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Promoting Reconciliation Through Youth: Cross-Community Initiatives in Vukovar, Croatia

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This article provides a conceptual framework for mapping cross-community work and projects that have been designed in more recent years to assist the process of reconciliation among young people in the city of Vukovar (Croatia), and to analyze underlying socio-psychological assumptions of these interventions. The nature of initiatives is examined through the prism of some socio-psychological theories and, in particular, through Nadler and Shnabel's (2008) Need-Based Model, Allport's (1954) Contact Hypothesis, and Tajfel and Turner's (1986) Social Identity Theory. This study found that there are serious problems with the manner in which reconciliation has been approached by the local communities in Vukovar. 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.

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CONFLICT AND POST-CONFLICT PERIOD IN VUKOVAR

In mid-1991, conflicts escalated in areas of Croatia populated by large numbers of Serbs. Vukovar underwent a 3-month siege during which the

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city was almost completely destroyed. Data about the number of wounded and killed is unclear; some estimates claim that about 2,000 people were killed and over 500 “disappeared” (Tanner, 1997). A large mass grave holding about 200 bodies, all of Croat ethnicity, was found at *Ovčara*, about 10 km east of the city. There is some evidence from a number of highly reliable verbal sources that this was an act of revenge for atrocities committed by the Croat authorities before and during the siege. The city fell to Serbian forces on November 18, 1991, and Serbian authorities ruled the territory the self-declared *Republika Srpska Krajina* until November 1995 when, as part of the Dayton process, Eastern Slavonia was integrated into Croatia under the Erdut Agreement. Since then, between 60,000 and 80,000 persons of Croat ethnicity, who left the region in 1991, have returned. In this context, reintegration of the two communities was necessary, and both Serbs and the Croats were apprehensive of and avoided contact with each other.

The process of polarization unfolded as more and more Croats returned. Social life “doubled”; new shops and coffee bars, opened by Croats, attracted exclusively Croat customers. Parallel institutions, such as local radio stations, sports clubs, and citizens’ associations, were created. Children in schools and kindergartens are separated into different buildings or shifts. Croat children are taught in Croatian, whereas Serb children learn in the Serbian language—the language division being more political than linguistic. It seems there has been little propensity toward contact and socializing with the other ethnic group. However, Čorkalo Biruški and Ajduković (2008) found in a comparative study that the attitudes among young people and their parents toward social inter-group integration and tolerance were more positive in 2007 than in 2001.

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. Diverging interests, social positions, and interpretations of recent history in terms of who-did-what-to-whom-first also have exacerbated the estrangement.

Although official events sponsored by governmental bodies are almost always monocultural, the town itself still contains quite a few ethnicities, including (although no reliable figures are available since before the War) about equal numbers of Serbs and Croats. Before the war, the town’s population was characterized by a high percentage of mixed marriages. Serbs and Croats lived in mixed communities, sharing buildings, schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods (Babić, 2002; Kay & Olsen, 1993). In rural areas, villages were more ethnically homogenous, and interaction between Serbs and Croats was limited to the work and trade spheres. In the post-conflict context, the ethnically mixed neighborhoods in Vukovar have been

preserved (or reconstructed), but it is a socially polarized environment in which crossing the line to socialize with the other ethnic group is not encouraged.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND INTER-COMMUNITY CONTACT

Children and youth living in post-conflict areas grow up in an environment marked by a culture of violence. They are subject to attitudes and prejudices along the ethnic lines of those who should be serving as positive role models, all of whom are filling them with hatred. There are few opportunities for young people to find other positive role models. Some young people were small children when the conflict started, but they all have knowledge of how their community or relatives, parents, grandparents, and other family members have suffered and been affected during the conflict. For some, these narratives lead to bitterness, distrust, and suspicion of the other community.

Besides being victims, young people are often also perpetrators of the violence. There are few resources available to the youth and, consequently, most of them spend their free time watching TV programs or drinking in nightclubs. It seems that most disorders are related to problems caused by a relatively small number of young people, often under the influence of alcohol.

Nevertheless, although there may exist a relatively pessimistic attitude toward the ability to build bridges among the adult population, children and young people are often regarded by scholars as more open to building positive relationships. Perhaps because they are seen as holding the key to the future, some of the most sustained attempts at community relations work have been aimed at this age group. Today's youth are tomorrow's adult citizens and leaders, and it is of crucial importance to study how to reach the younger generations and facilitate the process of reconciliation among them.

THE PROCESS OF RECONCILIATION IN POST-CONFLICT AREAS 95

Reconciliation is a complex term, and there is little agreement on its definition. According to psychological theories, the essence of the reconciliation process consists of changes in motivations, goals, beliefs, attitudes, emotions, and patterns of behavior that have been part of society for years (e.g., Lederach, 1997). It is an over-arching process that includes the search for truth, justice, forgiveness, healing, and so on (e.g., Staub & Pearlman,

2001; Worthington, 2002). It is necessarily a long-term process that consists of a multitude of initiatives and stages, where progress is an accumulation of small steps addressed at the individual–interpersonal, local, societal, and state levels. 105

Nadler and Shnabel (2008) defined the process of inter-group reconciliation as “removing conflict-related emotional barriers such as a feeling of victimhood” (p. 38) and collective guilt (see Branscombe & Miron, 2004; Leach, Snider, & Iyer, 2002; Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008; Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2004). In post-conflict situations, people are caught in a stalemate, and they perceive their group as being the innocent victim and the rival group as an absolutely guilty perpetrator of wrongdoings. Scholars who have analyzed the role of emotions in international conflicts suggest that a major obstacle to reconciliation is victims’ feelings of humiliation and resentment (Lindner, 2006; Scheff, 1994). On the other hand, members of the group in whose name the crimes were committed need to restore the feeling that they are accepted by others. Perpetrators can ameliorate the threat to their identity as moral actors by denying the painful consequences of their actions and their responsibility for having caused them (Schonbach, 1990). They can distance themselves from the pain and suffering of the adversary, which constitutes a barrier to reconciliation. What may encourage readiness for reconciliation is the willingness to accept the responsibility, show empathy, and offer apologies. 110 115 120

Croats in Vukovar want Serbs to acknowledge their suffering, to show some remorse for the past crimes committed in their name, and to help uncover the truth about their missing family members. On other side, Serbs in Vukovar think that the violence directed against Croats during the war has nothing to do with them. They argue that they personally harmed nobody, and see no reason to show remorse or apologize for crimes (Ajduković & Čorkalo Biruški, 2004). Many Serbs see themselves as victims of crackdowns, dismissals from work, arrests, and physical abuse perpetrated by Croats immediately before the war or during the siege. 125 130

Nadler and Shnabel (2008) proposed a Need-Based Model, suggesting a distinction between socio-emotional and instrumental reconciliation. Socio-emotional reconciliation seeks to remove the emotional and identity-related barriers of victimhood and guilt through the successful completion of an apology–forgiveness cycle not only top-down by official declaration, but among ordinary people as well. There are two processes at the base of socio-emotional reconciliation: acknowledgment of and apology for past wrongdoings by the perpetrator and members of the group in whose name the crimes were committed. When the perpetrator admits responsibility and apologizes for past wrongdoings, the victim is given the power to grant or withhold forgiveness (Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991). 135 140

The road to instrumental reconciliation is more focused on social contact and cooperation to achieve instrumental goals important for both parties (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008). Programs in educational and community settings that are based on the ideas of the Contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1954), and the proposal that inter-group conflict can be reduced by cooperative efforts to obtain superordinate goals (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961) represent this approach. The argument is that contact, under appropriate conditions, may lead to improved communication and better understanding between groups and, consequently, to greater cooperation and coexistence at the individual and group level. The evidence in support of this hypothesis is rather extensive (for a review, see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), although far from conclusive (Bekerman, 2002; Forbes, 1997; Maoz, 2004; Salomon, 2004; Suleiman, 2004).

The success of socio-emotional reconciliation processes depends on the existence of trust between the two adversaries (Nadler & Liviatan, 2006). This suggests that the process of socio-emotional reconciliation needs to be viewed as a two-stage process. Only after efforts of instrumental reconciliation secure a basic level of trust can processes of socio-emotional reconciliation be implemented to move out from the cycle of blame and counterblame (Nadler, 2002).

Conflicts reinforce people's membership in their ethnic or religious groups and promote ingroup bias. Brewer and Miller (1984) suggested that improvement of inter-group relationships requires reducing the salience of existing ethnic and religious identities. Three relevant proposals for ways to deal with salient ethnic and religious identities are (a) decategorization, (b) recategorization, and (c) crossed categorization. The decategorization model (Brewer & Miller, 1984) suggests minimizing the use of category labels and, instead, interacting on an individual basis. To achieve harmonious inter-group relationships, group membership needs to be made *less* salient. The recategorization model (e.g., Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993) argued that inter-group prejudice can be reduced if perceivers reject the use of "us" and "them" in favor of a more inclusive, superordinate "we" category. The crossed categorization model proposes that most realistic inter-group contexts involve several categorizations, some of which coincide and some of which cut across each other. Thus, "others" may be outgroup on one dimension but ingroup on another.

From a combination of the Need-Based and Social Identity models, Maoz (2004) identified two main approaches used in programs organized to promote reconciliation. On the one hand, the coexistence model emphasizes the commonalities and the similarities between the groups and seeks to promote aspirations toward a common goal. On the other hand, the confrontational model emphasizes the direct confrontation and discussion of

sensitive issues. A third model, the mixed model, combines elements of the two main approaches. The story-telling exchange (Bar-On & Kassem, 2004; Salomon, 2004) represents this category.

This study aims to explore the role of civic organizations and projects that have been designed in recent years to assist socio-emotional and instrumental reconciliation among young people in Vukovar. We describe some typical programs and interventions, analyze the processes and psychological mechanisms used, and discuss the success and difficulties that emerged. Most of the programs try to promote instrumental reconciliation and use the coexistence model, due primarily to the fact that socio-emotional reconciliation requires confrontation on difficult emotional issues and requires a certain preparation of the participants and expertise among program leaders. Last, this study assesses the sustainability, strength, weakness, opportunities, and barriers for peace education through community relations work in this post-conflict context.

METHOD

This study comprised in-depth interviews with 13 local administrators (7 women and 6 men) from 13 different programs initiated in Vukovar to promote reconciliation. They all have high levels of education (at least an undergraduate degree). Eleven of them are leaders who dedicate themselves full time to activities in their organization, and the other 2 are employed in other qualified jobs (1 physician and 1 journalist). We selected organizations in Vukovar that are active in promoting inter-cultural dialogue among young people.

The interviews followed a loosely structured scheme around a set of arguments; the wording of the questions and their sequence followed the flow of the interview itself and not some predefined order. The interviewees were asked to describe themes of the areas and activities in which their organization has been involved, and socio-psychological strategies and methods of interventions. In addition, interviewees were asked to concentrate on the assessment of the sustainability, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and barriers for contact and dialogue between the young people belonging to Croatian and Serbian communities in Vukovar. Last, but not least, they discussed problems experienced by civic organizations in terms of funding and collaboration with other governmental and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). These general themes were developed into a set of more specific questions designed to help the interviewer to start an interview or, when necessary, to bring an interviewee back on topic. Examples of these questions are as follows: I would be grateful if you could first briefly describe

the areas and the activities in which your organization is involved? Which projects have been implemented by your association? Can you explain in detail how youth are engaged in your projects and activities? Can you discuss the factors that have supported or discouraged reconciliation among young people? 225

The face-to-face interviews lasted between 80 min and 120 min, and took place in the individual's workplace or at a local cafe. The interviews were conducted between June and December 2007 in the interviewees' mother tongue by the interviewer, Ankica Kosic. All interviews were taped, transcribed, and subject to a discourse analysis, which was constructed around the following themes: (a) their perception of opportunities to promote instrumental and socio-emotive reconciliation among the youth in Vukovar, (b) their view on reasons why the successes and difficulties occurred, and (c) their perception on what would have to happen for reconciliation programs to really be successful in the context of Vukovar. 230 235

FINDINGS 240

Promoting Reconciliation Through Inter-Group Contact

Most of the NGOs in Vukovar-Sirmium County try to involve people from both ethnic groups, with the hope that their contact will reduce negative stereotypes and promote dialogue and reconciliation.

The European House Vukovar (*Europski Dom Vukovar*) was established in 2000, and started more recently to organize some residential projects, especially during the summer. For example, the project called, "Run Without Frontiers,"¹ involved a group of 10 young people from secondary schools in Vukovar, and 10 youth from Serbia, and brought them together on an ecological farm in a Croatian village near Vukovar. They actively participated in the work of that farm, but also in a series of seminars on socio-psychological themes such as stereotypes and prejudice, nonviolent resolution of conflicts, and so on. 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 their parents would say." 245 250 255

Some other methodologies have been developed by NGOs in Vukovar with the aim of bringing young people together. These programs involve organizing some creative activities and artistic expressions (e.g., painting and dance), computer courses, foreign language courses, initiatives to 260

¹It symbolically refers to the river Danube.

support to elderly people, ecology, and so on. Participation is voluntary, programs usually involve small number of participants, and it is not easy to achieve a balance between the number of Croats and Serbs.

The quality of contact is determined by the quality of communication among people involved. Several interviewees in Vukovar noted that, regardless of background, many youth lack self-confidence and feel embarrassed in social interactions with whomever they talk. Youth with a low perceived effectiveness in communication may avoid contact with others, especially with those belonging to the other community. Thus, great importance should be given to the building of self-confidence and social skills. Unfortunately, few projects focused on improving knowledge about conflict transformation and communication skills among children and young people. 265 270

Our impression is that most of the programs were based on simplified and superficial coexistence models in which some common interests were emphasized (e.g., music, arts, and dance). There were no discussions on themes of common interest that may unite them, such as school issues, local issues (e.g., youth facilities), and larger social issues (e.g., sports, music, the arts, environmental issues, etc.). We argue that through such 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. 275 280

Some NGOs have promoted projects within schools, but apparently it is not easy to convince schools to collaborate; they have a heavy working schedule, and it is not easy to find a free period. The principals are suspicious about the project proposals, especially when they do not personally know the leader of the project. 285

Promoting Contact Through Leisure Activities

According to some scholars, cultural events and activities (e.g., music, cinema, theatre, the visual arts, etc.) have great potential of attracting people irrespective of ethnic origin and, as such, are considered an important tool in the process of reconciliation (e.g., Avruch, 1998; Cohen, 2005; Lederach, 1997). Most cultural events provide a non-competitive opportunity for interactive participation with members of the "other" community. Art and culture may be useful vehicles for the exploration of sensitive or difficult issues. 290 295

NGOs in Vukovar are aware of the need to help young people improve their quality of life through involvement (e.g., in cultural and sport activities), but very few initiatives have been promoted because of the difficulty in securing funds to organize these programs. Most young people spend their free time in cafe bars and nightclubs, and Croats and Serbs still go 300

Q2 to separate places. More recently, the Centre for Social Education (PRONI) has promoted the development of a network of Youth Clubs Throughout Croatia. To date, Youth Clubs Throughout Croatia has attracted more than 1,300 regular members, and is active in promoting various cultural initiatives such as concerts, dances, informal education, debates, and sports. However, the Vukovar Youth Club organizes very few activities; and, once again, a limited number of people are involved in these initiatives. Another NGO (The Youth Peace Group Danube) tries to bring young people together around so-called alternative culture. Leaders of this NGO argue that alternative culture can create an alternative identity, and can help people belonging to different national and ethnic groups to get together; but again, a limited number of people have been involved.

Group divisions in Vukovar are also reflected in the sporting domain. Sports can provide a great opportunity for young people to meet others from a different community. Here, mixed teams could be formed as a way to recategorize identities and promote dialogue among young people. In Vukovar, sport has not been used, to date, as a means to promote inter-group relationships. No mixed teams have ever been formed in schools in occasions of sport events or competitions.

We conclude, therefore, that the use of sports, arts, and popular culture in Vukovar as tools for community development, education, and reconciliation has never been encouraged.

Promoting Reconciliation Through Improvement of the Socioeconomic Situation

Our analysis of interviews showed that a major portion of the projects working with young people focused on the improvement of their socioeconomic situation through education and training. The war changed Vukovar from a prosperous town to a place where most people lack jobs and money—and hope. One NGO (PRONI) annually promotes projects focused on helping youth through education to find a job, or to start a business. Projects vary greatly in terms of number of the youth involved, but most operate within a range of 10 to 20 people. Individual empowerment is perceived as a key aspect of their work, and as an important condition for reducing negative inter-group attitudes. They presume that once people feel self-confident and start to resolve their socioeconomic problems, they may realize that it is not necessary to perceive members of the outgroup as a threat. In addition, these projects could also be seen as an opportunity to meet and socialize with people from the other group, but usually it is difficult to achieve a balance between the number of Croats and Serbs in such activities.

Some Additional Reflections on the Successes and Difficulties of the Programs Proposed by NGOs in Vukovar

This study provides some insights into the nature of community relations work with young people in Vukovar, and tries to give some suggestions on areas where future work is still needed. Several programs were undertaken with the aim of bringing people together in the hope that contact would reduce negative stereotypes and promote dialogue and reconciliation. 345

Project leaders are aware of most of the principal concerns discussed in the literature on contact initiatives. For example, it is difficult to say if contact *per se* produces positive attitudes toward others, or if individuals who engage in contact already uphold the values of a peaceful and equitable society. Another concern deals with the problem of how to attract reluctant individuals and those who perpetrate sectarianism into cross-community contact groups. 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 (Hewstone & Brown, 1986). This is critical in Vukovar because there are so few possibilities to meet youth from the other community outside of activities promoted by the projects. 350 355 360

Virtually all programs financed by governments and external funders last for a maximum of 2 years. In light of the depth of the problems and the degree of complexity of the processes involved, these programs seem far too brief to accomplish their goals. In addition, a problem with this process is that it is rarely followed up—that is, although there is contact, there is seldom discussion of the points involved or measures that would lead to involvement at a deeper level. 365

A limited number of projects have dealt with sensitive issues important for socio-emotional reconciliation such as victimhood, collective accountability and guilt, forgiveness, and human rights. We think that if young people can accept that the dynamics of conflict are complicated, and stop generalizing responsibility to the entire outgroup while at the same time admitting the responsibility of some members of the ingroup, the process of reconciliation could start. Furthermore, it is possible that a regional identity could reinforce a sense of unity among the two communities, but we found no attempts to reinforce that type of common identity. There is a need for projects that would promote a dialogue among young people through which they might realize that they have a lot in common, such as interests in economic development in their region, protection and improvement of the environment, quality education, improved job opportunities, problems of corruption, more independent media, exciting cultural initiatives, and a better quality of life. 370 375 380

There is also a need for developing additional programs to deal with trauma on an individual level. Psychologists need to play a more active role, but their presence has been scarce in Vukovar.

We think that the prospect of future integration with the European Union could have an important psychosocial impact on the respective groups and serve as an incentive for democratic reforms. Youth exchange programs and peace education can contribute to this, but they have to be linked with a strategy for economic development. Youth mobility (one of the main goals of the Bologna Declaration, as a part of the process of integration into the programs of the European Union) should be promoted through a wider exchange of students. The interviewees emphasized that young people could benefit from contact with a multicultural environment in the European Union and other parts of the world. It may open their minds to the fact that there is a world beyond their city and country, and that prejudiced views need to be challenged and changed. Unfortunately, due to poor socioeconomic standards in the region, most young people do not have the opportunity for educational, cultural, and tourist mobility outside the area.

Unfortunately, there is the lack of a long-term perspective on the situation in Vukovar and eastern Croatia, in general. No one has taken leadership, and no one has been willing to accept leadership. In fact, local authorities, usually backed by their political party leaders, have tended to obstruct any resolution of these problems. They are perceived as having a stake in maintaining the *status quo*, and even in furthering segregation.

We think that Vukovar is an example of how *not* to achieve reconciliation among youth. Although NGOs have made brave efforts, they have been hampered by a lack of funding and, even more important, by a lack of commitment by the government and the international community.

Some Problems with the Methodology

There are a number of methodological problems for research work in eastern Croatia that we have encountered over the years:

- Suspicion: it is quite difficult to get people to speak, as they are uncertain how the data will be used and to whom the contents of their conversation will be given. Thus, unless the interviewee knows the interviewer well or has some external source for verifying the *bona fides* of the interviewer, there may be severe problems in obtaining data at all and certainly in obtaining accurate data.
- Apathy and excessive research: many people simply will not speak to researchers. Their experience is that they speak to many people without ever hearing from them again and without any results for them personally.

Both of the problems lead to a sample of participants that can be highly skewed. We question whether these problems also apply to other conflict and post-conflict regions and whether these biases have been ignored in the past.

CONCLUSION

The overall picture of NGOs' initiatives is somewhat fragmented, reflecting the development of disparate projects, relatively isolated from one another. We recommend that future projects be guided not only by an analysis of possibilities for obtaining funding but, above all, by the needs in the societal context. Interviewees perceived that the increase in short-term funding over the past 10 years has fostered a spirit of competition into youth work practice. They underlined that funding application processes are often cumbersome and time consuming. Thus, one of the recommendations would be to make the application procedure less complicated. Furthermore, cooperation among governmental organizations and NGOs, and better communication between researchers and policy actors, needs to be encouraged.

A culture of involvement in socially useful activities should be promoted among young people. NGOs should help them to develop a positive identity and to care about others in a way that goes beyond the boundaries of the group. More attention should be given to educating them in activities directed toward acquiring healthy habits and lifestyles and preventing addiction.

Above all, there is a need in post-conflict areas to promote education on individual and group processes that cause biased perceptions and conflicts and to develop a culture of communication among the youth that would change the attitudes within their communities and remove the need to use violence to resolve conflict at interpersonal and inter-group levels.

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