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The practical usefulness of the space metaphor for, in this case, peacebuilding makes it worthwhile to unpack it rather than discard it as overly difficult to interpret. However, its nuances need to be carefully analyzed in order to avoid unnecessary confusion or misunderstanding. The authors present a number of different contexts where not only the term but even more so the concept itself proves to be of great value.

Embracing small spaces

A useful metaphor with strong impact

Roger W. Foster and Jayne Seminare Docherty

In the field of humanitarian assistance, there has been much talk of the allegedly calamitous "shrinking" of humanitarian space. After examining the literature on this problem, Cynthia Brassard-Boudreau and Don Hubert concluded that for many organizations in the humanitarian aid field, "the notion of humanitarian space embodies a series of assumptions that together imply an inexorable decline in the ability to provide material assistance to populations affected by armed conflict... [B]y conflating a range of largely disconnected phenomena under this single heading, humanitarian organizations have generated an unnecessarily gloomy outlook on the prospects for effective humanitarian operations. This conflation is a barrier to analyzing and responding to the very real challenges of security and access facing humanitarian organizations".[1]

> ***A lack of violence in situations that remain unjust is known as negative peace.***

The solution, Brassard-Boudreau and Hubert argue, is to abandon use of the term humanitarian space. Should peacebuilders be equally wary of the spatial metaphor? Should we shy away from talking about peacebuilding in small spaces? We think not.

Human cognition and language depend on metaphorical reasoning. "Metaphors employ that which we know (a familiar entity or system) to give shape to that which we do not understand (an unfamiliar entity or system). By drawing an analogy between the (relatively) known and the (relatively) unknown, metaphors guide perception, action, and reasoning, thereby enabling us to make sense of the new and unfamiliar by extending or stretching our knowledge of the familiar."[2] In a field built on an architectural metaphor (peace*building*), it is no surprise to hear practitioners talking about "creating space" for peace[3] or "expanding space" for peace or democracy[4] or working in "small spaces".

New practices require new ways of imagining action, and this requires new language. This is why discussion of new forms of practice is so rich in metaphors. Peacebuilders also talk about their work using organic images and metaphors such as health, sustainability, resilience, or artistic metaphors such as creating or imagining peace.[5] Metaphors need to be used with caution, because they guide our perceptions and our choices in ways that are largely unnoticed. If we are not careful, they can get distorted and drive our practice in unintended directions.

Unlike Brassard-Boudreau and Hubert, we think that even when a metaphor gets weighted down with difficult interpretation, it is more useful to unpack it rather than to throw it out, particularly if the metaphor is still providing useful insight about practice. At this point, discarding the space metaphor for peacebuilding would be neither realistic nor helpful. However, its usefulness does depend on how well we explore nuances of meaning in order to avoid unintentionally adopting practices that are incongruent with our values and intentions.

This is particularly important when we are trying to communicate our practices to other groups working alongside us in the field. For example, when military peacekeepers use a metaphor of creating space for peace they might think about capturing and holding relatively small spaces such as a village or sector or region as *outposts of peace* and then spreading peace from the space that is held to other spaces. The space metaphor readily intersects with the image of capturing and holding territory on a battleground. The resulting image is appealing enough that some peacebuilders have explored a non-militarized version of holding territory for peace. See for example Landon Hancock, Chris Mitchell and others[6] on zones of peace, areas where local peoples come together and communally create spaces free of militarized confrontations. Also see http://www.zonesofpeace.org/ for information about zones of peace in a particular location.

Similar metaphor, different goals

In spite of using a similar metaphor of space, military peacekeepers and civilian peacebuilders may be working towards different goals using practices that are either incompatible or difficult to coordinate. The military approach is often focused on achieving security and order and calling it peace, while the civilian peacebuilding approach is more often focused on creating just relationships and institutional mechanisms for sustaining those relationships. A lack of violence in situations that remain unjust is known as negative peace, while the absence of violence that is created by establishing just relationships is called positive peace.

Either form of "peace" may be achieved by focusing on space as a guiding image, but no one on the ground would equate the outcomes.

All of that said, the world is a complex and messy place. Sometimes military units do support creating positive peace, and the spatial metaphor can help military and civilian groups work together to achieve that outcome. Being able to converse about the different ways they are applying a shared metaphor of space can help military peacekeepers and civilian peacebuilders identify and work toward a shared end. Or such conversations can help different interveners recognize the limitations on their cooperation.

As with the allegedly shrinking humanitarian space, small operational space is sometimes imposed on peacebuilders by outside factors. For example, it is difficult to do peacebuilding in situations dominated by:

- protracted violence (e.g. Afghanistan, Somalia, DRC);
- totalitarian repression (e.g. North Korea or Syria);
- religious, ideological or cultural vigilantes who repress dissenting voices (e.g., the Taliban, the Communist Party in the old Soviet Union, groups anywhere that would burn books not to their liking); or
- cultural norms or expectations that reinforce structures of domination (e.g., unspoken social rules of exclusion based on race, gender or other identity factors).

Yet, even in these circumstances, relationships can be transformed in small spaces, and so can patterns of behavior that sustain oppression and violence.

Jeffrey Goldfarb studied three proto-democratic "free spaces" in pre-1989 Eastern Europe.

- The kitchen table, in Poland and elsewhere in the old bloc, a free zone where intimate groups of friends could talk face-to-face with one another without concern for the present party line;
- A private apartment in a typical socialist housing bloc which transformed itself into a bookstore of illegal literature; and
- A poetry reading in a large Warsaw apartment where intellectuals and artists met weekly for unofficial readings, lectures and discussions.[7]



PHOTO: KATE HOLT/IRIN

The protracted violence in Afghanistan poses serious challenges to peacebuilding efforts. A member of the newly trained Afghan National Police patrols through a poppy field in Mian Poshteh.

Taken together, his examples illustrate the power of focusing on small (intimate) locations where new behaviors can be enacted as people take on the task of transforming larger and more public spaces. According to Goldfarb "... these small events contributed to the transformation – indeed the transformation could not have happened without them".[8]

Goldfarb's studies imply that working in small spaces may be key to achieving peace writ large.[9] His research holds out hope for those people of peaceful intent who are laboring in situations where constraining, restricting, limiting and confining forces and conditions hinder peace promoting actions on a larger stage.

From the bottom to the top

Goldfarb's research also lends credibility to the work of peacebuilders who *strategically choose* to engage in conflicts from within a small space. In her analysis of Mennonite peacebuilding, Sally Engle Merry looks at activities that consist largely of "making connections or building relationships among people who are antagonistic, and working to replace this hostility with trust".[10] This aspect of peacebuilding focuses on "the long-term construction of relationships among ordinary people, as well as negotiations among leaders ... In this view, peacebuilding does not occur only at the top but also comes from micro readjustments of power in the small *spaces* of everyday social life, accomplished one at a time in the lives of people in situations of conflict. Without local transformations, successful negotiations by top leaders will not produce peace".[11]

Reflecting on his engagements with so-called "victim communities" in Colombia, John Paul Lederach notes the incredible creativity that community members displayed in their efforts to "survive the waves of violence that pound over the mostly invisible yet ever present seabed of structural injustice, poverty and exclusion".[12] One of the key elements in the ability of these communities to transcend cycles of violence, he notes, arose from "their willingness to risk an innovative capacity exemplified by *their solidarity to undermine the law of silence imposed by armed groups*".[13] Resilience in these communities involved processes through which community members found their "voice," in "a spatial and sonic context"[14] that is most effective when it is *small*.

> "Voice infers a proxemics of space and relationship. It means that people are within hearing range, the shared space of a conversation. A conversation requires a spatial distance wherein the words – sound externalized – are accessible and interactive. As such, to have a voice suggests that people and significant processes affecting their lives are proximate, close enough that the vibrations of sounds touch each other, create echoes that bounce and resonate. Metaphorically, the sensation of "being voiceless" al-

ways refers to finding oneself in a space too expansive, too distant and remote to *feel* the vibration."[15]

For Lederach, one significant guidepost toward resiliency is "the development of local social spaces that encourage and sustain a quality of dialogical interaction wherein people feel they can touch, shape and be shaped by accessible conversation. This suggests a combination of localness and proximity that helps people stay in touch, while reaching from the local to more distant less accessible space as collectives. In such spaces, people feel a sense of voice that reverberates and creates resonance with events and processes that affect their lives".[16] In other words, small spaces are a boon to peacebuilding, not a limitation to overcome.

Small space coupled with large scale

The need for working in small spaces appears to hold true, no matter what phase of conflict we are talking about. The signs of rising risk for violence in so-called pre-conflict (actually pre-violence) situations are observable in the small spaces of marketplaces, football matches and schools or universities. In post-conflict situations, large scale, official truth and reconciliation processes cannot replace the face-to-face truth telling and psychosocial trauma work that enables communities to break out of cycles of tit-for-tat violence. See, for example, the work of Fambul Tok in Sierra Leone (http://www.fambultok.org/), which is proving more effective than the official tribunal.

> ***Small spaces are a boon to peacebuilding, not a limitation to overcome.***

During periods of transition from war to peace, peacebuilders encounter opportunities to build new political, constitutional and economic arrangements that can deal with the roots of a conflict. By increasing the transparency and accountability of the public processes, small-space work up-ends the prevalent strategies for negotiations to end internal wars. Such processes typically bring together representatives of the combatant groups, usually with the aid of an international mediator behind closed doors, aimed mostly at meeting the minimum demands of the protagonists. This "standard" negotiation process is often perceived more as "dividing the spoils" among those willing to use violence to gain access to power than about promoting social inclusion and equitable development.[17] Working in small spaces has improved peace negotiations and peace processes in locales as diverse as South Africa, Guatemala, Mali, Colombia, the Philippines, and Northern Ireland by building both capacity and demand for public participation in the processes of societal reform.

One final observation from our own work in Burma/Myanmar suggests that we should not think about "small spaces" as locations marked by the absence of government or official actors. Even official actors can benefit from identifying small spaces for authentic encounter, and well-positioned unofficial actors such as NGOs can assist with this process. Here, we are thinking of a quiet initiative by a local NGO that brought together newly elected members of the parliament in Burma/Myanmar during the transition from military rule to a mixed civilian/military government. In the small spaces organized around dialogue and capacity building, the legislators were able to discuss practical problems such as how to organize legislative committees and how to act their way into their role as parliamentarians. These off-the-record, small space activities helped a parliament that many feared would be a rubber stamp for continued military rule emerge as a counterweight to the army and the military-dominated administrative branch of the government.

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5 Lederach, J.P. (2005). *The moral imagination: The art and soul of building peace.* New York: Oxford University Press; Lederach. J. P. and Lederach J. L. (2010), *When Blood and Bones Cry Out: Journeys through the Soundscape of Healing and Reconciliation.* Queensland, Australia: University of Queensland

6 Hancock, L. M. & C. R. Mitchell, editors (2007). *Zones of peace: Local conflict mitigation in the midst of civil violence.* Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press

7 Goldfarb, J. (2006). *The politics of small things: The power of the powerless in dark times.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp.10-12

8 Goldfarb, J. 2012. http://www.deliberatelyconsidered.com/2012/03/mid-atlantic-reflections-on-the-road-the-politics-of-small-things-and-media/dscn4404-1edit/

9 Chigas, D. & P. Woodrow. (January 2009). Envisioning and pursuing peace writ large. http://www.berghof-handbook.net/documents/publications/dialogue7_chigwood_comm.pdf

10 Merry, S.E. (2000). "Mennonite peacebuilding and conflict transformation," in *From the ground up: Mennonite contributions to international peacebuilding.* C. Sampson and John Paul Lederach (editors). New York: Oxford University Press, p. 205

11 Merry (2000), p. 205-211, emphasis added.

12 Lederach, J.P. (2010). Resiliency and Healthy Communities: An Exploration of Image and Metaphor. *What Makes for Healthy Communities?* Unpublished paper available at: www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/JohnPaulLederach.pdf, p. 3

13 Lederach, J. P. (2010), p. 3 emphasis added.

14 Lederach, J. P. (2010), p. 8

15 Lederach, J. P. (2010), p. 8

16 Lederach, J.P (2010), p. 12

17 Barnes, C. (2002). "Owning the process: mechanisms for political participation of the public in peacemaking." In *ACCORD 'Project': International Review of Peace Initiatives*, 13, pp. 6-7. Also see, Hancock, L. M. & C. R. Mitchell, editors (2012). *Local peacebuilding and national peace: Interaction between grassroots and elite processes.* New York: Continuum International Publishing Group