

THE PERSPECTIVES OF RECONCILIATION AND HEALING AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN VUKOVAR (CROATIA)

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Abstract

We examined social psychological factors that may contribute to the restoration of the intergroup relationship between young ethnic Croats and Serbs in the city of Vukovar (Croatia), and the projects proposed by non-governmental organizations aimed at re-establishing inter-group relations. A number of in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of civic organizations in Vukovar. Findings illustrate that different strategies and activities are used by community organizations, involving a relatively small number of participants, who do not have a developmental plan in place to follow young people after the termination of a project. We feel that new and coherent strategies and facilities for youth work are urgently needed in the region to prevent deal with current trauma and to prevent future violence.

Introduction

Most of people in conflict areas found themselves trapped in inter-group conflict against their will. They go through the hell of the conflict for years (e.g., Northern Ireland, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina), and develop a psychological repertoire of beliefs, attitudes, and emotions about the causes of the conflict and its course. Inter-group conflicts deeply involve society members; many of them are victims and have lost some of family members, friends, or their properties, whereas others are perpetrators of wrong doings and have killed others or even committed atrocities. All these who survive inter-group conflict, must deal with psychological wounds, and they leave a legacy of polarization, anger, and hatred that are difficult to dissolve. Children and the youth living in post-conflict areas grow up in an environment marked by a culture of negative attitudes, prejudices, and hatred (e.g., Volkan, Ast, & Greer, 2002). Some young people have had little if any direct personal experience of the conflict, but almost all have had intimate knowledge of how their 'community', or older relatives, parents, grandparents, and other family members had in the past suffered and been affected. Young people face many problems, as reported in a survey conducted in 2005 by Dr. Nikola Drobnjak¹ (see also Stanivuk & Tauber, 2008). Many of them suffer depression, passivity, apathy, and

embedded drink culture and aggressive behavior. The periodic aggression associated either directly with traumatic stress or with its side effects (misuse of alcohol, drugs) contributes to incidents that may rip open old sores in this war-affected area and, thus, spark further tensions.

The question is how to get through and reach to the younger generations, and facilitate the process of reconciliation among them. This study aims to explore some socio-psychological factors in the process of reconciliation among young people in Vukovar (Croatia), and the role of civic organizations in promoting inter-group contact and dialogue.

The Process of Reconciliation in Post-conflict Areas

Reconciliation is denoted as a difficult, long and unpredictable one, involving various steps and stages. Nadler (2002) proposed the Need-Based Model and suggested the distinction between socio-emotional and instrumental reconciliation. Socio-emotional reconciliation seeks to remove the emotional and identity-related barriers to the end of conflict through the successful completion of an apology-forgiveness cycle among ordinary people, and not only by official declaration top-down. According to the author, there are two processes at the base of socio-emotional reconciliation: acknowledgment of the crimes by the perpetrators and members of the group in whose name the crimes were committed, and the granting of forgiveness by the victims.

Forgiveness is mentioned in the literature as an important factor that can help people to move towards socio-emotional reconciliation with the other group (Nadler, 2002; Staub & Pearlman, 2001). For the past 10 years, a robust body of empirical and theoretical literature has been devoted to forgiveness within interpersonal relationships. However, only a few studies have empirically examined forgiveness in intergroup settings. There has been no overall consensus on what constitutes forgiveness (Worthington, 2002). Multiple definitions have been proposed and it is beyond the scope of this report to suggest a new characterization of this concept. Broadly, forgiveness has been defined as an intra-individual, prosocial change toward a perceived transgressor that is situated within a specific interpersonal context (McCullough, 2001). Schwartz (1992), in his study of universal values, refers to forgiveness as the “willing to pardon others” (p. 62). Across many definitions of forgiveness (see Helb & Enright, 1993), it is commonly perceived as the release of anger (Davenport, 1991; Fitzgibbons, 1986), and giving up the right to revenge (Cloke, 1993).

Forgiveness can counter a preoccupation with the past and its pain by offering the affected groups an opportunity to confront those associated with the harm. In this sense, forgiveness can be experienced psychologically as an agency restoring mechanism for the victims. The recent national truth telling commissions are broadly aimed at restoring such agency. For example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa attempted to create a context for the victims of Apartheid to share the impact of their

suffering with the perpetrators, while the latter group could recognize the pain resulting from their deeds and apologies (Tutu, 1999). Forgiveness is found to be higher when the perpetrator offers an apology or shows remorse (Weiner, Graham, Peter & Zmuidinas, 1991).

In post-conflict situations people are captured in a stalemate position, and among factors that contribute to that we can mention victimhood (e.g., Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008). There is a prevalent and dominant perceptual pattern where people view their group as being the innocent victim and the rival group as the guilty perpetrator of wrongdoings. Such stereotypical perceptions influence negatively their propensity toward reconciliation and forgiveness. Croats in Vukovar want Serbs to acknowledge their suffering, to show some remorse for the past crimes committed in their name, and to help them reveal the truth about their missing family members. On the other side, the Serbs in Vukovar think that the violence directed against Croats during the war had nothing to do with them. They argue that they personally harmed no one, and see no reason to show remorse or apologize for crimes they never committed, much less seek forgiveness (Ajduković & Čorkalo Biruški, 2004). Furthermore, they assert that they were the victims of Croat aggression and violence directed against them.

The road to instrumental reconciliation is more focused on cooperation to achieve instrumental goals that are important for both parties. During these cooperative projects the parties can gradually learn to trust and accept each other. Programs in educational and community settings that are based on the ideas of the contact hypothesis (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) and the proposal that intergroup conflict can be reduced by cooperative efforts to obtain superordinate goals (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961) represent this approach.

Ajduković and Čorkalo Biruški (2004) suggest that social reconstruction must address at least four levels. At the individual level, there is the need for psychological interventions to help those most affected by the war and its aftermath cope with the trauma and psychological wounds. At the level of community (inter-personal level), there is the need to re-establish a network of social relationships and of trust. At the societal level (inter-group level), it is important to create initiatives that pursue common interests and co-operation between different social groups. Finally, at the state level, the rule of law must be established to protect the human rights of all individuals, and to prevent discrimination.

Tauber and Barath, most recently reported in Tauber and Stanivuk (2008), add the levels of the family, the group and the neighborhood between the individual and the community and further discuss regional and meta levels.

Tauber (2004), together with Barath, developed a model for operationalizing reconciliation and recovery which they called “Complex Rehabilitation”. This includes the following principles:

- Good assessment of the local situation. This assessment must involve the all groups of the population in the assessment process (“action research”). It also includes mental and physical health epidemiology.
- Training of local professionals and non-professionals and the population as a whole in psychotrauma relief assistance including peer-group counseling, non-violent conflict resolution, community organization, critical thinking, and self-reliance as well as in such essential skills such as communication, organizational management and coordination.
- Involvement of the population in making plans for the development of the community.
- Work on reconciliation at a speed appropriate to the situation and the people involved.
- Encouragement of the formation of local initiative groups and NGOs, and the formation of coalitions among these organizations.
- Continuing evaluation of the process as a whole and of each element of it.
- Continuing research into the problems and the solutions to them at a theoretical and practical level.

Young people feel psychological wounds for trauma they personally or their families experienced, and develop ‘bitterness’, distrust and suspicion of the ‘other’ community. According to socio-psychological theories, fundamental to the reconciliation is the restoration and rebuilding of social relationships. The psychological aspects of reconciliation have been explored mostly through the prism of theories on inter-group contact.

Reconciliation through Contact and Interaction

The Contact hypothesis suggests that intergroup contact, under appropriate conditions, might help to alleviate conflict between groups and reduce mutual prejudice, and change various aspects of intergroup perception such as increase in the perceived variability of the out-group (Allport, 1954; also see Pettigrew, 1998 for a review). Favorable conditions include cooperative contact between equal-status members of the two groups, in a situation that allows individuals to get to know each other on more than a superficial basis, and with the support of relevant social groups and institutions. The evidence in support of the hypothesis that contact under appropriate conditions can improve intergroup relations is rather extensive (Hewstone, 1996; Hewstone & Brown, 1986; Hewstone & Cairns, 2001; Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, Paolini, McLernon, Crisp, Niens, & Craig, 2005; Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns & Voci, 2004; Pettigrew, 1998) although far from conclusive (Abu-Nimer, 2004; Bekerman, 2009; Forbes, 1997; Hewstone & Brown, 1986; Hughes & Knox, 1997; Salomon, 2004).

The problem is that the optimal conditions (positive political climate, shared goals, perceived interdependence of outcomes, and so on) are rarely met – especially in the case of groups with a history of violence. The institutional support, which is key for the contact to have the intended positive effect, is particularly challenging (for young people

it is somewhat easier when incorporated into formal education). In addition, it has been suggested that even where there is apparent attitudinal change during cross-community projects, it may be short-lived or context-specific. The participants are likely to revert to their previous beliefs and behaviors as soon as they return to their own neighborhoods (Cairns & Cairns, 1995; Trew, 1989). Moreover, positive outcomes that result from the interaction do not guarantee a generalization of attitudes from individual members to the out-group as a whole (Hewstone & Brown, 1986; Scarberry, Ratcliff, Lord, Lanicek, & Desforges, 1997). Positive members of an out-group are likely to be subtyped, or cognitively processed as separate from the group as a whole, or treated as an individual with no connection to the overall group. However, it is worth noting that even one positive encounter with a member of the other group, although it is unlikely to change the stereotype of an out-group in general, can sometimes bring about change in perceived group variability, revealing that “they” are not “all alike” (Hamburger, 1994). Furthermore, direct and indirect cross-group friendship is thought to be one of the best predictors of better intergroup attitudes because of its impact in terms of reducing anxiety and threat (Hamburger & Hewstone, 1997; Pettigrew, 1998).

Research on the moderators and mediators of intergroup contact is growing fast (e.g., Eller & Abrams, 2003; Levin, van Laar, & Sidanius, 2003; Paolini et al., 2004; Paolini, Hewstone, Voci, Harwood, & Cairns, 2006; Tausch, Tam, Hewstone, Kenworthy, & Cairns, 2007), and has demonstrated that the outcome depends on a variety of situational and individual factors. Among most important we can mention specific emotions, such as intergroup anxiety (Paolini et al., 2004), empathy and self-disclosure (Turner, Hewstone, Voci, Paolini, & Christ, 2007). We propose that social anxiety and communication styles may be relevant factors in inter-group contact.

Communication is highly important for human beings and for every social interaction. There are differences in communication styles. We can communicate effectively or less effectively, we can use more constructive styles to deal with problems such as searching for a solution through dialogue, searching for a compromise, showing respect for other’s opinion, regulate emotions through communication, or on other side, we can use less constructive styles such as withdrawal, expressing in aggressive and offensive way, throwing insults. The anxiety/uncertainty management theory of effective communication (Gudykunst, 2005) assumes that the perception of effectiveness in communication with others reduces anxiety and eases communication. Thus, a great importance should be given to the building of self-confidence and social-skills. This study explores the role of non-governmental organizations in promoting social contact and communication among young people in Vukovar.

Reconciliation through Changing Social Categorizations

The concept of social identity is used broadly to refer to the psychological link between individuals and the social groups to which they belong. We all belong to several

social categories and therefore may have a series of social identifications, one or more of which is salient at any given time. Conflicts reinforce the individual's membership with their ethnic/religious groups and the in-group bias. In Vukovar, most of young people have strong ethnic/religious identities (Kosic, 2007). We argue that if ethnic group identification is the most important dimension of who a person is, and if stereotyping becomes the modus operandi for defining people, then the future of the country will exclude tolerance and integration, and a new generation of bigots will emerge. Thus, for the society, an important dilemma should be how to deal with salient ethnic/religious identity. We must note that, in the practice of one of the authors (Tauber), the problem of identity – and the reduction of identity to ethnic/religious identity – is a problem in virtually every client with whom he has worked since 1995.

In addition to contact theory, social psychology has proposed that intergroup conflict may be reduced – and reconciliation promoted – through changes in the structure of social categorization. An improvement intergroup relations therefore, it is suggested, requires reducing the salience of existing social categories (Brewer & Miller, 1984, 1988). This, it has been proposed, can occur through a number of mechanisms, among which: (a) de-categorization; (b) re-categorization; and (c) crossed categorization.

The *decategorization* model (Brewer & Miller, 1984) suggests minimizing the use of category labels, and instead interacting on an individual basis. It argues that, in order to achieve harmonious intergroup relations, group membership needs to be made *less* salient. This would allow those involved in the intergroup interaction to focus on personal information that individuates out-group members and makes them distinct from their group as a whole. Brewer and Miller and their colleagues have investigated their model in a series of experimental studies (Bettencourt, Brewer, Rogers-Croak, & Miller, 1992; Miller, Brewer, & Edwards, 1985). The studies confirmed the participants who adopted an interpersonal focus displayed significantly less in-group favoritism.

The *recategorization* model (e.g., Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993; Gaertner, Mann, Murrell & Dovidio, 1989; Gaertner, Mann, Dovidio, Murrell, & Pomare, 1990) argued that intergroup prejudice can be reduced if perceivers rejected the use of “us” and “them” in favor of a more inclusive, superordinate “we” category. Relationships that cut across ethnic, religious, or cultural lines help to combat the effects of narrow identity groups and harsh intolerance, and move individuals toward a wider sense of social identity. There is extensive support for the common in-group identity model from sophisticated laboratory experiments (Gaertner et al., 1989). It is also quite easy to find real life illustrations consistent with the common in-group identity model, such as different ethnic communities developing a common national identity that does not threaten the particularistic identity of either side (e.g, Belgium, Switzerland). As Brewer (1997) concluded, “De-categorization and re-categorization are inherently limited in their applicability when we move from the laboratory to real life situations in which social groups are very large and the context is highly politicized” (p. 203). For groups with a history of antagonism, and for minorities who are likely to resist assimilation into a

superordinate category, the prospect of superordinate group identity may constitute a threat (Brewer, 2000; Hornsey & Hogg, 1999).

The third model on crossed categorization proposed that intergroup contexts involve several categorizations, some of which coincide and some of which cut across each other (for a review see Crisp & Hewstone, 1999; Mullen, Migdal, & Hewstone, 2001). Thus, “others” may be out-group on one dimension but in-group on another. The results of experimental studies showed greatest bias against the double out-group, which is reduced when the target is a member of the in-group on one dimension and the out-group on the other (Migdal, Hewstone, & Mullen, 1998). Like the other interventions reviewed, there remain limitations to the use of crossed categorization. Because one categorization is normally dominant in cases of conflict, even crossing multiple alternative categories may not weaken discrimination (Hewstone, Islam, & Judd, 1993). There is also a need for further basic research exploring when and how various models of crossed categorization might operate (Crisp & Hewstone, 2001; Miller, Urban, & Vanman, 1998) and what type of change is brought about by this intervention.

Many ways have been proposed within the society to promote contacts and change social categorization among young people, and these concern above all the integrated education and cross-community programs. Concerning cross-community projects, Maoz (2009) proposed a distinction between several models: (a) the coexistence model; (b) the joint project model; (c) the confrontational group identity model; and (d) narrative story telling model. The Coexistence Model is based on de-categorization, and asks participants to forget group identities and concentrate on personal similarities. The Joint Project Model is based on re-categorization and crossed categorization, and involves participants in activities of common interest where they can develop a common identity. These two models do not request explicitly a direct discussion on the conflict, and do not guarantee the symmetric involvement of all participants. Instead, the Confrontational Model emphasizes inter-group interactions and discussion on the conflict. The problem is that direct confrontations can distress and alienate participants and cause negative attitudes. It is difficult to define what is recommendable or not to discuss. According to Maoz (2009), the Narrative Story Telling Model addresses both coexistence and confrontational models, and interpersonal and intergroup interactions. However, here the dilemma is what is the good narrative to create more positive contact and attitudes among people?

This study aims to explore the initiatives designed to promote socio-emotional and instrumental reconciliation among young people belonging to Croatian and Serbian communities in Vukovar. A description was made of the types of programs and interventions used by them in promoting intercommunity contact and to deal with salient social (ethnic and religious) identity. In addition, it analyzes the methods and models used to promote dialogue among young people, as well as themes of opportunities and barriers for dialogue, problems experienced by civic organizations in terms of funding, motivating young people to participate, and so on.

Conflict and Post-conflict Period in Vukovar

In 1991 conflict escalated in those areas of Croatia populated by large numbers of Serbs. The city of Vukovar was almost completely destroyed and the most of Croats from Vukovar were expelled and spent years as refugees in other parts of Croatia. Some estimates claim that about 2000 people were killed and over 500 ‘disappeared’ (Tanner, 1997). A large mass grave, holding about 200 bodies, all of Croat ethnicity, was found at the agricultural centre at the village of *Ovčara*, about 10 km east of the city. Since the end of the conflict in Croatia in 1995, many Croats who left the region in 1991 have returned, but challenge of building sustainable coexistence between Croats and Serbs in Vukovar proves to be hard to achieve. Conflict left a legacy of anger, bitterness, and hatred among the groups that is difficult to dissolve. Vukovar shares a common set of problems with most post-war contexts: trauma, feelings of grief and loss, collective memory, and the many other issues that make “social reconstruction” so difficult. Different interpretations of recent history in terms of who-did-what-to-whom-first also have exacerbated the estrangement.

The war changed Vukovar from a prosperous little town to a poor place where most people lack jobs and money, and hope. While official events sponsored by governmental bodies are almost always monocultural, the town itself still contains quite a few ethnicities, including, to our opinion (but no reliable figures are available since 2001) about equal numbers of Serbs and Croats. Before the war, the town's population was characterized by a high percentage of mixed marriages. It is estimated that at least 80% of the population had at least one first or second degree relative of another ethnicity. In Croatia before the conflict, Serbs and Croats lived in mixed communities, sharing buildings, schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods (Babić, 2002; Olsen, 1993). In rural areas, villages were more ethnically homogenous, and in these areas the interaction between Serbs and Croats was limited to the work and trade spheres. In the post-conflict context, the ethnically mixed neighborhoods have been preserved (or re-constructed), but there has been a polarization in many other institutions, such as schools, local radio stations, sports clubs, cultural associations. Children in schools and kindergartens have been separated into different buildings, shifts, or classes. Since 2005, high schools are more integrated in the sense that youth belonging to Croatian and Serbian ethnic groups go to the same schools, in same shifts, but in separate classes. Croat children are taught in Croatian, while Serb children learn in the Serbian language. It should be noted that the division of these two languages is more political than linguistic. They are certainly mutually understandable, the differences being similar to those between British and American English or between Dutch and Flemish. While the Cyrillic alphabet is used in Serbian, virtually all Serbs also understand the Latin alphabet.

There are no clear physical differences between Serbs and Croats, and the cultural differences between the ethnic Croats and the ethnic Serbs in Croatia have not been so large. Nowadays, the language provides the most important criteria for recognizing the

Other (Kardov, 2006). Although small differences existed between Croats and Serbs before the war, the exposure to different influences during the years of separation resulted in the almost complete erasure of the specific characteristics of the local dialect. Still, regardless of these influences, once sovereign, Croatia found it necessary to exaggerate the minor differences through changing some words.

The general atmosphere in Vukovar is less tense today, but still most of people belonging to opposite groups do not communicate with each other.

Methodology

The methodology involved in this study comprised semi-structured in-depth interviews with 13 representatives of civic organizations in Vukovar, active in the field of psycho-social support, and promotion of inter-group contacts and activities. The interviewees were asked to describe themes of areas and the activities in which their organizations have been involved, and strategies and methods of interventions. In addition, they were asked to concentrate on the assessment of the opportunities and barriers for peace education through community relations work in Vukovar. The face-to-face interviews lasted between 80 and 120 minutes, and took place in the individual's workplace or at a café bar. The interviews were conducted by mother tongue interviewer who is the first author of this paper in the period between June and December 2007. All interviews were taped in order to draw upon their experience, transcribed, and subject to a discourse analysis.

Analysis of interviews concentrates on discourses constructed around themes: (1) areas of intervention; (2) which socio-psychological strategies and methods are used in interventions; (3) what interventions they propose to help those affected by trauma; and (4) how do they deal with salient ethnic/religious identity.

Findings

Vukovar is a small city and it was not expected to find there many civic organizations. The voluntary sector was almost non-existent in the former Yugoslavia, and it has experienced substantial growth over the last years. Most non-governmental organizations have been created during the last few years upon the initiative of people active in NGOs in Western countries, who have been working on transferring their experiences, skills, attitudes and knowledge to local communities and mainstream partners. By now, virtually all organizations have left Vukovar-Sirmium County led by the assumption that mainstream organizations can now do the majority of the peace-building work. Few organizations managed to survive until now and they try, among

other objectives, to improve inter-group relations among young people. We first describe initiatives promoted to deal with psychological trauma at individual level.

Individual Psychological Precursors in the Process of Reconciliation among Young People in Vukovar: Healing of Psychological Trauma of the Civil War

Men, women and children in Vukovar have suffered the emotional wounds of war, and very many of these are as yet unhealed. We believe that the healing of the emotional wounds is a pre-requisite to reconciliation with others, and in this study we explored programs that have been focused so far on psychological healing of young people in Vukovar. Several interviewees pointed out that community revitalization and development starts with the healing of psychological problems (traumas) and re-establishment of individual self-confidence. However, a limited number of projects have been promoted with the aim of assisting people through the healing of emotional wounds and in preventing behavior disorders. Our interviewees suggested that reasons for that could be found in the cultural context, but also in the lack of financial and professional resources. In the context of the former Yugoslavia the usual way to deal with any kind of emotional problems was within the family, without asking for a help from psychological services. Psychotherapy has been culturally stigmatized, and it is thus rare that trauma victims will resort to it. Most of people do not regard themselves or their children as someone who 'has psychological problems', and they certainly do not wish to be labeled by anyone else as 'psychological problem'. Currently, however, the psychological pressure has reached such high levels that many go to psychiatrists despite the stigma in hope that they can solve easily their problems by taking prescribed drugs.

Children and young people in Vukovar lack support from family which has been traumatized as well, and the emotional well-being of children deteriorates when they realized that their parents cannot cope efficiently with the situation and their emotional wounds. In Vukovar, many of the fathers have been war veterans and are unable to leave behind the trauma of war. They have no one to talk to about their problems: either their families do not want to hear their war stories, or the veterans themselves do not want to bother their relatives. Several of them have serious problems with alcohol overuse or dependence, or even had suicide attempts and other severe psychological reactions. Most of people have experienced frequent shelling for 5 years, separation from loved ones, destruction of homes and other buildings, poverty, homelessness, loss and bereavement. Tauber (2004) describes people in Vukovar as characterized by feelings of hopelessness or depression, anxiety, intrusive memories, emotional instability, outbursts of anger, problems in interpersonal relations, addiction to alcohol and other substances, and high levels of family violence. Usually, traumatized people carry on with life in an attempt to function "normally", but they carry their tension just below the surface, not knowing how to solve it. They do not deal with painful feelings by talking about them within family,

with friends, or professionals. Many people lack skills of non-violent communication, they do not know how to argue in conflict situations without anger and passion, and most of times they react irrationally and emotionally. Many people have still weapons in their houses, left over from the war, and a small incident, such as the anniversary of a traumatic event can, and sometimes does, lead to a tragedy.

There are few opportunities for children and youth to find positive role models. According to our interviewees, school could be an important context, and while some teachers has been very active in peacemaking, there also have been cases of traumatized teachers transmitting their own problems to their students. Furthermore, the idea of mixing the expression of emotion with academic experience has not been a frequent practice in the schools in the former Yugoslavia. In the pre-war strictly hierarchical culture of schools, it was not considered appropriate for children to approach a teacher about non-academic issues, nor for pupils to share personal feelings in the classroom. It seems that it is not easy to change that system. Missing the education on good manners, politeness, and appropriate expression of personal feelings, young people cannot be fully empowered to build their self-esteem and self-confidence but rather it is creating a violent and aggressive youth without proper emotional and psychological stability.

Furthermore, there are few places for the children to go for help and few ways for them to express their problems and to deal with them. The fact is that the children and the youth that we do not deal with today will provide severe problems in the next generation or, rather, the next several generations and will certainly contribute to future problems within the society. There is still in Vukovar a serious shortage of practitioners for assisting victims of psychological trauma with their healing and recovery. The existing healthcare system cannot cope with the magnitude of the problem. There are only two psychiatrists in the public hospital in Vukovar, and as a result, many people affected by trauma remain outside the official structure of institutions, in particular those living in rural areas. Social workers and psychologists alike report that there is not enough time to properly deal with the large number of clients and that counseling often remains at the level of basic needs, rather than mental health promotion. There are shortcomings in counseling services, especially concerning suicide prevention (SOS lines, outreach centers), family violence and youth counseling services.²

Concerning the role of civic organizations in psychological healing, only two NGOs in Vukovar provide psychological counseling to children and families, through individual and group work, and through workshops for parents and teachers. These initiatives are focused on preventing behavioral disorders, reinforcing a sense of security, and improving communication skills. The problem is that it is difficult to find the funds to carry out such programs. A few more organizations have been established in Osijek, a city located twenty miles from Vukovar. Already in May 1992, Adam Curle, academic and an international peacemaker, together with Katerina Kruhonja and other local residents, founded The Centre for Peace, Human Rights and Non-Violence, an organization endeavoring through education and human rights action to generate a local

culture of nonviolence (Curle, 1999; Kruhonja, 2000). The Centre's activities were seen by many local Croatian officials as subversive, and Kruhonja, along with others, was threatened with death. Courageously ignoring the threats, they continued, and the Centre evolved from regular meetings in private homes into a structured organization. The work of the Centre now includes civil rights and peace education, legal and practical assistance, community mediation (particularly necessary to assist refugees returning to villages from which they had fled), facilitation of self-help groups for those who have suffered loss and bereavement, groups for parents, and psycho-social programs for women who have suffered domestic violence. Funding came sporadically to the Centre from many sources, including the European Union, and in 1998, Katerina Kruhonja and Vesna Terselic shared the Right Livelihood Foundation Award (generally known as the alternative Nobel Peace Prize). In 1996, together with the members of "Mir i dobro" (Peace and Good), they proposed a workshop to explore ways in which they could help the local children. In the summer of 1996, a group of around 25 local teachers, psychologists, and other local community members started to explore the psychological effects of the war on themselves and their community and to work on establishing an atmosphere of trust and non-judgmental acceptance, and acknowledging the anger and emotional pain. Successively, Curle's approach to the psychological aspects of conflict and peacemaking was implemented in a number of projects in Osijek, and some of the practitioners have done short-term projects in Vukovar. Groupwork in *Mir i dobro* has tried to encourage non-violence, and to find ways to enhance communication and awareness of a shared humanity, particularly amongst the children. Some groups included brainstorming and discussions, narrative, art, role-playing, poetry, creative writing, music, dance, and active listening and discussion in pairs or small groups to share experiences (Audergon & Arye, 2006). The facilitators have also provided occasional short lecture-style information to pull together and support the large group discussions and normalize the reported experiences of loss, bereavement and trauma. The groups have been multi-ethnic and gradually, when the group members began to speak of their experiences and feelings, they became more aware that those from both sides of the conflict shared similar experiences. Although *Mir i dobro* members no longer meet together as a large group, individual members are still active, and their work spread to neighboring areas.

Treatment for psychological trauma still available in Croatia tends to be based on one or more of the following broad approaches: medication, cognitive therapy, and some sort of counseling. With time, activities are changing from the relief of psychological trauma to projects focused on social problems, such as domestic violence projects, alcohol and drug abuse, and implementing peace-education activities in local schools. All of these except the drug-related approach are extremely limited because of lack of funds for personnel and project costs. There is continuous need for the training and preparation of community mental health workers to deal effectively with community problems, but also for implementing peace-education activities in local schools.

Our analysis of interviews showed that most projects working with young people have been focused on the improvement of the socio-economic situation through training and personal development, and on leisure activities. It is hypothesized that people, once they feel self-confident and start to resolve their problems, may realize that it is not necessary to perceive members of the out-group as a threat. One of the frequent comments made in relation to young people is that there are few resources available to them. Consequently young people start drinking and using (prescription) drugs, and engaging in anti-social behavior as a response to the boredom they feel. In effect, most of the conflicts among young people are related to problems caused by a relatively small number of individuals who were under the influence of alcohol. Some young men feel that violence is the norm for settling conflicts, and that that can play a role in maintaining their status and in building their tough reputation. A survey conducted in 2005 by Dr. Nikola Drobnjak,³ argued that young people have complained about the non-existence of policy towards youth at the local level “they do not have places to go out, nothing is offered to them, and nothing interests them”. NGOs in Vukovar are aware of the need to help young people to improve the quality of life through involvement for example in cultural and sport activities, but very few initiatives of this type have been promoted.

Some interviewees suggest that problems of children and youth in particular, need to be addressed through an integrated approach, which must be carried out at the levels of the individual, the family, the group, the community and the society. The elements of such a program must combined cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and social approaches, and must include at very least work on psychotrauma, non-violent conflict resolution, encouragement of critical thinking and skills of self-governance. It is suggested that this plan must involve a large degree of capacity building among the children and youth themselves through peer counseling programs, but also must include similar treatment and training of parents and teachers. Educational settings, be they formal or non-formal, could have great contributions.

Notably, there are no facilities available to children and young people where they can get anonymous advice and assistance with their problems, be they psychological problems, family problems, problems with such issues as drugs and sex, economic problems, and, in short, the normal problems of childhood and youth and, additionally, the problems related to the war and the post-war period.

Collective Socio-psychological Precursors in the Process of Reconciliation among Young People in Vukovar: Interpersonal and Inter-group Contact and Interaction

The community level of reconciliation is based on bringing about more positive and cooperative contact between members of previously hostile groups, and in attempts to change the structure of social categorizations. In Croatia in the post-conflict period a

certain number of non-governmental organizations have been created with objective of promoting peace education, reconciliation and dialogue among separated groups.

Reconciliation through Contact and Interaction

A variety of methodologies have been developed by NGOs in Vukovar with the aim of bringing people together. Inter-community groups have been organized around some volunteering and cultural activities (e.g., ecology, support for elderly people, artistic and cultural activities). However, NGOs are still a relatively recent phenomenon in the former Yugoslavia, and there is a lack of experience with civil society organizations and with voluntary activity in general. Volunteerism is not particularly valued in Croatia, and young (and older) people are unwilling to volunteer, despite high unemployment and lack of activities, as well as the opportunity to obtain new knowledge and skills through NGOs. Moreover, in the first post-war years, the representatives of local government as well as ordinary people have viewed NGOs with suspicion and lack of trust, as they have received money from unfamiliar sources from abroad.

Some NGOs have promoted projects within schools, but the project leaders argue that it is not easy to convince schools to collaborate; they have a heavy working schedule and it is not easy to get a free term. The principals are suspicious about the project proposals, especially when they do not know personally the leader of the project.

Several strategies have been used to bring young people together. Vukovar NGOs organize some short courses, or more recently they started to organize some residential programs, especially during summer time. For example, the project called 'Run Without Frontiers' (Footnote: It symbolically refers to the river Danube), involved a group of 10 young people from secondary schools in Vukovar, and 10 youth from Serbia, and brought them together to an ecological farm in a Croatian village near Vukovar. They were participating actively in the work of that farm, but also in a series of seminars on socio-psychological themes such as stereotypes and prejudice, non-violent resolution of conflicts, etc. Project leaders noted that "if you take children out from the local context – from Vukovar – then they are absolutely different. They do not care about divisions and borders; they do not need to think what would say their parents."

There are few possibilities to meet the youth from the other community outside of activities promoted by the project; it is difficult for these young people to visit each other at home. They and their parents are afraid that other members of the ethnic community would criticize them if they see them talking to somebody from the other group in public, or visit each other at home.

We argue that the quality of contact is determined by the quality of communication among people involved. People avoid contact with the other group and cross-community projects also because of social anxiety (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). Many interviewees in Vukovar argue that the youth lack self-confidence, and feel embarrassed in social interactions, and this is even more across ethnic lines. They have

negative expectations and fear that will not be able to cope effectively with the situation. There is an embarrassment and feeling that others hate them, and there is a strong belief that they cannot comprehend and trust each other. They feel that they cannot be accepted, and sometimes feel even threatened because cannot foresee reactions of the other side. People expect that their group will be blamed, which represents a threat to their social identity and consequently to their self-esteem, and thus they feel a strong need to defend in-group.

The anxiety/uncertainty management theory of effective communication (Gudykunst, 2005) assumes that the perception of effectiveness in communication with others reduces anxiety and eases communication. Thus, a great importance should be given to the building of self-confidence and social-skills, but few of projects in Vukovar have given an attention to that so far.

In conclusion, all initiatives that try to involve people from both ethnic groups with the hope that their contact will reduce negative stereotypes and promote dialogue and reconciliation have certain limitations. As mentioned, one of the most serious limitations is that participants in cooperative contact programs, even if they do come to view one or a small number of individuals from the other group more positively, do not necessarily generalize their positive attitudes and perceptions. Moreover, we do not know if contact *per se* produces positive attitudes toward others, or is fact that individuals who engage into contact already have had a certain level of positive attitudes toward relations with other group. It is possible that those individuals who become involved in community relations projects are those who would already uphold the values of a peaceful and equitable society. In addition, for most of these initiatives it is difficult to guarantee the symmetry in participation or equal number of participants from both communities. There is the lack of interest of young people for civic organizations and participation in their projects, and NGOs in Vukovar have still to learn how to teach children and young people to be social activists. Furthermore, we argue that a problem with this methodology is that it is rarely followed up, that is, while there is contact, there is seldom discussion of the points involved nor are there measures that would lead to getting to a deeper level. It is also seldom carried out for a sufficient period of time to accomplish a substantial portion of what we would like to happen.

Last but not least, it seems that though conditions such as common goals, cooperation, and equal status are recognised as valuable in practice, they are rarely given strategic priority and sometimes they are difficult to meet. The institutional support, which is key for the contact to have the intended positive effect, is particularly challenging. In our opinion, it would be somewhat easier if young people were incorporated into integrated schools, and if civic organisations were support to formal system of education. In summary, we can say that we have not seen evidence of positive effects of interventions using the contact hypothesis in the context of the situation in Vukovar for all of the reasons stated above.

Dealing with Salient Ethnic/Religious Identity: Social Recategorization

Some NGO leaders assume that if we let young people from opposing groups get to know each other through inter-group contact, they will discover that the person from the out-group is more similar to themselves than they originally thought, and that type of interactions would lead toward de-categorization of ethnic/religious identities.

Some cross-community projects are focused on re-categorization, or development of awareness of a common identity (e.g., youth identity, European identity). According to some scholars, culture events and activities (e.g., music, cinema, theatre, the visual arts, and so on) have great potential of attracting people irrespective of ethnic origin, and as such are considered an important tool in the process of reconciliation (Avruch, 1998; Cohen, 2005; Lederach, 1997). Most cultural events provide a non-competitive opportunity for interactive participation with members of 'other' community. Art and culture may be used as a good vehicle for the exploration of sensitive or difficult issues (e.g., history, identity, traditions, symbolism, divisions, etc.), and to tell something about the society. Both the arts and coexistence efforts are difficult to evaluate, yet the thousands of arts-related programmes in post-conflict regions and multiethnic societies illustrate the distinctive qualities of a range of approaches that use art to promote reconciliation (Cohen, 2003). Unfortunately, only few art project and music groups have been promoted bringing together young people belonging to 'opposite' communities. In general, we may conclude that in Vukovar, the use of arts and culture as a tool for community development, education and reconciliation has not been encouraged.

In Vukovar, sport has not been used until now as a mean to promote inter-group relations. No mixed teams have ever been formed in schools in occasions of sport events or competitions.

We think that the perspective of future integration with the EU can have an important psychosocial impact on the societies of the former Yugoslavia and can serve as an incentive for democratic reforms. The EU should contribute to the creation of favorable conditions to make young people resist nationalist rhetoric and roll-back strategies. Youth exchange programs and peace education can contribute to this, but have to be linked with a strategy for economic development. Providing young people with economic perspectives and giving them opportunities to travel and to work abroad means to support them to develop a positive vision for their lives and to exchange opinions with others. This would be an important investment which contributes to more open-minded views, and which would contribute to reconciliation and increase readiness to constructively deal with the past.

Some of the interviewees argued that there were no attempts to reinforce a regional identity. We suggest that a regional identity could reinforce a sense of unity among the two communities.

Our impression is that most of the programs were based on some sort of simplified and superficial coexistence models, in which some common interests were emphasized

(e.g., music, arts, dance). More programs are needed to encourage young people to enter into constructive inter-ethnic dialogue. There are no discussions on the themes of common interest and concern, such as school issues, local issues (e.g., youth facilities, quality education, exciting cultural initiatives, sport, music, the arts, better quality of life), and larger social issues (e.g., environmental issues, etc.), that may unite them and through which they might realize that they have a lot in common. We argue that through these discussions young people might discover that many of their beliefs, concerns, and experiences are similar. On the basis of their shared interest, common goals could be employed to create a condition for instrumental reconciliation.

One important barrier here has been the lack of official sanctioning for such projects and for co-existence between groups. In fact, the opposite has been the case – officials have encouraged strong mon-culturalism. The society in this region is one which follows authority, and we fear that, until official attitudes change, such efforts are doomed to failure.

A limited number of projects have dealt with sensitive issues important for socio-emotional reconciliation such as victimhood, collective accountability, forgiveness, and so on. We think that if young people can accept that dynamic of conflict was complicated, and to stop generalizing responsibility to the entire out-group and in parallel admit the responsibility of some members of the in-group, the process of reconciliation could start. Through contact and dialogue it becomes obvious that both sides have paid a price for the conflict and that in certain ways they are both victims. When people express their availability to understand that there are also in the opposite group people who were suffering, who did not want war but found themselves involved despite their unwillingness to hate others, it is going to be easier to enter into dialogue. There is a need for a dialogue through which those who were in the war could say to each other “we were fooled by our politicians, but we realized now that we were wrong.” However, there is a need for some kind of healing within themselves in order to make that kind of move. Moreover, direct confrontation on sensitive issues could also distress the participants, and reinforce negative attitudes. Few attempts have been done in Vukovar to promote the Narrative Model (Bar-On, 2002; 2006; 2008), in which participants from both groups engage in “story telling” of their personal and collective narratives, experiences and suffering in the conflict. It is based on the assumption that in order to reach reconciliation, groups in intractable conflicts must work through their pain and anger through story-telling, what could enable the members to express empathy and to increase the understanding toward the out-group, and consequently to facilitate the process of forgiveness and socio-emotional reconciliation. This approach requests a particular preparation of the project leaders. Bar-On (2006) discusses the question of the 'good enough story', a story that creates intergroup empathy and does not alienate or hurt the other participants. He raises the questions such as how do we (and should we) encourage the telling of such stories and discourage the telling of stories that can escalate intergroup hostilities and hurt out group members? We think that the risk for negative interaction

and verbal violence in this approach is increased if the project includes participants that initially hold extreme opinions against the other group.

Conclusions

This preliminary study has provided some insights into the nature of community relations work with young people in Vukovar.

Most of programs aimed at promoting reconciliation among young people in Vukovar are carried out by NGOs. A number of community projects have been undertaken in last years to promote inter-group dialogue among the youth. The enormous efforts which individuals and organizations put into these projects should be saluted and recognized.

NGOs working in Vukovar are mainly indigenous, the international community having slowly withdrawn over the past seven years. These NGOs are limited and they are frequently categorized along with everything else in the segregated community and are often referred to as a “Croatian” or “Serbian”. There are three exceptions to this, namely the Nansen Dialogue Centre, which is supported by the Norwegians, PRONI, which has been supported by Swedish and Dutch funding and only recently has become a local organization and the Coalition for Work with Psychotrauma and Peace, which is Dutch-registered with funds from a number of countries. All have resisted efforts at categorization. We stress, however, that these organizations are exceptions to the rule.

There are serious problems with the manner in which reconciliation has been approached by the local and international communities. Unfortunately, with very few exceptions, virtually all programs financed by governments and external funders last for a period of a maximum of two years. In light of the depth of the problems and the degree of complexity of the processes involved, these programs seem to be far too short to accomplish their goals. Furthermore, such programs are considered to be “peripheral”, that is, far less important than, say, programs of physical reconstruction or the programs involving the political process. The challenge of inter-community work is not only to create changes, but also to sustain them.

Inter-community programs in post-conflict areas should concern work on issues such as human rights, victimhood, reconciliation, and so on. However, it seems that NGOs in Vukovar look for guidance on how to deal with these sensitive issues, and how to bring groups of young people from different communities together to listen to each other about their personal experiences related to the conflict.

Priests and church ministers, who potentially have a lot of influence in the area, could give significant contribution in promoting forgiveness and reconciliation, but until now they showed little propensity towards helping to build inter-community dialogue among young people. Comparative teaching on religion is missing in schools in Croatia. It would be important to introduce that and to establish centers for inter-religious

dialogue. Furthermore, approaches to such religious leaders have met with much lip service and virtually no concrete action toward cooperation. Even offers to train religious leaders and lay members of congregations have been rejected without explanation.

Furthermore, we stress that the current use of ethnic division for political gain is seriously blocking efforts toward forgiveness and reconciliation.

Also other factors should not be neglected, such as political, economic, cultural, religious, and so on. There is a need to control media which continue their manipulation and presentation of a black and white story. Furthermore, formal schooling should also have a primary role in overcoming deeply entrenched historical viewpoints, transmitted by family and other social actors. For example, in Northern Ireland, a policy of mutual understanding tries to cope with the past through a common way of teaching history and through constructing a curriculum aimed at providing students with more balanced understanding of the subject. We hope, that the countries in the Balkans, or at least of the former Yugoslavia, may decide to take a similar approach in the interpretation of history (see, for example, the Joint History Project of the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, <http://www.cdsee.org/jhp/download_eng.html> accessed November 6, 2009). In addition, it would be of great relevance to develop programs for dealing with change of ideologies and moral values in Croatia and other parts of the former Yugoslavia, especially when young people are concerned. In addition, unfortunately peace education is not included in school curricula, and we hope that in near future there will be more availability to work in that direction.

Unfortunately, political forces have continued to emphasize the differences and have not contributed to reconciliation. Indeed, quite regularly, politicians of all ethnicities have used these differences to obtain votes and continue to do so. The international community has not yet seen fit to put pressure on the politicians to change these attitudes and to work for reconciliation.

Furthermore, although, at first, there was foreign aid for Vukovar and the region, the international community seemingly has lost interest in the area, especially in light of conflicts elsewhere in the world. Even though Croatia is a candidate state for the European Union, few resources are coming into the area, and these have been routed through governments rather than through non-governmental organizations, thus preserving the already existing relationships.

We think that Vukovar is an example of how *not* to achieve reconciliation among youth. While NGOs have made brave efforts at this work, they have been hampered by a lack of funding and, even more importantly, by a lack of commitment by government, the international community and religious bodies, which do not take such work seriously. We think that such attitudes do not contribute to the creation of a democratic society based on human principles and values of respect for cultural differences.

Notes

1. Some results are published in 'Vukovar Newspaper', June 17, 2005, by Željka Kraljic.
2. <<http://www.osce.org/croatia/>> accessed November 5, 2009 and <<http://www.cwwpp.org/Documents>> accessed November 5, 2009.
3. Some results are published in 'Vukovar Newspaper', June 17, 2005, by Željka Kraljic.

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