



“Key” informants and causal accounts of conflict and peace

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So-called “key” informants are often a central source of information in qualitative research on civil conflict, in particular when it comes to uncovering motivations for fighting or to stop fighting and causal accounts of war and peace. However, in an unruly post-conflict environment or a “no-war-no-peace” scenario, determining which informants are “key” is far from straightforward. In many cases, in particular in highly unstable environments, the choice of key informants is determined by access and expediency rather than systematic selection, with significant consequences for the validity of causal accounts. Based on field research in West Africa (Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), this paper is an attempt at a more systematic reflection on the notion of “key” informants and the challenges accounts by those informants pose for the analysis of the causes of war and peace. It will identify different types of key informants and examine the advantages and pitfalls of causal accounts provided by each type of key informant. It will discuss how to assess the validity of information about the causes of war and peace, how to deal with often conflicting key informant accounts as well as some ethical issues researchers may encounter when interviewing key informants.