bush and Colleen Duggan (eds.). (2015). *Evaluation in the Extreme: Research, Impact and Politics in Violently Divided Societies*. **Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 348 pages. ISBN 978-9351503941.**

Reviewed by Eric Abitbol, Youla Pompilus-Touré, and Lorenzo Daïeff

INTRODUCTION

Deeply reflective and engaging, Kenneth Bush and Colleen Duggan's edited volume speaks to evaluators and researchers about the challenges, responsibilities, and possible peaceable contributions of research and evaluation in violently divided societies (VDS). Drawing on conceptually compelling theory and richly diverse experience, this book makes for essential reading, a conceptual and practical discursive tool, sounding board, and planning guide.

A LONG-STANDING RESEARCH AGENDA

In the 1990s, Ken Bush, with the support of Colleen Duggan and other colleagues at the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), brought an important and critical reflective note to the euphoria surrounding the end of the Cold War in a body of work on peace and conflict impact assessment (PCIA). This work challenged much of the accepted discourse of the day that was rooted in democratic liberalism, which saw peace and development as being deeply entwined and favourably mutually constitutive. Instead, it advanced the idea that international development support contained seeds both of peace and of violent conflict.

PCIA was itself informed by the critical discourse of scholars and practitioners from the Global South and North, and it spawned multiple and diverse approaches to development thinking and practice. This includes Mary Anderson's (1999) *Do No Harm* approach, two special issues of the *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* (2013, 2014) on evaluation and PCIA and the more recent body of work on conflict sensitivity (Handschin, Abitbol, and Alluri, 2016). *Evaluation in the Extreme* is an important and insightful addition to this corpus, focusing primarily on the importance of research for evaluation in VDS and, notably, on the theories, methods, ethics, political agency, and challenges of research for evaluation in VDS.

Corresponding author: Eric Abitbol, PhD, Senior Consultant in Environment, Security and Conflict Transformation at Universalia, eabitbol@universalia.com

INFORMING INTERVENTIONS IN VDS

The point of departure for Bush and Duggan's edited volume is the argument that inadequate attention is paid to "the impacts of research on the dynamics of conflict, or peace" (p. 4). Good research, they argue, is key to informed interventions in VDS, where outcomes are (or should be) gauged in terms of peaceableness and conflictuality. Further, given that researchers and evaluators themselves are actors in VDS, their work is situated within the conflict context, with ethical, methodological, political, and logistical implications.

Informing reflections on these matters, Bush and Duggan draw on a diverse group of scholars, evaluators, funders, and practitioners from the Global South and North in the composition of 11 thoughtful, highly informed, and well-paced chapters on "how individuals and institutions appropriate (or misappropriate) research, and apply (or misapply) it, for the purposes of influencing policy and practice" (p. 5). Their agenda, if it is fair to describe one, may be understood as encouraging a greater rapprochement between the fields of policy/practice research and evaluation in the interest of more peaceably informed, critically situated, and reflexive interventions.

The volume opens with McDermott and colleagues' excellent review of the myriad debates and cross-cutting themes in the evaluation of research in VDS. These include the purpose of evaluation, the role of the evaluator, theories and methods, stakeholder participation, and the nature of evidence. This literature review provides an anchor for the rest of the chapters and would be of benefit to most, if not all, evaluators.

The book then considers the ethical dilemmas facing researchers and evaluators, particularly in VDS. Whitty, for instance, describes how the political economy of "desired outcomes" (p. 106) powerfully tugs on the researcher/evaluator toward making certain methodological, logistical, financial, and discursive choices, in tension with "the need for independence; and the overriding requirements of quality and expertise" (pp. 111–112).

Jayawickrama and Strecker discuss the importance of taking into consideration tensions between the diverse ethical frameworks, norms, and priorities in researcher/evaluator home countries, in VDS, in universities, and in the private sector. They recommend researcher/evaluator self-awareness, reflectivity, cultural humility, and a responsive sensitivity to context. Knox, finally, points to the fact that researchers/evaluators are politically situated, bringing their own values and biases to their work. As he states, "[t]his is particularly important because of the evaluator's role in interrogating the theory of change in most evaluations" (p. 184).

Extensive debates are underway regarding the implications of research on policy-making and practice, given the contemporary prevalence of results-based management. Mindful of the importance of context, drawing on his case study of HIV/AIDS research in South Africa, Kelly points to the fact that "evidence-to-policy" cultures are generally absent in VDS and would have to be carefully constructed (a point also made by Hay in a later chapter). He further argues that the research process is likely equally, if not more, important than its findings: "The

most direct policy and practice outcomes were often achieved prior to peer-reviewed publication" (p. 202). Research programs should thus consider supporting non-research activities like advocacy and networking since evidence must generally be picked up by media or advocacy networks to reach and influence politics (p. 200).

The chapter by Zaveri reframes the idea of VDS through a vulnerability lens, pointing out that many groups living even in non-militarized contexts are violently divided from their societies through social and/or systemic violence. Zaveri articulates the ways in which evaluation research might be pursued in the face of such (globally omnipresent) violent divisions; and his discussion serves as a reminder that evaluation in itself can have ambiguous, even negative effects, if beneficiaries are used instrumentally (for example, as data sources). Alternately, as Healy and Healy explain, it can help build trust and understanding across divides in VDS: evidence-based and activist-based approaches to research and evaluation can be complementary, and evaluation, rooted in data and analysis, can become a part of a peace process.

A COLLABORATIVE LEGACY

Beyond its intellectual rigour, a key strength of this book resides in the regional diversity and experience informing the chapters, from Northern Ireland, to Sri Lanka, to South Africa. There is some inconsistency in the length and depth of the chapters, such that some questions are raised but not answered, leaving the reader to look elsewhere for greater insights. But that is also the mark of an important text, as it stimulates further research and reflection. This book leaves an important legacy. Ken Bush passed away suddenly earlier this year, and Colleen Duggan has by now left the IDRC. This text will perhaps remain the final literary fruit of their long and insightful association. It seems only fitting that it should be a collaborative work emerging from years of engagement, reflection, and shared experience drawing in theorists, practitioners, and professionals from the Global South and North in critically shared discursive solidarity.

REFERENCES

Anderson, Mary (1999). Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace – or War. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Handschin, Sabina, Eric Abitbol, and Rina Alluri, eds. (2016). Conflict Sensitivity: Taking It to the Next Level. Working Paper. http://www.swisspeace.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/Media/Publications/Working_Paper_2_2016.pdf (accessed 12 October 2016).

Journal of Peacebuilding and Development (2013). Special Issue: Evaluation in Violently Divided Societies (VDS): Politics, Ethics and Methods. Vol. 8(2).

Journal of Peacebuilding and Development (2014). Special Issue: Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA). Vol. 9(1).