

Critical Reflection

Following the KOFF Master Class on Arts & Peacebuilding on 28 March 2019

Poetry, Gender and Peace

William McInerney, Doctoral Researcher, University of Cambridge

Poetry makes us human... Poetry, through words, reduces our experiences to their essence and, at the same time, uplifts our souls to their highest.

- Marry Lee Morrison¹

The KOFF Master Class, *Poetry, Gender and Peace*, was held at the swisspeace offices in Bern on 28 March 2019. The class brought together arts, peacebuilding, and gender equality professionals from across Switzerland. The first session explored conflict transformation approaches to strategic arts-based peacebuilding practice and discussed spoken word poetry case studies. In the second session, participants engaged in an interactive spoken word poetry workshop.

This critical reflection will summarize the key ideas from the class and engage with emergent themes. The following sections will: **1)** Outline key theories and concepts that inform a conflict transformation and moral imagination approach to peacebuilding; **2)** Review the idea of strategic arts-based peacebuilding; **3)** Introduce spoken word poetry, review relevant case studies, and discuss the interactive writing and sharing poetry workshop; and **4)** Conclude with a discussion on emergent themes and questions from the class. This critical reflection is intended to illuminate the collaborative learning experience of the master class. While this reflection is influenced by existing scholarship and my own professional practice, it can also be understood as a representation of the exchange of ideas from the master class participants.

1. Key Theories and Concepts

The class started by exploring broad conceptual questions about arts-based peacebuilding work. What is violence? What is peace? What is

peacebuilding? The answers to these questions grounded the class in a conflict transformation paradigm and moral imagination framework to engage the potential of strategic arts-based

¹ Morrison, M. (2009) Poetry and Peace: Explorations of Language and "Unlanguage" as Transformative Pedagogy. *Journal of Peace Education and Social Justice* 3(1), 88-98.

peacebuilding through spoken word poetry.

1.1. Violence

Violence is multidimensional. Inspired by the work of peace scholars and practitioners Johan Galtung and Betty Reardon, the class discussed different forms of violence including personal and relational violence (physical and psychological-based), cultural violence (social and cultural norms-based), and structural violence (systems-based). These *violence(s)* are interconnected. Violence is not static and siloed; it is relational and dynamic. The class also highlighted the concept of post-structural violence from scholars Kevin Kester and Hilary Cremin². Post-structural violence describes the various forms of violence that can arise from well-intentioned peace work and workers themselves. Interrogating good intentions and exploring the possible risks and harms of peacebuilding, and arts-based peace work in particular, was a reoccurring theme throughout the class.

1.2. Peace

Peace is also layered, complex, and dynamically interconnected. Johan Galtung delineates between negative peace; the cessation of violence, and positive peace; the wider promotion of justice and equality. This foundational classification of peace is expanded upon by the Austrian peace scholar Wolfgang Dietrich. Dietrich's examination of peace traditions around the world indicate there are at least four key *peace families*

including: energetic traditions focusing on peace through harmony; moral traditions focusing on peace through justice; modern traditions focusing on peace through security; and postmodern traditions focusing on peace through truths. Attempting to navigate this complexity, Dietrich argues that there is not one true peace, but rather a constant dynamic of *peace(s)*. He proposes the concept of *transrational peace* as a way to work with and through the multiplicity of *peace(s)*³. Transrational peace is not a rejection of modernity's desire for security, nor a repudiation of the multiple truths presents in postmodern peaces. Rather, it is the ability to see and hold both and explore how they interact and co-exist in peacebuilding contexts. Transrationality was a key theme in the class and was used to navigate the complexities of arts and peacebuilding work.

1.3. Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation

There are many definitions of peacebuilding. The class broadly conceptualized peacebuilding as the movement from violence(s) to peace(s). While there are many peacebuilding approaches, the class focused on the work of John Paul Lederach and the conflict transformation paradigm. Lederach defines conflict as natural, dynamic, and deeply relational. Conflict transformation work moves beyond reactive conflict management, and past initial surface-level conflict resolution, to explore the underlying causes, relations, and human condition. Conflict transformation work

² Kester, K. and Cremin, H. (2017). Peace education and peace education research: Toward a concept of poststructural violence and second-order

reflexivity. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 49(14), 1415-1427.

³ Dietrich, W. (2012). *Many Peaces: Interpretations of Peace in History and Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

addresses the multiple dimensions of violence in order to cultivate a sustainable positive and transrational peace. In doing so, Lederach embraces creativity as a key element in helping people gain clarity and understanding, and ultimately the ability to imagine solutions that transform their relationships and conflicts. Lederach considers this an essential part of peacebuilding work and calls this vital ability to imagine, recognize, and embody creative alternatives to conflict, the *moral imagination*⁴. Lederach outlines four guiding principles for transforming conflicts through such a mindset: 1) Imagine ourselves in a web of relationships; 2) Sustain a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity; 3) Believe in and pursue the creative act; and 4) Cultivate courage and accept the risk of stepping into the mystery. The moral imagination is a helpful guiding framework that accounts for the complexity of violence and peace and situates the role of the creativity and the arts at the heart of peacebuilding practice. With this in mind, the class explored the strategic implementation and integration of arts-based practices in peacebuilding contexts.

2. Arts and Peacebuilding

The class defined art as creative and cultural practices that engage and take the form of artistic products, processes, and mindsets. Thus, art's creative core works to activate the moral imagination and promote conflict transformation. Art is dynamic in that it bridges the cognitive and the embodied; the effective and the affective. Art can communicate and transform the way people think, feel, and act. Peacebuilders can harness this potential to support a variety of

peacebuilding practices such as resilience-building, dialogue, reconciliation, societal change, and reflexivity.

2.1. Strategic Arts-based Peacebuilding

The concept of *strategic arts-based peacebuilding* is based on the work of scholars Michael Shank and Lisa Schirch⁵. Put simply, strategic arts-based peacebuilding engages artistic and peacebuilding professionals in using artistic products, practices, and mindsets in peacebuilding work. Strategic arts-based peacebuilding should be: 1) Theoretically grounded; 2) Coordinated and integrated with other peacebuilding efforts; and 3) Elicitive, adaptable, culturally responsive, and community-based. The following section briefly outline how a strategic-arts based peacebuilding approach can be used to address various dimensions of violence.

Personal Violence: Art can engage identity, voice, and therapeutic work. Practitioners can help participants use art to facilitate identity and emotional exploration as well as healing and coping with loss and trauma. In doing so, art can help promote individual agency, positive self-identification, and resilience.

Relational Violence: Art can promote interpersonal communication and community building work including inter and intra-group exchange, dialogue, and reconciliation. This work can help challenge stereotypes and strengthen inter and intra-communal culture.

Cultural and Structural Violence: Art can be used to address broader social change

⁴ Lederach, J. (2005). *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁵ Shank, M. and Schirch, L. (2008). Strategic Arts-Based Peacebuilding. *Peace and Change* 33(2), 217-243.

and advocacy work by using art as a catalyst for raising awareness and shifting social norms, practices, cultures, and structures.

Post-Structural Violence: Art can promote, critical reflection, accountability and mindfulness and support the exploration of peace-worker motivations, practice, and impact. Art practices can help promote peace worker well-being and illuminate and examine the risks, challenges, and the unintended violence of arts and peacebuilding work itself.

2.2. Challenges and Risks

Exploring the challenges and risks, as well as interrogating the assumptions and good intentions behind arts-based peacebuilding practices, was another reoccurring theme in the KOFF Master Class. Some of the key challenges we discussed included: 1) Finding, supporting, and integrating artistic expertise into existing complex peacebuilding practices; 2) Working with a relatively small research base (although it is growing); 3) Measuring the impact of art in a quantitative-focused and donor-driven field; and 4) Ethical complexities around the commodification and exploitation of art and artists.

These challenges are magnified by the risks of arts-based work. Put simply, good intentions in arts and peacebuilding work is not good enough. Arts-based work can be impactful because it is a powerful conduit for people to understand, make meaning, and express themselves. But the power of art can be dangerous, especially in precarious contexts that often surround conflict. Practitioners must be aware of the risks of arts-based practices including the potential for such practice to: 1) Re-traumatize individuals or communities; 2) Unintentionally worsen divisions between

or amongst people and groups; and 3) Endanger participants who use art to express themselves in contexts where doing so may have personal, relational, or communal repercussions. These risks illuminate some of the unintended violence, or post-structural violence, which can come from arts-based peacebuilding work. Concerns over such violence does not mean practitioners should never engage in arts-based peacebuilding. Rather, it means practitioners should be aware of the risks, seek to mitigate them, and always ensure their work is grounded in praxis that is critical, intentional, and well-planned. Further, individuals participating in such programs should be informed of the potential risks and be supported in exercising their agency accordingly.

In summary, the class outlined a conflict transformation approach to peacebuilding that seeks to move from violence(s) to peace(s) through a moral imagination framework. In doing so, the class highlighted the importance of creativity and the role of arts as a strategic peacebuilding practice. Strategic arts-based peacebuilding can be transformative in promoting peace at personal, relational, societal, and post-structural levels. But, as attention to post-structural violence illuminates, arts and peacebuilding work is challenging and requires taking risks and being accountable.

3. Spoken Word Poetry and Peacebuilding

Building upon this foundation, the KOFF Master Class focused on using spoken word poetry as a case study in strategic arts-based peacebuilding practice. Poetry is a creative and critical conduit for personal and communal expression.

Creating contexts where people can remember, tell, and envision their own past, present, and future taps into the moral imagination and can facilitate moments of transformation on personal, relational, cultural, and structural levels.

The class started this discussion by looking at the ancient and modern history of spoken word poetry. Spoken word poetry is simply poetry spoken aloud. But spoken word also stems from specific critical social and political traditions of promoting alternative narratives to dominant discourses. The class discussed how spoken word poetry compliments a creativity-driven moral imagination conflict transformation approach. Spoken word also aligns well with a strategic arts-based peacebuilding approach. Spoken word is elicitive and culturally responsive, can accompany and compliment other peacebuilding work, and is relatively low-resource. Lastly, research from a variety of education and community contexts⁶ indicates spoken word poetry education could support personal and relational peacebuilding, indirectly engage cultural and structural peacebuilding work, and provide a valuable post-structural peacebuilding tool for practitioners. Moving the discussion forward, the class explored two specific ways spoken word poetry could be used in peacebuilding practice: 1) Peace poetry; and 2) Poetry peace education.

3.1. Peace Poetry

⁶ The literature shows practitioners use spoken word poetry to promote and develop academic achievement (Raj Desai and Marsh, 2005), critical literacy (Fisher, 2005; Muhammad and Gonzales, 2016), critical consciousness (Raj Desai and Marsh, 2005; Stovall, 2006; Camangian, 2008), emotional intelligence and empathy (Levy, 2012; Levy and Keum, 2014), student voice (Raj Desai and

Peace poetry uses poetry as an advocacy and awareness raising approach. Peace poetry focuses on poetry as an artistic communication product that can be used to educate, promote alternative narratives, and contest cultural and structural violence. Peace poetry is a complimentary storytelling tool to support other data-driven analysis and efforts. It helps by amplifying the human condition and highlighting the impact of peacebuilding for the people they serve.

3.2. Poetry Peace Education

Poetry peace education uses poetry as an artistic product and practice to address personal and relational violence through educational programming. Spoken word poetry education has been shown to promote self-empowerment, voice, resilience, healing, dialogue, and community building. Poetry peace education takes this potential and applies and adapts it to peacebuilding contexts. Drawing on examples from my career as a poetry peace educator, the class explored case studies including teaching poetry as a means of non-violent resistance in Palestine, poetry workshops as cross-cultural communication with Indonesian youth, and various US-based poetry programs that worked with youth from marginalized communities.

3.3. Case Study: Poetry and Critical Masculinities

Building on my current research and practice at the University of Cambridge, the class went into detail discussing the

Marsh 2005; Camangian, 2008; Gulla, 2007; Xerri, 2017), identity exploration (Camangian, 2008; Levy, 2012; Fiore, 2015), community building (Fisher, 2005; Chepp, 2016), and performance, confidence, and public speaking (Smith and Kraynak, 2009; Muhammad and Gonzales, 2016; Xerri, 2017).

ways spoken word poetry can help engage young men in gender equality and violence prevention. Violence against women is a severe and urgent issue around the world. Women and gender non-conforming activists, practitioners, and scholars have been leading efforts to prevent and eliminate this violence for centuries. Unfortunately, many men have historically been silent and absent from these prevention efforts. Men's violence prevention work seeks to address this problem through engagement and education interventions directly targeted at men. Strategic arts-based peacebuilding practice can support these efforts. The class focused on how peace poetry and poetry peace education could address some of the personal and relational barriers to men's involvement including some men's lack of knowledge about, interest in, or willingness to address gender inequality and gender-based violence. The class discussed how integrating poetry into traditional men's violence prevention programs could help transform these problematic attitudes and behaviors.

Drawing examples from my research and professional practice the participants discussed ways to integrate spoken word poetry into men's violence prevention and engagement work. Spoken word poetry can help promote young men's critical consciousness by using poems as engaging and culturally-responsive learning texts. Spoken word poetry metaphor writing can be used as a creative-critical learning practice to help young men learn about complex and abstract concepts like masculinities, gender, violence, and peace. Poems can act as sensitizing experiences and poetry writing, listening, and sharing can promote

empathy and support men's emotional and identity development. Lastly, spoken word poetry education can help harness young men's courage and willingness to embrace vulnerability in speaking up about important social issues like gender equality and violence prevention. Poems can serve as inspirational examples of pro-social behavior and alternative masculinities.

These examples of spoken word poetry as a strategic peacebuilding practice are the tip of the iceberg and point towards the possibility of a larger creative strategy for engaging men. In the class we discussed adapting Lederach's four point moral imagination framework into a *moral imagination of masculinities* approach to support men in understanding: 1) The complex relational nature and construction of masculinities and gender-based violence; 2) The importance of moving beyond rigid gender binaries; 3) The value of creativity in catalyzing peaceful masculinities, and; 4) The importance of courage in standing up and speaking out against inequality and violence. This framework can act as a helpful guide and conceptual starting point for engaging men in these complex and critical issues.

3.4. Spoken Word Poetry Workshop

After a coffee break, the participants reconvened and put these ideas into action through a series of guided spoken word poetry activities. Talking about spoken word poetry is helpful and understanding the underlying theory behind peacebuilding work is necessary. But the best way to truly engage with this practice; *is to practice!* In under 90 minutes, participants played an interactive storytelling game, reflected on the power of stories and the importance of telling their own, walked through a series of

multi-step poetry writing workshops, crafted original works of poetry based on key moments from their lives, and shared their poems with the group.

As demonstrated in the workshop, spoken word poetry can be adapted to almost any learning context, employed with learners across various artistic, confidence, and language levels, and used as a means to promote intrapersonal reflection, interpersonal connection, and group dialogue and cohesion. Spoken word poetry can be taught in a step-by-step process-oriented manner that promotes accessibility, inclusivity, and strategic adaptability. You do not have to identify as 'a poet' to benefit from a spoken word poetry workshop. Considering the context of the swisspeace master class in Bern, the workshop was oriented towards using poetry to promote personal and professional reflection on the participant's lives and peacebuilding practice. The same workshops could be adapted and run with various groups of people in differing contexts to promote personal processing and healing, group dialogue and exchange, or resistance to dominant cultural norms, structures, and narratives.

4. Closing Reflections

The KOFF Master Class was an exchange of ideas, experiences, and ultimately, poetry. This opportunity to discuss arts-based peacebuilding leaves us with several questions and reflections related to the challenges and risks of arts and peacebuilding as well as an emergent opportunity for more collaborative, bottom-up peacebuilding practices.

Art is not good or bad. Art is a powerful product, process, and mindset that we can learn to cultivate and wield. In order to mitigate some of the risks identified in the

master class, scholars, practitioners, participants, and funders need to work together, rely upon 'do-no-harm' principles, practice culturally responsive and relevant programming, and make sure there is proper expertise, training, and support for facilitators and participants. It can be tempting to just sprinkle some art into programs. But such approaches often lack the requisite planning, expertise, and consideration of the risks and challenges to be successful. Arts will bring greater value to peacebuilding projects when they are integrated meaningfully rather than simply added on the side. Arts integration should be intentional, planned, resourced, monitored, and evaluated. In order to promote best-practices and collective learning in the field, practitioners, policymakers, donors, scholars, and the communities they serve should seek to facilitate more collaborations, professional networks, and cross-sector partnerships that bring arts and peace professionals together.

One of the most recurrent themes of the master class revolved around using the arts to promote peace worker wellness and address post-structural violence in the field and in our organizations. The arts, like poetic writing and sharing, can be an important and useful reflection, communication, and team-building practice. The arts can help us critically reflect upon key moments around what works, and importantly, what does not work. The arts are a bridge between the affect and effect of our work and present an opportunity to bring forward our own voices and the experiences that shape who we are as people and as practitioners. Engaging in this creative and critical self-reflection can help practitioners

and peacebuilding organizations do peace work more peacefully.

The arts, and spoken word poetry in particular, offer a powerful way to engage conflict transformation peacebuilding work. Lederach's moral imagination framework and strategic arts-based peacebuilding practice can help practitioners explore ways to meaningfully integrate arts into their programs. This approach to peacebuilding is elicitive, adaptable, and accessible to a wide range of contexts. Using poetry and the arts to critically engage men in conversations about gender equality and violence prevention is one such example that shows promise. An adapted *moral imagination of masculinities* is an example of how such work can be conceptually grounded and strategically implemented to engage with complex and challenging conflict contexts. But the true

potential in spoken word peacebuilding practice lies the broad power of storytelling and its connection to conflict and peace. Storytelling shares near unanimous importance and cultural relevance around the world. Dr. Sara Cobb, a conflict narrative specialist at George Mason University, writes about how stories are the 'architecture of our consciousness; they shape the way we think, speak, and act'. Accordingly, they play a large role in our conflicts as well as in our paths towards peace. Spoken word poetry harnesses the powerful role of storytelling and brings an artistic and creative imagination that allows us to dream, see, and embody paths towards peace.

swisspeace

swisspeace is a practice-oriented peace research institute. It analyses the causes of violent conflicts and develops strategies for their peaceful transformation. swisspeace aims to contribute to the improvement of conflict prevention and conflict transformation by producing innovative research, shaping discourses on international peace policy, developing and applying new peacebuilding tools and methodologies, supporting and advising other peace actors, as well as providing and facilitating spaces for analysis, discussion, critical reflection and learning.

swisspeace is an associated Institute of the University of Basel and member of the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences. Its most important partners and clients are the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation, international organizations, think tanks and NGOs.

The Swiss Platform for Peacebuilding (KOFF)

KOFF is a well-established platform for exchange, dialogue and network composed of around 50 civil society organizations and two state organizations engaged in the fields of peace, human rights and development cooperation. Its objective is to contribute to the reinforcement, the visibility and the relevance of Swiss peacebuilding across the spectrum from fragility to peace.

Critical Reflections

In its *critical reflection* series, swisspeace and guest speakers critically consider the topics addressed at KOFF roundtables with a view to summarising the main arguments put forward and carrying on the discussion in order to encourage further debate.