

## Chapter 8

# From Collective Victimhood to Social Reconciliation: Outlining a Conceptual Framework

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Various explanations can be given for the eruption of the violent conflicts in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. In this chapter, we argue that from a socio-psychological perspective, many of these forces are based on a renewal of national identities, including a redefinition of national goals and collective images, which drew upon old collective memories and new threats. The process of regeneration of national identities was accompanied by their transformation from inclusive to exclusive identities. An *inclusive identity* has open boundaries and allows for easy departure from and entry into the group. A group with an inclusive identity can accommodate neighbouring identities, integrate them and live with them in cooperation and peace. In contrast, an *exclusive identity* elevates the own group above others, sharpens the differentiation between the in-groups and out-groups, and prevents people from crossing inter-group boundaries. In extreme cases, these processes are accompanied by an intense focus on the own group and its narrative. That is, people glorify their own group while delegitimizing other groups and viewing them as threats to the fulfilment of their own identity.

The inclusiveness and exclusiveness of a society is determined by the contents that accompany the meaning of collective identity (Ashmore et al. 2004; David and Bar-Tal 2009). These contents address the particular meaning of membership in the collective. Although some content categories, such as territory, symbols or collective memory, appear in many groups, the endowed meanings of these categories differ from one another and thus furnish the boundaries that differentiate nations from one another. Moreover, these contents have a determinative effect on the relationships that the collectives maintain with other groups (Andrews 2007). Some societies that intend to start a conflict imbue the contents of their collective identities with a deep sense of collective victimhood while delegitimizing their rivals. These identities are constructed within the framework of new expanding national goals.

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In this chapter, we concentrate on these contents that, in our view, play a major role in different conflicts. Specifically, we will focus on the vicious and violent conflict that erupted in Yugoslavia during the early 1990s. We propose that in the 1980s, especially with the ascendance of Milosevic in Serbia and Tudjman in Croatia, various political and societal changes occurred that had important effects not only on the collective identity of Serbs but also on the collective identities of the other ethnic groups in Yugoslavia. These changes laid a new emphasis on Serbian nationalism, collective memory and inter-group relations. Of special importance to the reconstruction of the more exclusive Serbian national identity was the theme of *collective victimhood*, which led to the emergence of new societal goals. In turn, both the theme of victimhood and the new goals were related to the delegitimization of other ethnic groups. These themes raised the threat perception, catalysing the eruption of violence. We will describe first how the redefinition of collective identity based on the contents of collective victimhood and delegitimization played a role in mobilising the rival forces. We will then describe their impacts during the war. Finally, we will outline a road to reconciliation that demands the elimination of these destructive contents. Reconciliation is necessary to the establishment of lasting and stable peaceful relations between the former rivals.

## **Mobilisation: Invoking the Past to Control the Present**

The reconstruction of collective identity in Serbia led to the emergence of the threat perception. The perceived threat touched upon tangible and symbolic needs and goals (Stephan and Stephan 2000). These threats included threats to physical existence, resources, territory, identity, esteem, freedom, prestige and equality. The perceived threat provided the basis for the development of conflict-related goals (Cohen 1979). The goals provided the visions for each group in Yugoslavia and, at the same time, stigmatised a rival group as an obstacle to the achievement of these goals.

These processes served as tools for mobilising the masses. Mobilisation is the deliberate recruitment of a society's members to engage in conflict. Mobilisation can be seen as a type of persuasion process that aims to convince group members to join the conflict (Bar-Tal 2013). A basic precondition for mobilisation is that the individuals must greatly identify with their group and the proposed goals and accept the contents of the reconstructed collective identity of the ethnic group (Simon and Klandermans 2001). Moreover, individuals must not only identify with the group and accept the conflict-related goals but also approve of the actions that the group takes and be willing to perform some type of action on behalf of the group (Klandermans 1988). This process is executed through messages composed of beliefs that are relevant, are concrete, appeal to identity, are threatening and arouse strong emotions. Of special importance are the messages that attribute hostile motives and intentions to the other group (i.e., delegitimization) (Elcheroth and Spini 2011). Eventually, participation is needed because without the group members' participation, total devotion and readiness to sacrifice their lives, conflicts cannot evolve and gain strength. The

group members must express their support in various ways and join the activities, including military activities, needed to escalate the conflict and keep it alive (Staub and Bar-Tal 2003).

During the Tito era in Yugoslavia, the different ethnic and national groups successfully maintained generally cooperative relations because of force and/or reason. Some authors have argued that during this period, the divisive collective memories, the emotions and the myths that energise nations were in a dormant state or “kept on hold” (e.g., Kaplan 1994). In contrast, Sekulic et al. (2006) have shown that there were no clear clues that could have indicated the possible eruption of the vicious and violent conflict. There was no clear level of intolerance and hatred or behavioural evidence of tension or confrontations. However, the researchers also noted that “the absence of open suppression of ethnic hatred does not contradict the existence of collective memory as potential source of mobilization. . . . To access these collective memories they must be activated and directed to the ethno-political goals, in most cases by extremist leaders or chauvinist elites who use their power to mobilize masses.” (p. 801). We suggest that the reconstruction of the Serbian collective identity with the awakened collective memory provided a fertile ground for the eruption of the violent conflict. In this reconstruction, the awakening of a collective sense of victimhood, which has important implications for the direction of the actions taken by a national group, played a special role (Bar-Tal et al. 2009; Vollhardt 2012). Collective victimhood can be defined as a group mindset resulting from the perceived intent of another group to inflict harm on the collective. The harm also must be viewed as undeserved, unjust and immoral and one that the group was not able to prevent (Bar-Tal et al. 2009). The collective sense of victimhood has important effects on the way a society manages its inter-group relations and on its relationships with its rivals in times of conflict. In many cases, victimhood helps to feed the outbreak of the conflict and its continuation. Later, victimhood inhibits the peace process.

In the second half of the 1980s, the media cultivated the rise of Serbian nationalism through manipulative interpretations of past events, by creating myths and by encouraging extremism within the official Serbian Orthodox church and part of the intellectual elite. Of special importance to the disintegration of Yugoslavia was The Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Science. Published in 1986, this document legitimised the increased feelings of victimhood. Its main theme was that the process of decentralisation was leading to the dissolution of Yugoslavia and that Yugoslavia’s constitutional structure discriminated against Serbs. Accordingly, Serbian propaganda portrayed the conflict as a fundamental question of Serbian rights (Bennett 1994; Thomas 1999; Gow 2003).

The commemoration of the 600th anniversary of the Turks’ military victory over the Serbians at the Kosovo Battle on June 28, 1989 was an important event that facilitated the resurgence of an exclusively Serbian national identity (Glenny 1993). In a pivotal speech in Kosovo, which many believed to be a warning signal of the violence to come, Milosevic sent shockwaves through the other Yugoslav republics by communicating the following message: “Six centuries after the battle of Kosovo Polje, we are again engaged in battles and quarrels. There are not armed battles but the latter cannot be ruled out yet” (National Technical Information Service of the Department of Commerce of the U.S. 2009).

The Serbs' chosen trauma, the Battle of Kosovo, had been passed on from generation to generation and effectively kept alive, though the memory was dormant at times. The reactivation of the "psychological DNA of Kosovo" awakened the traumatised self-image of the Serbs' ancestors: never again would they allow such a defeat to occur (Volkan 1997). The story of the battle of Kosovo illustrates the various ways in which a chosen trauma can affect a group. Adopting a chosen trauma can enhance ethnic pride, reinforce a sense of victimisation and even spur a group to avenge its ancestors' defeats. Thus, a traumatic re-enactment and exploitation of old fears and hatreds in addition to the emphasis on the Serbs' victimisation in the past (Leatherman et al. 1999; Ross 2001) added to the redefinition of the national identity and national mobilisation that led to the violent conflict (Anzulovic 1999; Staub 2006).

Another crucial element that facilitated the mass mobilisation of the members of each ethnic group and fuelled the conflict was the indoctrination of an elaborate system of beliefs that propagated ideas concerning exclusive nationalism, victimhood, fears, threats and even the delegitimization of the other groups (Gagnon 2004; Ramet 1996). In particular, the mobilisation of the Serbian population through a systematic propaganda campaign enabled the conflict to evolve and spread rapidly. Milosevic's state-run Serbian media became a tool of war that systematically portrayed Serbs as under threat from the "Croatian Ustashe" (the Croatian fascists who were the allies of the Nazis in WWII) or "Islamic fundamentalists" (i.e., Bosnian Muslims) (MacDonald 2002; Malcom 1994). In fact, the hate campaign was directed against any opponents of a Serbian-dominated Yugoslavia and greatly facilitated the mobilisation of ordinary Serbs. Oberschal (2000) summarised these developments with the following observations:

Yugoslavs experienced ethnic relations through two frames—a 'normal' frame and a 'crisis' frame. People processed both frames in their minds: in peaceful times the crisis frame was dormant and in crisis and war the normal frame was suppressed (p. 989).

Oberschal also noted:

In the waning days of Communism, nationalists activated the crisis frame on ethnicity by playing on fears of ethnic annihilation and oppression in the mass media, in popular culture, in social movements, and in the election campaigns (pp. 998–999).

This observation indicates that old national elements of collective memory and other national credos do not disappear but are held, transmitted and lie dormant within families and other ethnic institutions. These elements are ready to be reawakened when needed by societal, political and cultural forces.

The new emphases on Serbian collective identity aroused feelings of threats among the various ethnic groups in Yugoslavia and accelerated the sharpening of their collective identity by constructing and reconstructing its contents, including new goals that were designed to meet the new challenges (Bennett 1994; Malcolm 1994). The other groups' nationalism had also been stirred by their respective political leaders. In particular, Serbian nationalism stimulated the resurgence of the Croatian nationalists, whose sentiments were exploited and manipulated by Franjo Tudjman in Croatia. Croatian nationalism was also insensitive to the fears and insecurities of Croatia's

Serbian population, which greatly assisted Serbia's efforts in exacerbating tensions amongst the Serbs throughout Yugoslavia. These developments caused the threats to national identities to spiral out of control and the violent conflict to erupt (Kelman 2006).

## War: Framing the Present as a Validation of Past Narratives

When the conflict between Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats escalated in Croatia in June 1991, "both sides began to recall more acutely their centuries-old historical grievances, their suffering during World War II, their religious differences, the pain inflicted by the other" (Volkan 1997, p. 54). The carnage and ethnic cleansing in the following months and years was largely influenced by the shadows of the past. These traumatic memories included not only the Battle of Kosovo but also the traumatic events of World War II, when hundreds of thousands of Serbs were massacred and others were sent to concentration camps. A sense of past victimhood violently resurfaced (Ross 2001).

Once violence erupts, it immediately changes the nature of a conflict (Bar-Tal 2013), especially if harm is inflicted on civilians in addition to military forces. This harm violates the codes of moral behaviour, arouses strong emotional reactions, involves group members, delegitimizes the rival and escalates conflicts. Although individuals perform violent acts, collective violence is initiated and executed within a social system. That is, the social system rationalises and justifies the violence, mobilises the group members to perform it, trains the group members to perform violent acts and then glorifies them.

As a consequence, violence immediately provides concrete foundations for a sense of victimhood, distrust and fear. Of particular importance to the execution of violence, especially atrocities are the mechanisms of threat and delegitimization, which justify and rationalise moral misdeeds. Delegitimization excludes a rival group from the boundaries of the commonly accepted groups as a legitimate member worthy of basic civil and human rights and indicates that this group deserves inhumane treatment (Bar-Tal and Hammack 2012). This process assumes that only the delegitimized group raises threatening goals and executes violent, unacceptable acts. This perception leads the delegitimizing group to commit violence and atrocities because the in-group tries to avert danger by taking preventive actions and revenge for the past harm caused by the out-group. This process is reinforced by an accompanying sense of collective victimhood that is sometimes interpreted as a license to commit immoral and illegitimate acts (called moral entitlement). Groups with high sense of collective victimhood reason that the in-group is allowed to do everything within its power to prevent a trauma from ever happening again (Bar-Tal et al. 2009; Vollhardt 2012). Once delegitimization, threats, a sense of collective victimhood and violence emerge, the vicious cycles of conflict begin (Bandura 1999; Staub 2003). This repertoire leads to more violence, which, in turn, broadens and strengthens the repertoire.

Collective violence eventually led to a terrible legacy for the different groups throughout the former Yugoslavia. The single worst atrocity happened in July 1995 in Srebrenica, where approximately 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men, some as young as 7 years old, were systematically rounded-up and massacred by the Bosnian Serb forces. From April to June 1992, Sarajevo was placed under siege by the Bosnian Serb Army, which took control of 37 municipalities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, including Prijedor, Kozarac, Zvornik and Foca, while an additional 800 villages were attacked (Calic 2009). Concentration camps, such as Omarska, Karaterm and Manjaca, were created and used as a means of torture, intimidation and extermination. The Catholic churches and mosques that came under Serbian control were systematically destroyed, reflecting an intention to destroy collective identity (Calic 2009). In Croatia, the military forces under the leadership of Franjo Tudjman also conducted ethnic cleansing campaigns against the Serbs in Slavonia and the Krajina region of Croatia. One of the largest ethnic cleansing operations happened in the summer of 1995 in Croatia, where a large part of the Serb population (ca. 200,000) was expelled, and approximately 400 Serbs were killed. Croatian forces also committed serious human rights violations against the Bosniaks in Herzegovina and central Bosnia (Calic 2009). The dissolution of Yugoslavia also witnessed grave human rights violations, such as massive deportations and massacres of civilians in Kosovo. Given these terrible acts of immoral violence, one may ask the following question: how can groups address such a disruptive legacy to build a better future? The last section tries to answer this question by accounting for the events that followed the bloody carnage. The violence stopped, and an agreement was reached in Dayton in November 1995 and signed in Paris on December 14, 1995. Eventually, Yugoslavia disintegrated into seven states. Currently, the nations and states in this region face the challenge of determining how people should move beyond the formal ending of the conflict by establishing lasting and stable peace through reconciliation.

## **Reconciliation: Acknowledging a Disruptive Legacy to Prepare the Future**

In the aftermath of a bloody war that reflected a history of long buried and uncovered conflict, nations and states must go through a long peace-building process to create a stable and lasting peace. *Stable and lasting peace* can be defined as consisting of the mutual recognition and acceptance of a supreme goal to maintain peaceful relations, which are characterised by full normalisation and cooperation in all possible domains of collective life that provide a secure co-existence (Bar-Tal 2013). The process of building a stable and lasting peace process does not stop with the achievement of a peaceful settlement to the conflict. In fact, in the last several decades, it has become evident that formal peace agreements fall far short of establishing genuinely peaceful relations between the former adversaries (e.g., Knox and Quirk 2000; Bar-Tal & Bennink 2004; Lederach 1997; Lipschutz 1998; Simpson 1997; Wilmer 1998). Achieving a stable and lasting peace requires both structural and psychological changes. The psychological changes include changes in not only

worldviews, feelings, beliefs, attitudes and behavioural intentions but also in societal, cultural and educational products, such as information in the mass media, ceremonies, leaders' speeches, books, films and school textbooks. Fundamentally, the new socio-psychological basis must be shared by the majority of a society's members and deeply penetrate the society's institutions, organisations and channels of communication (Asmal et al. 1997; Bar-Tal 2000; Kriesberg 1998; Lederach 1997). However, the repertoire that fed the conflict does not change overnight with the signing of a peace agreement. The peace-building process is long and does not occur unintentionally. Rather, the process also requires reciprocal, planned and active efforts to overcome obstacles and facilitate its solidification. One of the necessary conditions of peace is *reconciliation*. We will focus solely on this process.

Reconciliation pertains to the socio-psychological restructuring of the relations between past rivals that allows for the healing of past wounds caused by the conflict. To achieve this healing process, the parties must recognise and accept their crimes, freely discuss the past conflict and take responsibility for and correct past injustices and wrongdoings (Bar-Tal 2013). Thus, the reconciliation process builds new relationships that allow the parties to move beyond the experiences accumulated before and during the conflict. Reconciliation allows each party to form a new socio-psychological repertoire that can accommodate past grievances and contentions while constructing new views about the rival, the conflict and the collective self (Bar-Tal 2009). This new socio-psychological repertoire enables former rivals to build new relations as the foundations of a stable and lasting peace.

As the reconciliation process proceeds, there is wide agreement that a successful outcome requires the formation of a new shared outlook on the past. Once there is a shared and acknowledged perception of the past, both parties can take a significant step towards achieving reconciliation. As Hayner (1999) noted:

Where fundamentally different versions or continued denials about such important and painful events still exist, reconciliation may be only superficial (p.373).

Reconciliation implies that both parties not only get to know but truly acknowledge what happened in the past (Asmal et al. 1997; Chirwa 1997; Gardner Feldman 1999; Hayes 1998; Hayner 1999; Lederach 1998; Norval 1998, 1999; Cehajic and Brown 2008). *Acknowledgement* of the past implies that the parties recognise that there are at least two narratives of the conflict (Hayner 1999; Kopstein 1997; Norval 1999; Salomon 2004). This factor is important to the reconciliation process because each party's collective memory of its own past underpins the continuation of the conflict and obstructs peacemaking (Bar-Tal 2007). Reconciliation necessitates changing these societal beliefs (i.e., collective memories) about the past by learning about the rival group's collective memory, admitting one's own past misdeeds and taking responsibility for the outbreak and maintenance of the conflict. Through the process of negotiating collective memories, where one's own past is critically revised and synchronised with that of the other group, a new narrative emerges (Asmal et al. 1997; Hayes 1998; Norval 1998). With time, this new historical account of events substitutes for the reigning collective memory.

However, overcoming the past often requires more than the establishment of a common collective memory. During the conflict, both parties accumulate many

grievances towards the other side. Years of violence leave deep scars, anger, grief, a sense of victimhood and the desire for revenge. These grievances must not only be known but also truly acknowledged by the rival society (Asmal et al. 1997; Kriesberg 1998; Lederach 1998; Norval 1999; Ross 1995; Wilmer 1998). Some researchers have gone a step further by asserting that the collective acknowledgement of the past is not enough to promote a reconciliation process. Instead, they argue that the reconciliation process should ultimately lead to collective healing and forgiveness of the adversary's misdeeds (Arthur 1999; Hayner 1999; Lederach 1998; Shriver 1995; Staub 2000; Cehajic et al. 2008).

According to this view, reconciliation consists of restoration and healing. It allows for the emergence of a common frame of reference that permits and encourages societies to acknowledge the past, confess former wrongs, relieve the experiences under safe conditions, mourn the losses, validate the experienced pain and grief, receive empathy and support and restore broken relationships (Lederach 1998; Long and Brecke 2003; Minow 1998; Montville 1993; Staub 1998, 2000). This process creates a space in which forgiveness can be offered and accepted. The element of forgiveness as an outcome of reconciliation is important if one or both parties are attributed with responsibility for the outbreak or maintenance of the conflict and/or the misdeeds committed during the conflict (Auerbach 2004).

Thus, if the acknowledgement of responsibility for atrocities is a necessary prerequisite for sustainable inter-group reconciliation (e.g., Cohen 2001), we must determine which socio-psychological factors can instigate this process. Surprisingly, little empirical evidence is available on this subject. For example, an interview study conducted with Serbian adolescents regarding the Srebrenica massacre suggests that inter-group contact and the acknowledgement of out-groups are potentially significant positive predictors of the acknowledgement of the in-group's responsibility for the atrocity (Cehajic and Brown 2008). Recent findings have shown that Serb adolescents who had frequent and high-quality interactions with the members from other groups were more willing to publicly acknowledge their group's responsibility for the atrocities committed during the 1992–1995 war (Cehajic and Brown 2010). Such high-quality interactions facilitated acknowledgement through an increase in perspective-taking and a decrease in biased beliefs of competitive victimhood. These findings suggest that promoting positive inter-group experiences characterised by trust, cooperation and tolerance might lay the ground for greater acknowledgement and future reconciliation (MacDonald 2009). In addition to promoting positive *inter-group* experiences, recent experimental studies conducted in two different conflict contexts show that the promotion of positive *self*-experience increases both the acknowledgement and acceptance of in-group responsibility (Cehajic et al. 2011). By actively re-affirming some important and threat-unrelated aspects of the self, the participants showed a greater readiness to acknowledge the unwelcome knowledge of their group's violations of human rights.

In addition to promoting positive inter-group and personal experiences, we believe that the promotion of positive narratives of inter-ethnic tolerance and cooperation (i.e., positive propaganda) could help to facilitate reconciliation in the former Yugoslavia. Governmental and non-governmental representatives, including the media



and the education system, should induce and increase the frequency of every type of inter-ethnic cooperation while compelling the parties to impartially examine and acknowledge their own past and present behaviour.

In addition to the acknowledgement and acceptance of responsibility and the offering of forgiveness by all society members, other broader issues need to be addressed to achieve and sustain long-term peace and reconciliation in the former Yugoslavia. Those issues include delivering justice to victims, improving the socio-economic conditions of displaced people and refugees, strengthening governmental institutions (i.e., increasing people's trust in the government) and economies, and undermining the actors, including political leaders, who still fuel exclusive and intolerant nationalism. These issues must be addressed within the local contexts, and the people of the former Yugoslavia bear the key responsibility of doing so. However, the international community, particularly the EU and the USA, cannot forget or minimise its role in providing a sustainable peace in the Balkans. The international community also plays a role in this important process by providing moral and economic support.

We end this chapter by suggesting that successful reconciliation requires commitment and decisive policies that are implemented with the help of the international community. By nature, the reconciliation process is long and requires the involvement of society's members, who need to reconstruct their views of rival societies, the past and the future. This process can begin and be executed in many different ways, but every method requires the ability to refer to past crimes and a collective sense of justice. The next chapters address these key issues.

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