Walking the tightrope

Can storysharing play a part in reconciliation?

Masters thesis
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”because a story is a tightrope between two worlds.”

Jeanette Winterson, *The PowerBook*

1 Introduction

It’s good to talk. Modern, western, Freud-fed people assume this. We see the sharing of intimate stories as the mortar of all serious relationship building. There are no silent friendships and every relation has to start with a story; This is who I am, please introduce yourself. In a reconciliation context this idea has been exercised on a grand scale in South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. Among the different aims of the TRC was the goal that the voices of the victims would be heard. People would tell their story and other people would hear them. Some sort of non-material rehabilitation was afforded the speakers and some sort of new understanding was assumed in the listeners. It would be a national catharsis and the beginning of the new, democratic and reconciled South Africa.

On a smaller, or rather, more intimate, scale, most people involved in these issues would agree that reconciliation efforts needs to be targeted on the community level as much as at the interstate, or interleadership, level. The immediate conflict may be over, the treaties signed and the elite that once led the fighting resigned to non-war if not actual peace, but it is always a fragile state of affairs as long as distrust still grows among the grassroots.

In this context, where new relations has to be built on a foundation of historic violence and mutual distrust, getting people to talk is seen as a way to build sustainable peace. One of Sweden’s aid agency Sida’s three main categories under the heading ”conflict management” is dialogue encouragement, which includes trust building on the person to person level. The idea is to find the common ground from which the normalisation of relationships can be started. In Northern Ireland the idea of discovering the humanity of the other through the sharing of life stories in emancipatory conversations has been at the heart of many peace and reconciliation groups.

This project looks at how theories and research on reconciliation and narrative fits into the reality of four organizations working with reconciliation in Bosnia-Hercegovina. I hope to show the complexity of the issue without falling into the trap of only presenting problems. I also try in this thesis to study the issue of reconciliation in a way that does not separate the individuals from the society they live in. No human being is a completely free agent; she has to survive as part of a family, a community, a country. Often there are even more categories that the individual has to consider on a daily basis. It is of course messy work trying to bring all those categories into an analysis, but not even trying is reducing the person and undermining the relevance of the research.

1:1 The research question

There is no doubt that donors, be they governments, aid agencies or NGOs, believe that it is good to talk. It has become common sense, but common sense claims do not need proof.

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1 Winterson 2001
2 Krog 1998
3 Mollov, Lavie, 2001
5 Ericsson 2001
Claims that underpin the donation of large amounts of money and the efforts of a lot of hard working people do. I set out on this project with the aim to try to shed some light on whether it really is good to talk, from a reconciliation point of view. The main question that guided me was: **Does sharing personal experiences with people from the other side of a conflict contribute to reconciliation?**

I have not worked with any hypothesis but I had some ideas of why it would be good if this kind of storysharing, the exchange of personal life stories, worked. While I was aware that getting people together and getting them to talk is not necessarily easy, especially in an environment of distrust and hatred, I imagined that it was relatively cheap. There is no need for fancy technology or a big administration. All you need is two people who dare to talk to each other. I figured, if this method works, it is a good method for small grass roots organizations who do not have access to large sums of donor money or do not want to depend on those kind of resources.

### 1:2 Reconciliation

Research around reconciliation will be more closely examined in the theory chapter but I think it will make it easier on the reader if my take on the term is introduced right at the beginning. I have thought, interviewed and analysed with Trudy Govier’s writing about reconciliation constantly in mind. She sees reconciliation as something that can only be seen in a combination of trust, forgiveness, co-operation and sustainability. In that way she turns what sometimes is a lofty but loosely defined word only useful in rhetorics, into something practical and possible to discuss. In my own condensed version of Govier’s writing **reconciliation is a renewal of trust through forgiveness that makes long-term co-operation possible.**

In examining the processes and possibilities of reconciliation in different womens’ groups in Bosnia-Hercegovina I draw on contact theory; research and thinking on if, how and why peoples’ attitudes about the other change when they meet her. What kind of people are more susceptible to change in what situation and meeting who? What environment is more conducive to making people ready to change?

### 1:3 Narrative

Thinking about reconciliation takes care of half of my research question but for the other half I need to consider the talking and sharing of stories. The power of narrative lies at the bottom of the idea that talking and sharing personal life stories is good. Both listening to and telling stories can change people, through identification, empathy and new perspectives on old memories. The story can change too and that is of course of great interest in a context where stories of ethnicity and nationality have been given historical immunity to change by people with an interest in keeping Them from Us and Ours.

### 1:4 Position in the ComDev context

In the context of the Communication for Development course, with its tilt towards mediated mass communication, this project may look a bit low tech. After all, person to person conversation seemingly needs no other skills or instruments than a common language. It is communication in its most fundamental form. But that is the very reason why I think that this

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6 Govier 2001
The project still fits within the frame of Communication for Development. Talk is where you have to start. But just because talking is relatively easy, it does not mean that getting results from talking is easy.

The globalisation theme of Communication for development may not be at the forefront of this project but it is visible through the interest of donors in reconciliation work. You could say that there is no industry as globalised as the development industry and no money as globalised as donor money. It is true in the sense that the industry and the money almost by definition transcends national borders. They are also totally dependent on a flow of information from all over the world to all over the world.

In the development theory context of the Communication for Development course this project places itself in a school that recognises the role of local actors, be they individuals or organisations, as more important than any international involvement. Things can be done without outside help, but very little can be meaningfully done if local actors are excluded. Storysharing involves whole people, whole lives. It is no use to even try it within the kind of development discourse that Arturo Escobar criticizes, where "the whole reality of a person’s life is reduced to a single feature or trait." While not sharing the anti-development school’s total rejection of a macro level of development, I agree with the belief that the local grassroots level is the most important if you want to create anything that is going to last.

2 Bosnia-Hercegovina

It is not easy to find a place to start when writing about the background of present day Bosnia-Hercegovina. There is an abundance of history, but there are also a surfeit of interpretations of that history. History is of course always an interpretation but when it has been abused and mutilated in the way it has been in the Balkans, (by historians too) historical narrative becomes, literally, a minefield. But I will take what seems to be a relatively safe route through Bosnia-Hercegovina’s recent past and start with the breaking up of communist Yugoslavia. It is not within the scope of this report to analyze what happened during the last war, to place blame or to discuss if the causes of the war were economic, ethnic, cultural, religious or a mix of these and anything else.

2.1 Recent history

With the adoption of a new constitution in 1974, communist Yugoslavia turned into a federation of republics. With the exception of Bosnia-Hercegovina, they all had a dominant nation, though regions, cities and villages within the republics could have national

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7 This was of course never more obvious than after the Boxing day tsunami in South East Asia 2005. The globalisation of information spread the terrible news, the globalisation of persons made thousands of westerners victims of a natural disaster far away from their own homes and both these trends in combination with the globalisation of money made the international response in the shape of aid break all previous records.
8 Escobar 1995, 110
9 Pieterse 2001
10 Croatia’s nationalist president Franjo Tudjman was a historian. Hayden 2000
11 I use “nation” as a term for the groups Serb, Croatian and Bosniak. The Bosnian word “narod” means nation, people and from 1971, Serb, Croat and Muslim were all categorised as narod in the Yugoslavian census. Since then, Bosniak has come to mean Muslim Bosnian in a territorial, national sense. (Campbell, 1998) While aware of the the many questions that can be raised over the use of different terms for group identity in Bosnia-Hercegovina, to me nation seems to be the most fitting under the circumstances, since the creation of nation-
demographics that were the inverse of the republics. While Bosnia-Hercegovina was the home of the Bosnian muslims, today called Bosniaks, they did not dominate the population in the sense that they constituted more than 50 percent of the population. During the seventies and eighties nationalism grew in Croatia and Serbia, and Slovenia started to move away from the Yugoslavian union and towards the European Union. By the late eighties former communists in both Croatia and Serbia had already successfully transformed themselves to nationalists, either within or without a socialist framework, and in the first free elections since the second world war in 1990 nationalist parties won in all republics.

In June 1991 Slovenia and Croatia declared themselves independent from Yugoslavia. The Yugoslav national army, JNA, was sent out to defend the integrity of the federation. The army was in effect controlled by Slobodan Milosevic, the president of Serbia who had gained control over half of the republics in the federation in the eighties and centralised its government in Belgrade. The JNA withdrew from Slovenia after a few days of fighting. They stayed on in Croatia, where there was a significant Serb minority, gained control over a third of the country and called it “The Serbian Republic of the Krajina”.

When the EU recognised Croatia and Slovenia as sovereign nations in early 1992 Bosnia-Hercegovina found itself in an untenable position. With no strong allies left in a federation that was becoming more and more obviously an instrument for the creation of a Greater Serbia, Bosnia-Hercegovina’s president Alija Izetbegovic asked for recognition of his country as independent as well. But the EU demanded that a referendum should be held first. 63 percent of the population voted in favour of independence. But many of the Bosnian Serbs boycotted the vote and two days after the referendum the serb nationalist party started building road blocks in Sarajevo. The war had started.

The Serb strategy in Bosnia-Hercegovina was to cleanse areas that they believed belonged to Serbia from all other nationalities. The Serb forces, JNA or Bosnian Serb paramilitary, used all weapons available in the genocidal cabinet; they killed, raped, destroyed property and cultural and religious heritage and built concentration camps. In Sarajevo, snipers terrorised civilians and made every crossroad in the besieged city a battlefield. They forced previously non-partisan Bosnian Serbs to choose sides, sometimes a whole village at once through staged attacks, sometimes one individual at a time. To choose to side with Muslim neighbours or friends could mean to choose death.

states was one of the currents in the flood of the conflict. Also, other terms, “ethnic group”, “religious group” and “cultural group” are at best inadequate and at worst, plain wrong and misleading.

Hayden 2000
Malcolm 1994
Hayden 2000. Although nationalist parties gained power in most of Bosnia-Hercegovina, it is important not to overstress the mandate they got. 28 percent voted for non-nationalist parties which gave their representatives the power in Tuzla and central Sarajevo. (Campbell 1998)
Rieff 1995
Malcolm 1994
Rieff 1995
Rieff 1995
63 percent of the population voted. 99.4 percent of the voters said yes to full independence.
Rieff 1995
Some writers do not use the term war for what went on in Bosnia-Hercegovina. Rieff (1995) means that to call it war is to give downright slaughter a dignity and legality that it does not deserve. I follow the use in most international writing and the use of the people I talked to in Bosnia-Hercegovina. Most of them used the word war, no matter what differences they may have had in their views on the causes and consequences of the conflict.
Malcolm 1994
In 1993 Bosnian Croatians started a war within a war, trying to create a Croatian state in Bosnia-Hercegovina. They used the same weapons as the Serbs. While the Bosnian government did not have ethnical cleansing on its’ agenda, it did attack and expel civilians in the course of the conflict. All sides had detention camps where civilians were abused.

But the war was not only fought with machine guns, sniper shots and tanks. The propaganda machines worked hard on all sides of the conflict and prejudices and nationally coloured boogiemen became hard facts. All Bosniaks were Muslim fundamentalists, all Croats were fascist sadists, all Serbs were nazi mass murderers. Newspapers, radio and TV became instruments of propaganda. It was the occupation of minds as well as the occupation of territory.

Hostilities between Bosnia-Hercegovina and Croatia ended officially in March 1994. Serb aggression ceased officially with the Dayton Peace Agreement in December 1995. During the three-and-a-half years of war, some 200 000 people had died and two million people, possibly more, lost their homes. At the time of writing more than 14 500 people are still missing. The Dayton documents state the right for refugees to return to their old homes and the parties to the agreement are required to make sure that those who want to go back can do so safely and without obstruction. This pledge has not always been lived up to. The High Representative has removed elected officials from their posts for working against the returning of refugees.

Bosnia-Hercegovina today is made up of the mainly Bosniak-Croat entity of the Federation of Bosnia and Hercegovina and the predominantly Bosnian Serb entity of Republika Srpska, plus the district of Brcko. The nation has a rotating presidency with one person from each of the three main national groups chosen every four years. Decisions on foreign policy, financial policy and other interentity or supraentity issues are made on national level but most of the political life of Bosnia-Hercegovina takes place on entity level.

The powers of the entity and national level institutions can at any time be outplayed by the international community’s High Representative. The High Representative can write new laws, block laws put in place by national or entity level authorities and remove officials and politicians that obstruct the peace process as it is described in the Dayton Peace Agreement.

2:2 The idea of reconciliation in Bosnia-Hercegovina today

After more than three years of war there are many things that needs doing. Houses must be rebuilt, infrastructure rerouted, political institutions reinstated and vast areas cleared of mines. There are so many practical things that cannot wait, who has time for abstract things like reconciliation? Those who wrote the preamble to the Bosnia-Hercegovinan constitution did. It

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22 Cockburn 1998
23 Interview with Alisa Muratacaus, director of Association for Concentration Camp Torture Victims Kanton Sarajevo
24 Rieff 1995
25 Hayden 2000
26 Cockburn 1998
28 Campbell 1998
29 See for example “Decision removing Mr Kemal Terzic from his position of Head of the Municipality of Donji Vakuf June 24 2002”, www.ohr.int. The removed official had delayed evictions from properties belonging to refugees and made it difficult for a returnee association to act in the municipality. Accessed on May 12 2005.
30 Hayden 2000
says that the state of Bosnia-Hercegovina is “dedicated to peace, justice, tolerance and reconciliation”. More concrete signs of active work towards reconciliation are harder to find on the national and political level. Refugees being able to return to their old homes is often considered one important step towards reconciliation. That process is going slowly and is sometimes actively obstructed. Suspects of war crimes being brought to justice is also looked upon as an important step towards reconciliation. That too is hindered by public officials. Radovan Karadzic, leader of Bosnian Serb nationalist party and General Ratko Mladic, commander of the Bosnian Serb forces, are still free, and persistent rumours say that at least Ratko Mladic can be found in Republika Srpska where there are people in influential positions that help him keep out of ICTY’s reach. Radovan Karadzic is more often believed to hide in Serbia-Montenegro. It is often argued that parallel to a judicial process reconciliation also needs another kind of investigation of what happened during the war years, an investigation that in the interest of all citizens sees beyond both justice and forgiveness, in short a Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the South African kind. Here as well, Bosnia-Hercegovina comes up short. There is a National Coordinating Committee for the Establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Bosnia Hercegovina but so far its efforts have come to little. If you, by now, are feeling a bit pessimistic about the whole process, the organisation of the whole country can be seen as an obstruction to reconciliation, with what could be described as its’ essentially nationalist partition in the Bosniak-Croat Federation and the Bosnian Serb Republika Srpska.

With all this in mind, the need for reconciliation work on the grass roots level seem all the greater, and that same work all the more difficult. How do you change people’s attitudes when the very structure of the society they live in enforces those attitudes?

### 3 Method

This thesis is based on qualitative interview material. I was interested in exploring the potential role of storysharing in reconciliation and to use any other method than the qualitative seemed unnatural to the subject area. Reconciliation is all about relationships and as Steinar Kvale writes in InterViews, the whole point of qualitative methods is to interpret meaningful relations. I wanted to look at the research question from as many angles as possible, and if possible, allow the interviewees to choose some of the angles. This made the semi-structured interview the most appropriate tool.

#### 3:1 How the interviewees were chosen

War is, in most societies, a deeply gendered activity. Different things are expected of women and men in times of war and different things are done to women and men in times of war. Men are called to fight for whatever values or territory under attack, women to protect them in other ways. The war in Bosnia-Hercegovina provides many examples of this. In Srebrenica, men and women were separated and the men killed. In other areas, when the men were not killed, they were put to forced labour while the women were put in camps and subjected to

31 DPA, Annex 4, accessed from [www.ohr.int](http://www.ohr.int)
32 [www.ohr.int](http://www.ohr.int)
33 International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia who has indicted both Karadzic and Mladic. [www.un.org/icty/](http://www.un.org/icty/)
34 Kvale 1996
physical and sexual torture. 84 percent of the refugees were women and children.35 The reports of the systematic and strategic rapes of non-Serb women by Serb forces and non-Croat women by Croat forces finally put it beyond a doubt that rape is not just a consequence of war but can be used as a weapon of war. This is not to say that non-strategic rape by soldiers did not occur in Bosnia-Hercegovina, it did, on all sides.

Women and men also face different challenges after a war, men traumatised by what they have been through as soldiers and women traumatised by what they have been through as civilians. In wartorn areas, women are a large majority of the population, many men having died while fighting or having been killed because of their potential to fight.36 The overwhelming majority of the missing persons are men.

Because of this, I chose to work with women’s organisations in Bosnia-Hercegovina and found my interviewees among their organizers and participants. I am not saying that men’s experiences of war are less valid or that either gender are more in need of reconciliation or has a greater ability to reconcile. But women’s and men’s experiences of war are different and therefore the conditions for peace will differ. By interviewing only women for this study I have hoped to achieve a greater concentration in my findings than I would have if I had talked to men as well. With the kind of qualitative, semi-structured and fairly wide-ranging interview style I wanted to apply, that concentration in the interview group seemed all the more important. At the same time, there is not much else that is homogenous about the group as it turned out. To show the diversity of the group I have included a table that divides the interviewees by nationality. The participants are anonymous, as they are when I quote them later on in the thesis. Seven of the interviewees lived in the Federation of Bosnia and Hercegovina and eight lived in the Republika Srpska. I interviewed eight participants and seven organizers for the analysis part of this thesis.

Table 1 Interviewees divided by nationality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bosnjak</th>
<th>Serb</th>
<th>Croat</th>
<th>Jewish</th>
<th>?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant A, Forum Zena</td>
<td>Participant B, Forum Zena</td>
<td>Participant A, Vive Zene</td>
<td>Jasna Zezevic, director, Vive Zene</td>
<td>Belma Zulcic, main assistant to the director of DUNB, Fokus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant C, Forum Zena</td>
<td>Stanojka Tesic, director, Forum Zena</td>
<td>Participant B, Vive Zene</td>
<td>Dubravka Kovacevic, director, Most</td>
<td>Azra Arnautavic, psychotherapist, Vive Zene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amelia Salkic, co-director Forum Zena</td>
<td>Stanka Francic, organizer, Forum Zena</td>
<td>Participant C, Vive Zene</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant D, Forum Zena</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant D, Vive Zene</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I wanted to talk to women’s organizations that had, or had previously had, reconciliation projects which involved some kind of multinational sharing of experiences and stories, either as the sole aim of the project or as one of several goals. I got a long list of organizations from the Sarajevo-based organization Zene Zemana that has a wide network of contacts all over Bosnia-Hercegovina.37 I sat down and started calling around to see which organizations seemed to have experiences that could be valuable to my project. In the end I did interviews

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35 Cockburn 1998
37 www.zenezenama.com.ba
in five organizations in four cities. The four that ended up in this thesis all receive donations for their multinational work.

In two of the organizations I talked to both organizers and participants, in a third participant interviews were planned but could not be carried out because of a combination of extreme and unseasonably bad weather and translator problems. In the other two organizations I talked only to organizers. In all I did regular interviews with 16 people. One of the organizations, Udruženje Zena Logorasica, fell outside of the frame of this thesis and I have not used material from that interview in the analytical part of this thesis.

**3:1:1 Fokus**

Fokus is a network of 32 women’s organizations and a few independent activists that meet regularly and organize seminars and roundtables all over Bosnia-Hercegovina. The network was started by another organization, Drustvo za Ugrozene Narode za Bosna-Hercegovinu, Society of Threatened Peoples in Bosnia-Hercegovina, originally a German organization but active, with Bosnian members, in the country since 1999. DUNB, for short, started out collecting testimonials for the war crimes tribunal. The experiences of that work led DUNB activists to the belief that a judicial process was not enough to bring about reconciliation. More contact between groups, and more talk was needed. In 2001 they started arranging meetings with representatives of different women’s organizations, some multinational, some not. This became Fokus in 2002. What started as an effort to get women of different nationalities to be in the same room and talk is today a forum for mutual help and advice. DUNB still lends its’ Sarajevo offices to Fokus when needed. I talked to Belma Zulcic, main assistant to the director of DUNB.

**3:1:2 Forum Zena**

Forum Zena works in Bratunac in Republika Srpska, a small town close to Srebrenica. Many of Bratunac’s muslims fled to Srebrenica and today it is a predominantly Bosnian Serb town. But return to the town and the neighbouring villages is in progress. Forum Zena was started in 1999 by women who did not accept the isolation from the Federation part of Bosnia-Hercegovina that politics and a media blockade had enforced on the town. They have a wide range of activities, working with everything from helping individual returnees with their contacts with authorities to mini-feminism school for girls and trustbuilding between citizens and public services. Forum Zena does not have any activities focused solely on getting people to talk but it is a hoped for by-product of their activities aimed at empowering women of all nationalities, such as workshops in political activism or how to run a small business. The office in central Bratunac is open to visitors during the day and many women come just to have a cup of coffee and chat. I talked to Stanojka Tesic, Amela Salkic and Stanka Francic, the three women employed full time by Forum Zena and to four women who have participated in Forum Zena’s activities in one way or another.

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39 Forum Zena has no web page.
Most works out of Visegrad in Republika Srpska, like Bratunac a Drina valley town with a past of war atrocities and a present where the community is still deeply suspicious of, and sometimes actively counteracts, Bosnjak return to the city and the surrounding villages. Since 1998 Most has worked to help returnees, improve relations between nationalities and to empower the women of the Visegrad area in general. They have had activities where the main goal was to get returnees and domiciles to talk but not anymore. Now that is a parallel goal alongside aims such as teaching the women of Visegrad English and how to use a computer. I talked to director Dubravka Kovacevic.

Vive Zene started its’ activities in Tuzla in the Federation in 1994, initially working with women suffering from war trauma. Tuzla received many Muslim refugees from Serb controlled areas during the war and there are still people living in refugee camps in the surrounding area. Today the organization employs 28 people; doctors, social workers and psychiatrists among them and Vive Zene has extended its’ work to include domestic violence, conflict resolution and reconciliation work.

This was the only organization where I looked at one specific activity, a group of 20 women meeting once a week in Dokanj, a suburb of Tuzla that was predominantly Croat before the war, but has a majority of Bosnjak inhabitants today. The group were formed in 1999 as a simple social club where Bosnjak, Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat women could meet over coffee and handicrafts. There had been some nationalistically fuelled trouble at the local school and Vive Zene had already started an art therapy group for children but wanted to involve the local women in some multinational activity as well. Some women in the group were refugees, some domicile. Two social workers from Vive Zene were present at the meetings. While the women came and stayed and talked, and some kind of bonds were forged, the organizers in Vive Zene felt that the contact was in some ways superficial and not truly conducive to healing and reconciliation. There were issues that were clearly avoided or talked about in a way that did not feel right. In their interpretation of the situation the organization was inspired by Israeli-American psychologist Yael Danielli and her thinking about the negative effects of not talking about traumatic events in the past. Survivors often participate in a conspiracy of silence, trying to forget what happened so that they can get some sense of normality back. But repressing what happened is, as Vive Zene reasons, not good for the individual or the community. So in early 2005 they put away the knitting needles and embroideries and replaced the social workers with psychotherapists. Every meeting has a theme, often talked about in terms of how something used to be done and how it’s done now. 15 sessions were planned and I was there while the 7th was in progress although I did not attend the meeting. Azra Arnautovic, one of the psychotherapists, was convinced that it would take many more than 15 meetings to achieve change.

40 Most has no web page but Swedish aid organization Kvinna till Kvinna who supports Most has some information in Swedish about the organisation, [http://www.iktk.se/landinfo/bosnien/sam_most.html](http://www.iktk.se/landinfo/bosnien/sam_most.html)

41 [http://www.vivezene.ba/](http://www.vivezene.ba/)

I talked to director Jasna Zezevic, Azra Arnautovic, one of the Dokanj psychotherapists, and four women participating in the Dokanj group.

3:2 Structure of the interviews

From the organizers I wanted the details of the projects, the aims and expectations, the thinking behind the activities and their own evaluations of whether they have been successful or not. At Forum Zena three organizers participated in the interview at the same time, at Vive Zene I talked to two organizers separately. Most and Focus were individual interviews. I used a translator for the interview with Forum Zena and for one of the organizer’s interviews at Vive Zene. These interviews ranged in time from one hour to three hours.

In individual interviews participants have told me about their experiences of the projects and their feelings about the “other” group. The participants were not randomly picked from the larger group of all participants. The practical circumstances did not allow that. At Vive Zene the interviews were held after the women’s weekly group meeting and the organizers encouraged the women to talk to me, but did not, as far as I know, choose the women I ended up interviewing. At Forum Zene the organizers had made some arrangements beforehand to make sure that I would get to talk to somebody. Some of the women turned up spontaneously. All participant interviews were done with a translator and they ranged in time from 15 minutes to 45 minutes.

The interviews were semi-structured with the organizer interviews initially being more structured since those were more orientated on fact finding while the participants interviews were more focused on finding out about feelings and letting the interviewees tell their stories in their own way. During the interviews it soon became apparent that the organizer’s feelings and personal experiences were just as relevant to the bigger picture and not possible to separate from their organizational experiences.

The structure of the interviews rested on the experience of storysharing, and the consequences of that experience. The questions were formulated with Trudy Govier’s thinking on reconciliation in mind: Reconciliation is a renewal of trust through forgiveness that makes long-term co-operation possible.

3:2:1 Interview questions

I wanted the interviews to be centred around trust, co-operation and future, relatively concrete, practical things. I also wanted to find out something about the participant’s backgrounds and motivations for getting involved in this particular activity. Seeing as the citizens of Bosnia-Hercegovina are constitutionally bound to reconcile, it also made sense to find out about their own definitions of reconciliation.

To make my thinking about the interview questions clearer I have put the questions in two tables showing where they fit in the general themes of the interviews. I used the general themes and the table format when analysing the interview transcripts. The questions presented here are in their “middle of the road” form. The questions obviously differed somewhat depending on which organization the person I was interviewing was active in.
### Table 2 Participants questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Talking</th>
<th>Change</th>
<th>Co-operation</th>
<th>Trust</th>
<th>Future</th>
<th>Reconciliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When did you start coming to NN?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How did you feel the first time you came here?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What did you expect?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did you think about the fact that there would be Bosnjaks/Serb s/Croats here as well?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you talk at the meetings?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Do the others talk?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How do you feel when the others talk?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you talk about?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Is there any specific conversation that you remember?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there any topics that you avoid talking about?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Have these meetings changed anything in your life?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have any contact with Serbs/Bosnjak s/Croats outside of X?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have any Serb/Bosnjak/ Croat friends?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you trust Bosnjaks/Serb s/Croats in general?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Would you vote for a Croat/Serb/Bo</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 Organizer’s questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Talking</th>
<th>Change</th>
<th>Co-operation</th>
<th>Trust</th>
<th>Future</th>
<th>Reconciliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What does reconciliation mean to you?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the main obstacles to reconciliation?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does this project do to overcome those obstacles?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>How often do you meet?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>For how long?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Who can attend?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you prepare the participants in any way?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Any kind of debriefing or other follow ups?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How important is it to get people to talk?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think you are successful?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you expect from this project?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I tried to conduct the interview with one eye on my interview guide and both ears on the person talking to allow the interviewee as much power over the situation as possible without me losing all sense of direction. With Steinar Kvale’s writing on briefing and debriefing in mind I introduced myself to the interviewees as a student from Sweden interested in the relationship between talking and reconciliation work. If asked I developed my ideas about my thesis, I saw no reason not to be completely open about what my purpose with the interviews was. At the beginning of the interview I said to the participants that the situation was in their hands and that they could end it whenever they wanted and that if they thought a question was stupid or difficult to understand they should tell me so. When I was finished with my questions I asked if the interviewee had anything they wanted to ask me.

Kvale 1996
With the Vive Zene participants it was just me, the translator and the interviewee in a room. At Forum Zena the interviews were held in a room where other people came and went, but there was no one else actively listening to what was said than me, the interviewee and the person translating.

I visited each of the three non-Sarajevo organisations over two days, with interviews with organizers on both days and interviews with participants, when I had such, on the second day. This made it possible for me to go through my tapes and notes from the first day and clear up any uncertainties with organizers on day two. But I only had one chance with each of the participants.

3:3 Transcribing and analysing

All interviews were taped and transcribed by me. I transcribed verbatim, well aware that transcription is an interpretative act and that the transcribed interview is at least one remove from the interview itself.\(^{44}\) I marked longer pauses and who they belonged to, me, the interviewee or both. I also marked laughter, crying and unexpected emphasis. I chose this way of transcribing for my own sake, feeling that verbatim transcripts were easier for me to work with when analysing, helping me to remember the interview situation and leaving less doubts for me about whose voice comes through in the transcript. For the quotes in this thesis I have cleaned the language somewhat, aware of the transformation that turns perfectly intelligent talk into perfectly stupid reading. I have tried to keep the colloquial feeling of the interviews and the feeling of the Bosnian language that I could hear in the translation. I don’t believe that I can give voice to anyone but myself but I share Catherine Kohler Riessman’s view that “we do hear voices that we record and interpret.”\(^{45}\)

The themes I used in the question table I used again in the analysis. With the themes on the vertical axis and each interviewee on the horizontal I placed significant quotes in the themes where I felt they most belonged. This allowed me an overview of how much had actually been said on each of my supposedly relevant themes and to compare more easily between different individuals and groups. What question the quote was an answer to did not guide in what theme box the quote ended up. Some answers took a whole different direction than my question would have anticipated.

While this cut and paste technique can be said to fragment the interview I do not think that it matters all that much for my purpose. I did not mean to do a deep reading of the narrative of the interview, but to get some grasp of the meaning of narrative to those interviewed.

When quoting and referring to interviewees I give the names of the organizers while keeping the participants anonymous, revealing only what organization they are involved in and, when relevant, their nationality. The organizers are official spokespeople for their organizations and are responsible for the use of donations. The participants represent only themselves and there is no issue of accountability in this context. But to make clear that I am not using just one participant from each organization I have named them Participant A Vive Zene, Participant B, Vive Zene and so on.

\(^{44}\) Riessman 1993
\(^{45}\) Ibid p8
3:4 Problems with the chosen method

With these kind of one-off interviews I am at the mercy of the interviewees and their will and ability to formulate their feelings and views. They, in their turn, are at the mercy of my questions and interview skills, or lack thereof. One of the claims of this thesis is that reconciliation is a personal experience that has communal consequences but the timeframe did not allow for a before-and-after study. So this study is focused on the personal experience. Time will tell of the communal consequences. So far the only really credible witnesses to whether storytelling works for reconciliation or not in the Bosnia-Hercegovinan context is the people who has told their story and heard others tell theirs.

Another issue that arises with interviews only after the projects have started is selective entry. These are adults who have chosen to get involved in activities and it is probable that people who harbour intense feelings of hate towards other nationalities are probably not going to voluntarily participate in a multinational project. This is a well-known problem in contact hypothesis testing.⁴⁶ How do you know that a certain attitude is the consequence of a contact and not the reason the contact was initiated in the first place? Most of the participants I interviewed swore that they had never had any problems trusting other nationalities. Their activities in multinational organizations had, according to their own testimonies, made very little difference to that part of the reconciliation structure. For the researcher, some of the problems of selective entry disappear when she doesn’t have to argue that there has been a change of attitude. But the problem is still relevant to reconciliation. I return to this in the chapter on conclusions.

A major part of the interviews was done with the help of interpreters. I did not want to choose interviewees based on their ability to speak english, since that would have left me with a very limited, possibly non-existent list of interviewees. And even if some of them could speak good English I wanted the interviewees to have all the creative and expressive possibilities of their first language, especially since the subject matter was potentially painful and certainly complex. With an interpreter as a filter I probably still missed out on some of that creativity and expressiveness. Although the analysis does not involve a close and deep reading of the interviews, this report would undoubtedly have been improved if I spoke fluent Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian, allowing for a more direct contact between me and the interviewees. That said, there are some advantages to working with an interpreter. There is a second person present at the interviews, and a second opinion to be consulted. There is also the added security for the interviewee of having someone present who is little less a complete stranger than I am.

While the translator in Tuzla was an independent professional with years of experience translating testimonies for ICTY, the person acting as translator in Bratunac was a volunteer at Forum Zena and also the director’s daughter. Her English was excellent but she was obviously not an independent agent and the participants knew her very well. The interviewees were comfortable with her, and their trust in her probably rubbed off a little bit on me. On the other hand, if someone had something really critical to say about Forum Zena’s activities they might have felt discouraged by her presence. There is no way for me to know whether someone held something back because of the translator, but I did get a very strong feeling that people felt at ease talking to me with her help.

⁴⁶ Hewstone & Brown 1986
4 The theory of tightrope walking

In spite of the heading of this chapter this thesis has no separate chapter just on theory. In accordance with the alternatives given within the course I have chosen to mix the theory with the analysis and instead make the division between the expectations on sharing of experiences in reconciliation work and the practice of it. In this section I also look at the studied organizations and their activities in the light of the considered theories and discuss some of the issues that light falls upon. The theory of reconciliation is not just what scholars and researchers have thought and studied and reported before me, but also the expectations and thinking of those working with reconciliation in the field. In the next chapter I will look at how things have actually turned out, the practice of tightrope walking. With this division most of the traditional kinds of theory end up in this chapter.

I draw on thinking and research about reconciliation, mainly contact theory, and thinking about narrative and the potential of stories. Contact theory sets the scene for the meetings I am interested in, and the narrative perspective helps me see what could be going on in that scene.

4:1 Reconciliation

Reconciliation is a buzz word in every post-conflict area and time. It is expected and usually seen as something at least close to necessary for the future of the war torn country or region. But it is not always easy to understand what is meant by it, as with many buzz words it is often used as if it is self explanatory. It is not. While I have worked with Trudy Govier’s and Maria Ericsson’s writing as a guide the definitions I got from organizers and participants clearly showed that there is no consensus on the meaning of reconciliation and my definition can be said to come up short of the realities of post-conflict life.

In her dissection of the term reconciliation, Trudy Govier starts out with the most general definition, that of a relationship restored after a conflict. But you don’t have to think very hard or very long before that definition presents a line of questions. Restored in what way? And restored to what? What needs to be rebuilt first is trust, without it, there is no relationship. There has to be forgiveness, but is forgiveness enough? No, it is not enough, since it only takes one person to forgive, but it takes at least two to reconcile. Reconciliation can never be unilateral. Without trust or forgiveness the best kind of future the people living in a post-conflict situation can hope for is a kind of parallel coexistence where co-operation might be possible but always dangerous since distrust and antagonism is still rife. That is not reconciliation. Reconciliation is sustainable and practical.  

Maria Ericsson identifies two processes that lie within the single term of reconciliation. One is the bridging of the gap that prejudices and stereotypes have created and that breeds distrust and prevents people from forming positive relationships. The other one is the dealing with the past, letting victims and perpetrators heal the damages of the conflict, and creating new relationships. Both these processes end with new relationships, because without that there is no co-operation and no common future. With the risk of getting repetitive: Reconciliation is a renewal of trust through forgiveness that makes long-term co-operation possible.

47 Govier 2001
48 Ericsson 2001
4:2 Contact theory

In contact theory, researchers agree that contact can be used to reduce ethnic prejudice, encourage reconciliation and counteract segregation, but they can disagree on what kind of contact gives the best results. Because it is obvious that everyday contact is not enough to keep the peace or kick-start reconciliation. If it did, the horrors of the war in the former Yugoslavia would not have occurred in the first place, because that war was in many cases fought between people whose families had been in contact, indeed neighbours, for centuries.

4:2:1 What kind of contact?

Ed Cairns describes a similar state of affairs to those found in Bosnia-Hercegovina, in Northern Ireland, where a history of casual meetings did not lessen the distrust between Catholics and Protestants. He means that this is because the meetings are just that, casual, and the contact relatively superficial. It is not that the contact theorists are wrong, it is just not enough with the occasional meeting in the local shop and a quick chat about the weather we’re having. Drawing from Cairn’s arguments, a more intimate and revealing kind of contact is needed if reconciliation is to be achieved.

All four organizations agree that casual talk is not enough to create the kind of bonds that reconciliation needs, but they also agree that it is not possible to start with the heavy stuff. You have to let people get to know each other superficially first, in order to build up trust and an atmosphere of relative comfort. Looking at how the participating organizations actually work, only Vive Zene and in some sense Fokus, make conscious efforts to bring the level of contacts somewhere beyond the casual. Indeed, that is one of the main points of Vive Zene’s Dokanj group.

/they’ve started to build confidence and we want to create the situation where they will start to feel that they can say something, something that they were not supposed to say before or didn’t dare to say before, without being called a nationalist, or without being killed or injured because she has a different name, different family/ Azra Arnautovic, psychotherapist Vive Zene

Fokus does not have the kind of therapeutic goals that the Dokanj project has, but contacts can be said to go deeper just the same since one of its’ main aims is co-operation between different groups and nationalities. That puts Fokus in a different category to Forum Zena and Most, who are multinational but whose activities don’t really make any demands on the quality of contacts between participants. If you take one of Forum Zena’s or Most’s computer courses you may have to sit next to a person of a different nationality but there is nothing that says that you have to talk to her or do anything else together with her. It is a kind of contact that can be kept mostly parallel should the people involved wish to keep it that way.

4:1:2 Between what kind of people?

Other contact theorists discuss the kind of contact necessary in terms of how the persons involved are categorised. Do people become more convinced of the “other” group’s general humanity if the persons from the other group they meet are more or less stereotypical? Is the contact more effective if people meet in groups or person to person? Mollov and Lavie, and many others in the field, list equal social status as a prerequisite for the ideal dialogue setting but in a study of attitudes of Arabs towards Israelis they found that contact can lead to a
positive change in perceptions even when the people involved have different social status.\textsuperscript{50} I find it hard to see how equal social status can be achieved at all, since an ingredient of many prejudices is that the other group by definition has a lower social status than the group the person holding the prejudice belongs to. What can be achieved is equal status within the environment of the contact. The organizers have to be attentive to their own prejudices and make sure that all involved are treated the same and given the same opportunities for expression.

The question of equal status within the organizations was on the whole taken for granted by the organizers. Creating groups that reflected equal status outside of the organizations was never considered.

Ben-Ari and Amir advocate interpersonal contact, as only when the other has been recognised as an individual can a generalisation in favour of the whole group be made.\textsuperscript{51} Hewstone and Brown state that contact must be between groups/between people who act as or are seen as representatives of groups, since people behave differently in group settings. Personal relationships may be improved with person to person contact but that will not count for much if the conflict is on the group level.\textsuperscript{52}

In Bosnia-Hercegovina the conflict has definitely been on the group level, with terrible consequences on the personal level. I believe that a change on the personal level is necessary for reconciliation. The strict separation between group and person makes little sense to me. All groups are made up out of individuals and all individuals are part of groups, both self-defined and defined by others. The interaction between the person as individual and the person as group member is subtle and fluid. It is in the space between the individual’s perception of herself and her role in reconciliation and her perception of reconciliation as a societal issue, where storytelling can play a part. With this in mind I find Pettigrew’s model more useful. He suggests that people first need to get to know each other as friends, and that group differences needs to be downplayed initially. As the relationship progresses, group saliency must be emphasized again in order for a common identity to evolve.\textsuperscript{53} This may sound a bit naive, it’s not as if it is easy to forget about “group saliency” in Bosnia-Hercegovina. I think that where Pettigrew’s model is relevant to Bosnia-Hercegovina is that while nobody is unaware of the weight of nationality, at times it seems as if the only alternative attitudes open to people in a multinational environment is either repression or in-your-face-jingoism. That chauvinism is not productive is a foregone conclusion but in the long run, not addressing the fact that there are groups, and tensions between them, is not conducive to reducing those tensions either.

The only one of the organizations I interviewed that did any kind of vetting of the potential participants or put together groups with a conscious idea to have a structure that promoted reconciliation, and not just a mix of nationalities, was Fokus.

First meeting, we chose women who are very important for this reconciliation process. So we chose women from Srebrenica, survivors... We chose women victims, like these from Alisa, you heard about that, such women. And then we had some contacts, for example Cana was on that meeting, and also other women, Serb women, mainly.

\textsuperscript{50} Mollov and Lavie 2001  
\textsuperscript{51} Ben-Ari and Amir 1986  
\textsuperscript{52} Hewstone and Brown 1986  
\textsuperscript{53} Pettigrew 1998
from the Drina valley. So we tried to connect them first because the problems there were the greatest, and so it was, we thought when this province can be solved, we can try to solve all the others.  
Belma Zulcic, main assistant to the director of DUNB, Fokus

Most and Forum Zena are there for any woman who needs them and is willing to be in the same room as women of different nationalities. In Vive Zene’s Dokanj group any woman living in and around Dokanj was welcome to the social club that was the beginning of the therapy group.

4:1:3 Under what circumstances?

In her doctoral thesis on reconciliation work in South Africa and Northern Ireland Maria Ericson lists eight conditions that have to be met in order for people to be able to both share their own experiences and listen to, take in, somebody else’s. The people involved need to feel that they are physically safe and that they have equal power. They must recognise the humanity of the other and their own dignity as a human. They must be prepared to look at themselves in a critical way and they have to care about the other’s welfare. Finally they must have a secure identity in themselves and can not have been recently traumatised. Cynthia Cockburn describes how women’s centres in Northern Ireland applied the one step at a time approach, first trying to break down prejudices in their own group, then building a tolerance for differences within the group and finally strengthening the women’s confidence in themselves. Only after those things were achieved would there be any sense in bringing Catholic and Protestant women together in the hope of any real attitude change. Lining up prerequisites like this, I come within the range of Pettigrew’s criticism of making an “open-ended laundry list of conditions”. Pettigrew sees this tendency as a typical one for contact theory, making it impossible to falsificate and a positive contact result close to impossible to achieve. When most studies show that contact, even when only some of the many conditions are fulfilled, have a positive effect, Pettigrew suggests that we try to separate those conditions that are necessary from those that are facilitating. I agree with Pettigrew but do not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater by ignoring the relevance of the facilitating conditions. One such facilitating condition, that I find has a special complexity in the Bosnia-Hercegovinan context, is the support of authority for the contact.

None of the groups in this thesis have exercised the careful preparing of participants and circumstances that Maria Ericsson and Cynthia Cockburn describe. All groups have been mixed from the start, there is no ingroup preparation. As stated earlier, the participants are welcomed on other grounds than whether they are in the right frame of mind for sharing experiences or not. But the fact that they turn up could be seen as a sign that they are. Here, you could claim, selective entry is a good thing, since it excludes those who are not ready for reconciliation by default. Those not willing to recognise the humanity of the other are not likely to come to a multinational organization. But there is still no way of knowing beforehand whether they care for the others’ welfare, recognise their own human dignity and have a secure identity in themselves. Vive Zene’s Dokanj group are involved in critical self examination, but if that happens in any of the other organizations, it is spontaneously. With the war ten years over the war trauma is not recent. But as will be discussed later, there are factors conspiring to keep the trauma fresh nonetheless.

54 Alisa is Alisa Murateaus, from a Sarajevo organization for survivors of concentration camps and victims of torture. Cana is Stanojka Tesic, director of Forum Zena in Bratunac.
55 Ericson, Maria 2001
56 Cockburn 1998
57 Pettigrew 1998
While there is no direct threat of physical violence within the meeting places of the groups, they cannot always be said to be on neutral ground either. The town of Bratunac has a predominantly Bosnian Serb population and the organizers in Forum Zena told stories of Bosnjak women suffering verbal abuse when going to the town. Several multinational organizations in the Bratunac area experienced physical harassment when they started their activities. Visegrad is also a town where Bosnjaks are in minority after the ethnic cleansing of the war. One woman in the Dokanj group said she had experienced threats within the group because of her nationality. Fokus has no place of its own, but uses the offices of Drustvo za Ugrozene Narode za Bosnia-Hercegovina when meeting in Sarajevo and other premises when organizing meetings and seminars in other towns.

That the support of authority, or the feeling that the prevailing social climate dictates one thing or another, is important to the success of contact is a widely held opinion in contact theory. Several of the organizers spoke of the feeling that there is a general movement away from dialogue and open discussion about what has happened in the country. To Jasna Zezevic, director of Vive Zene, one of the reasons for the Dokanj group’s existence was the fact that Bosnia-Hercegovinan society as a whole is in denial not only about what happened during the most recent war, but also in previous conflicts.

We have to go back very far through history and discuss about 2nd world war and these 50 years of silence, because it was 50 years of silence. And now our government, our society, they start again with silence. Like Dayton, everyone has to go back, everything will be like before, we will have brotherhood and unity, everybody will be happy, but it will come again. Because if you push that... and there is a hate, obviously, because that is why the war started as I understood it, but if you don’t discuss it, aggression and everything, one day, after 50 years we will have war again, or maybe before. Immediately when Sfor or international community leave, what will happen then?\(^5\)

Jasna Zezevic, director, Vive Zene

But even if you have the support of local authorities it can be a more complex gift than it might first look. If the authorities themselves are not trusted, their support is not likely to be worth much. Forum Zena was offered sponsored offices from the mayor of Bratunac. But they declined the offer, feeling that, working as a multinational organization in Republika Srpska, it was important not to be seen as too close to the municipal authorities.

Because there is still a great number of people who work for the municipality and who are at the same time responsible for war crimes. Already three times the High Representative has reconstructed seats in the municipality. Because of that, we always have to take care when we have any kind of contact, we have to be careful with authority, with municipality.

Stanojka Tesic, director, Forum Zena

So while municipality support might give a more positive effect on Bosnian Serbs active in Forum Zena, and raise the organization’s positive profile in the Bosnian Serb community in general, it might at the same time lessen the effect on Bosnjaks whose distrust of local authority rubs off on the organization. It might even keep some Bosnjaks away from their activities.

\(^5\) According to the Dayton Peace Agreement all refugees and internally displaced persons have the right to return to their old homes. Although the agreement also states that it is up to the individual citizen to decide where they want to live, the agreement has been used by local authorities to deny responsibility for refugees and internally displaces persons who do not want to return to where they used to live. Jasna Zezevic’s use of the phrase “brotherhood and unity” refers to communist leader Josip Bros Tito’s policy to suppress any nationalistic tendencies in communist Yugoslavia. (Sacco 2000)
Most, on the other hand, chose a different way of handling the municipality. They have made special effort to involve female officials of the municipality in their activities. One of the highest placed officials takes both English and computer courses with the organization. Considering that director Dubravka Kovacevic was arrested when Most started connecting Bosnian Serb women in Visegrad with Bosnjak women staying in Gorazde, this is quite a change in the authorities attitudes towards the organization.

4:2 Research on narrative

The perspective on contact theory and thinking on reconciliation gives us a frame for the activities of the interviewed organisations, they describe when contact has a better or worse chance to have a positive effect. But as Pettigrew points out, there is often a lack of “How” in contact research. The quantitative survey-method can give a lot of information as to when and where contact is positive but gives few clues to how contact works, when it works. Some very important pieces of the puzzle are missing. I believe that thinking about narrative can supply some of those pieces that show how contact works, because it addresses how stories work on people and how people work on stories. Storysharing is interactive, as of course all sharing is. Telling a story does something to the story and to the narrator. Hearing a story does something to the story and the listener.

4:2:1 Listening

Richard Kearney is a strong believer in the power of stories, be they fiction or fact. A story allows identification by evoking both empathy and detachment. Hearing a story we feel empathy for the people involved, and this makes it possible for us to remove ourselves from our own immediate experiences and prejudices.

“Narrative thus assumes the double role of mimesis-mythos to offer us a newly imagined way of being in the world. And it is precisely by inviting us to see the world otherwise that we in turn experience catharsis: purgation of the emotions of pity and fear.”

Pity and fear is a good description of at least part of the mix of emotions that complicate communication and contact between people of different nationalities in Bosnia-Hercegovina today. Bratunac used to be a relatively mixed town but in 1992 most Bosnjaks left and they did not start coming back until the war was long over. The founders of Forum Zena went to Tuzla in 1999 to meet with NGO’s working with Bosnjaks from Bratunac.

When we came back here, the first thing people in Bratunac asked us was "How does Muslims look?" Because eight years, from 1992 to 1999, there weren’t any muslims here. When they asked us how they look, we told them "They have horns".

Stanojka Tesic, director, Forum Zena

Stanojka Tesic’s anecdote is told in a joking manner but it is a telling description of the kind of isolation that is possible in a supposedly multinational country that is, in many places outside the larger cities, not so much the celebrated mosaic of multicultural and multinational

59 Pettigrew 1998
60 Kearney 2001, p12. Here the individual response to hearing an individual’s story is in focus, but Kearney believes that the same process can be applied to national narratives, the founding myths and ever reproduced epic tales of heroism and survival that lie at the foundation of most nations. The exchange of national narratives could play a part in conflict resolution, suggests Kearney, with the stories gradually developing alternative perspectives for the listeners.
life, but a Mondrian painting of big monochromatic fields. The nervous curiosity of the Bosnian Serbs of Bratunac is an example of the fear that grows where there is no contact.

Now that Bosnjaks are returning to Bratunac and the villages, fear and distrust is poisoning the everyday contacts that do occur.

“There are still persons who live like neighbours and they pass side by side but they don’t say hello. They used to be before very good friends, close friends, and I ask them ”Why are you doing that?” ”I don’t know how the opposite side will react. They always say something. Will that side say hello to me or tell me something ugly, something bad?” But when they find themselves with a same space, or some workshop or some course, then they talk, just because of that they have that common interest, they start to talk. And little by little they start to open those subjects.”
Amela Salkic, co-director, Forum Zena

Belma Zulcic from Fokus had examples where a kind of pity made it hard even for people with a pro-contact attitude to reach out.

Serbs for example around Srebrenica or in Srebrenica, they think a priori ”They hate us”. But only in those conversations you can show them you do not hate but that you hold some people responsible and that these are totally different things.
Belma Zulcic, main assistant to the director of DUNB, Fokus

Hearing a story opens up alternative perspectives for the listener. But the alternative perspective is not always welcome and a story can lead to a negative reaction. Belma Zulcic also remembers one Bosnian Serb woman at a seminar who found she had had enough of stories about Srebrenica.

(...) she stood up and just said ”Oh I cannot hear the word Srebrenica anymore, it’s all a lie, it’s all a lie.” And then you see the problem is that in this moment when someone says something like that you could get a big discussion coming up with everybody screaming and it’s very difficult. So we just tried to calm this woman down and we say ”Okay we have here some witnesses and they will say what happened in Srebrenica. If you know what happened in another part then you can say it. So you all have the possibility to say what was your own experience.”
Belma Zulcic, main assistant to the director of DUNB, Fokus

The organizers managed to defuse the situation by restricting the participant’s stories to those that came from first hand experience. Making this difference between stories that are selfexperienced and stories that are second hand explicit the organizers also made it harder for the listeners to deny the alternative views they were offered.

As Kearney points out, besides showing an alternative perspective, stories can also work by identification, by not seeing the differences but the similarities. Both organizers and participants talked about how hearing other talk about their lives in a way that reminds the listener of herself can be an instrument for change. In Dokanj, it was an expected result of the sessions.

They learn how to listen in the group. When one of them talks, the other ones hear and each member of the group is actually echoing with the story that she is hearing. So basically through that resonance she learns about herself and the emotions that story raises in her, the beliefs, the opinions, the truths. If the story that she is listening causes her to feel bad about something, that’s an issue that she has to work with. (...) Every time they leave that room, they leave different.
Azra Arnautovic, psychotherapist, Vive Zene

The act of listening to someone else and identifying is all the more powerful in a society where most people have been through war and suffered some kind of loss. But who has
suffered the most? Some interviewees almost apologized for crying over things that were not as bad as somebody else had gone through. In Tuzla some domiciles felt guilty about feeling traumatized even though they had not fled from their homes or been raped by soldiers. To acknowledge somebody else’s pain and at the same time accepting your own was seen by Vive Zene, based in the relatively sheltered Tuzla, as important to reconciliation.

/which trauma is the worst, that’s the question, mine or yours? Many, many small things have to be discussed, my pain is my pain and your pain is your pain and you don’t have to do anything with my pain.
Jasna Zezevic, director Vive Zene

4:2:2 Telling

While the narrator and the listener interact, the narrative also interacts with its environment. It is never a straight and flawless retelling of a “true” past event because the story is always influenced by the event of its telling. Richard Bauman explains it as the narrative being “doubly anchored in human events”. With reference to Bakhtin he sees the narrated and the narrative event as a single but complex event, a kind of quantum relation where any interference with one will influence the other. The context shapes the story and that includes the people the narrator has invited to listen to the story.

This interdependence makes narrative at the same time powerful and fragile, and something that should be handled with care. Bringing back painful memories is a responsibility that Most, with no psychological expertise among their activists, were not willing to take on.

/we didn’t have skills to do that, because we can start “Yeah what was your experience?” or something but if the woman starts to talk, what then? How do you close her again? Because her memories and bad thoughts has started again.
Dubravka Kovacevic, director, Most

Bauman also has, for this thesis, relevant points on how narrative not necessarily serves to make experience comprehensible or rational but just as well can be used to keep the interpretation of narrated events open. Jessica Senehi stresses this characteristic of the story as well. While this can be used in a way that is intended to confuse or mislead the listener, it can also mean that the narrator opens herself and her story up to other interpretations, and thus strengthening the possibility of reconciliation through identification. Senehi also points out that stories can be coded to reveal different things to different people. That potential subtlety can also be used to defuse a tense situation of accusers and accused.

“Through stories, it is possible to make a point while allowing the listener to save face.”

Vive Zene’s work with the women in Dokanj can be seen in the light of the open narrative. With everyone talking around a common theme, many interpretations can be heard and discussed. Adding to the openness of narrative is the meandering of conversation that can lead from one topic to another. At the session that took place when I was in Dokanj the theme was children. While few women in the Dokanj group have children who died in the war, many of them have children who live abroad, a less definitive loss, but a reason for mourning nonetheless. The women had brought pictures of their children and it was, from what I understood interviewing some of the participants afterwards, a highly emotional meeting.

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61 Bauman 1986, 2
62 Ibid
63 Senehi, 2000
64 Ibid, 103
When I talked to one of the psychotherapists later on, she told me that one of the more heated discussions during that session had been on the topic of political party membership, not an obvious issue downstream of children on the stream of thought. Talking about one thing can lead to something completely different, opening up new avenues of thought and shining a new light on old ones, revealing things you did not know was there.

Another interaction is that occurring between the storyteller and the story that can change the storyteller as she speaks. Telling a story from personal experience is also remembering, and not least, forgetting. Paul Ricoeur writes about remembering as both knowledge and action.\(^6^5\) In that sense, sharing life stories, is memory in action. As an activity, memory can be both used and abused.

We have a good example in the present state of Europe: in some places we could say that there is too much memory, but in other places not enough. Likewise, there is sometimes not enough forgetting, and at other times too much forgetting.\(^6^6\)

And of course, in Bosnia-Hercegovina, we could say that we have too much memory and not enough, all in the same place. There is too much of the kind of nationalistic memory that hangs on to six hundred year old battles like life rafts and, as Vive Zene argues, too little active, shared, remembering of what has happened in both individual lives and communities. I see that missing kind of memory as what Ricoeur refers to as memory as work. Memory as work is closely connected to mourning as work and mourning, to Ricoeur, is reconciliation. In a healthy mourning process, “the patient” (Ricouer writes about this in reference to Freud and psychoanalysis.) reconciles with loss and the new reality that has been created by that loss.

Ricoeur traces the abuses of memory to its close bonds with identity. Narrative is a way of upholding one’s identity and that includes forgetting or, in the narrative context, leaving out things that do not fit the identity. Narratives can be used for manipulation of identity and memory but also for healing, for finding a plot, some kind of - if not meaning - at least coherence, amongst the traumatic experiences and conflicting feelings. With narratives you get the chance to remember something in another way. The act of remembering in the form of storytelling can be an exercise in “telling otherwise”, in trying to see an event from another point of view.\(^6^7\) Here narrative clearly meets contact theory, narrative providing the instruments to projecting the alternative perspectives that contact theory considers so important.

The potential for change that lies in remembering is also of interest to John Shotter who writes about remembering as an everyday possibility of reordering and refeeling memory in *The social construction of memory and forgetting*. He also sees talking about personal experiences as a way of sustaining a social order.\(^6^8\) The potential of remembering in combination with the uses of sharing personal experiences opens up a lot of possibilities for change. If talking about something is remembering something and remembering something can change how I feel about it, then talking about something can also change how I feel about it. And if talking about something can sustain a social order it can also change that order.

Several of the organizers spoke of the dangers of not talking. The people of Bosnia-Hercegovina have seen history repeat itself and to some it has become evident that talking is

\(^{6^5}\) Ricoeur 1998, 6
\(^{6^6}\) Ibid.
\(^{6^7}\) Ibid
\(^{6^8}\) Shotter 1990
the only way to stop the circle of violence. I quoted Vive Zene’s Jasna Zezevic earlier, but the same issue was raised by Amela Salkic, co-director of Forum Zena.

“If we do like we did after the 2nd world war and not talk about everything that happened, the shadows of the past will come out again and we will have war again.”
Amela Salkic, co-director, Forum Zena

Jessica Senehi sees the potential for communal change in the sharing of personal stories. It can show communities where the common ground can be found, and how to move on to problem solving from there.69

Vive Zene’s women’s group is based on thinking that echoes of Ricoeur, Shotter and Senehi, though I never heard anyone involved in the project mention those names. What they are trying to do in Dokanj is very much memory as work, it is sometimes hard, sometimes painful, but it is necessary for healing and a positive mourning process.

“So that’s the goal. To have an overview on the situation of co-existence, trauma, to work out the process of mourning with them and to break the silence.”
Azra Arnautovic, psychotherapist, Vive Zene

5 The practice of tight rope walking

In this section I return to my interview themes and look at what the interviewees said on them. While the previous section was about the theories and expectations and gave all the space to the organizers, this section is about how things have turned out and is consequently more focused on the participants.

5:1 Talking

There is no doubt that there is a lot of talking going on in the studied organizations. Several of the participants I talked to came to the organizations at least partly because of the opportunity for conversation and socialisation they offered. That kind of motivation could be found in all four organizations. This is not surprising. Apart from the fact that chatting over coffee is an art form in Bosnia-Hercegovina, many women lead relatively isolated lives, with poverty, unemployment and, in some cases, traditional, patriarchal lifestyles limiting their opportunities for expanding their social network. For one woman in Dokanj, Vive Zene’s group became a way to restore her identity as a social person, an identity that had been shattered by the war. She started coming to the group when it was still a social club and describes the new direction of the group as a chance to get to know each woman better and become closer to everyone. Just like all the other Dokanj participants she assured me that there was nothing they could not talk about, and like several other participants from both Vive Zene and Forum Zena, she tied this both to the fact that they all know each other so well and trust each other, and to a personal characteristic.

“I am a person without secrets in my life, so I don’t have secrets in the group”
Participant A, Vive Zene

69 Senehi 2000
Another Vive Zene participant said that she chose to talk about painful things because it made her feel better afterwards. The positive effect of sharing personal experiences was also expressed by another Vive Zene participant.

"I say something that has happened to me and that initiates the other women to say something similar that has happened to them and how they solved the problem that I have. You share, that’s what we do here, we share.”
Participant D, Vive Zene

While most of the women professed their ability and will to talk about anything and everything there were some who expressed the kind of feelings that the organizers talked about, the wish to forget about the past and just move on. One Vive Zene participant felt that talking about the war was meaningless since it would not help her with any of the many practical problems that she faced every day. Another woman in the same group simply felt that it would be nice to sometimes do something else other than talking about painful things and bringing up memories that made her sad.

While Vive Zene set up the Dokanj group to get women to talk about the war and other issues they were avoiding, there was no conscious effort to get the women to talk about the war or any painful or potentially controversial issues in Forum Zena. But Forum Zena participants did it all the same, according to the participants themselves. The organizers found that when, asking about the whereabouts of relatives, which in most cases would lead to a war-related answer, was a way of avoiding embarrassing and possibly hurtful situations. In Bratunac, there is no taking for granted when it comes to people’s family situation.

The experience of Most was that it was hard to get the women to talk at all. Almost whatever they tried, the practicalities of post-conflict life got the upper hand. In their efforts to get women together to talk they first provided them with wool, thinking that handicraft would make the participants more at ease. But the women just turned up for the wool, and left. When they offered the women coffee once a week and gave the women whatever was left after every meeting they hoped that the participants would meet on their own initiative to drink coffee. But that led to conflict and in the end the organizers had to divide the coffee between the participants. Now Most has no activities that are directed primarily towards getting people to talk, though they hope that it is a by-product of having mixed computer and English classes. And since the staff is mixed, anyone contacting the organization is bound to have some contact with a person of a different nationality.

Contact theory states the need for alternative perspectives and Kearney sees the potentiality of stories in helping people to see otherwise. The interviews offered examples of how storytelling can offer alternative perspectives in the form of positive examples of multinational co-operation. In Fokus, a Bosnian Serb had told the others how she stopped the execution of her Bosnjak best friend and her sons by telling the soldier that he would have to kill her and her children first. The woman who told the story felt that outside of Fokus, this was a thing she could not talk about. At one Fokus seminar the example of Bosnian Serb women helping Bosnjak women to stay in Bijeljina was brought up. This was an exception to the rule of Bosnjaks being driven out of the city and as such offered an alternative view of how things were done during the war. The world can be “otherwise”. Another Fokus experience that was shared by both participants and organizers in the other organizations, was the recognition, after sharing personal stories of loss in the war, that none of the individuals present were personally responsible for the other persons’s loss.
There were many stories of how talking had brought about recognition of common interests and shared experiences in the process of identification that Kearney writes about. But there were also stories of how shared experiences in themselves are not always enough. Amela Salkic, Bosnjak co-director of Forum Zena and returnee, told me about how her best friend, a Bosnian Serb, had gotten Amela’s brother out of a prison camp and so probably saved his life. Amela’s brother was killed later in the conflict and Amela fled Bratunac. When she came back her friend would not talk to her. She had also lost a brother in the war and now wanted nothing to do with Bosnjaks. This is just one example but I think it illustrates that shared experiences in themselves is no panacea for hatred and distrust. There is a whole life surrounding those experiences, and a whole life that can make the difference between recognition and denial.

Having only interviewed the participants at one time it is hard for me to say whether their stories and memories have changed with their telling in the way that Ricoeur describes. But I can say that they got the chance to do it. I interviewed the Vive Zene participants after the group session whose main theme was children. One woman spoke of how coincidences shapes the life of both individuals and countries.

“...there are so many coincidences, we had the war and were it not for the war you would never come to Bosnia (laughs) and some people would never know about us, we wouldn’t know about some people. Everything is unpredictable. You can maybe hope to plan something but actually the main thing you cannot do, you can’t even plan your own future. I always remember when I was raising my children and during that period I was talking to my husband and I remember very often we were using that phrase: Oh God what will happen to our children, how will they develop and what is going to be for them in this world in the future.”

Participant A, Vive Zene

Then she talked about her son’s development from a boy who wanted to be a soldier to a young man who wanted to stay close to his parents to a man who has a family of his own in another country. During the session she had aired her memories of being a parent with small children, of seeing them grow up and make their own choices and seeing their, and her own, choices limited by war.

5:2 Co-operation

Co-operation is the part of reconciliation that makes it practical and not just a nice idea. I see all kinds of common activities as co-operation, including socializing. The degree of multinational socializing outside of the organizations differed a lot between participants. But all claimed to have no problem with working or socializing with people of other nationalities in general. Most of the women said that nationality was simply not an issue for them, and had never been. There were several accounts of long term multinational contacts, both before and after the last war. One of the Vive Zene participants, a Bosnjak refugee from Bratunac who had settled down permanently in Dokanj, problemized the issue for me. She got along well with her Bosnian Serb neighbour in Dokanj, but found it hard to accept that her mother, who had moved back to Bratunac, was behaving towards the Bosnian Serb neighbours there as if nothing had happened. This adds a dimension to contact theory thinking on how to get people to generalize from the individual to the whole group. This woman had no problem with the general group of Bosnian Serbs, it was the ones she connected to traumatic events that she found difficult to deal with. A person can make a difference between people who are felt to belong to the outgroup in a general kind of way and people who are felt to be more directly connected to the negative things associated with the outgroup. These are complex and intertwined feelings that, in my view, strengthens the case for a more complex and
intertwined model for contact work where the connections between the groups and the individuals are clear but not overemphasised, i.e. Pettigrew’s model as described earlier.

The Forum Zena women seemed to share the attitude that life has got to go on and the practicalities of life demands that you can’t isolate yourself from some people just because they are Bosnjaks or Bosnian Serbs.

“You have to live. And you cannot do that without people. It is impossible to make one kind of people live without the other.”
Participant D, Forum Zena

But right after the war ended, multinational socializing was a very distant idea.

“With all the suffering and the media and the politics, you simply could not believe that you could sit down and have coffee and conversation, not after all that happened here.”
Participant A, Forum Zena

Obviously, Forum Zena has shown that it is possible. Forum Zena’s participants show that it is possible in an individual way as well. One of them, a Bosnian Serb, was verbally attacked by a Bosnian Serb neighbour for welcoming a Bosnjak neighbour back from exile and having her over for coffee in the garden.

"Because she lost her husband as well, but now that woman has apologised to me, because she understands the situation and she talks with my neighbour now.”
Participant B, Forum Zena

It is difficult to measure individual change but with Fokus the meeting’s practical consequences are clear. The network has turned into an arena for co-operation between NGO’s and independent activists where they share their expertise and help each other find solutions to their problems. They even work together when it comes to applying for donor money, choosing the project they feel can make the most of the resources offered.

5:3 Trust

Trust is one of the most fundamental building blocks of reconciliation but not all that easy to come by. Three directions of trust are of interest in this thesis: the trust between the people, organizers and participants who are involved in activities, the trust the participants have or do not have for people of other nationalities in general, and the trust they have in society as a whole. You can have one or two without the other(s) but for reconciliation to be achieved, you need them all.

While most of the participants I talked to claimed they trusted the others enough to talk about everything, the organizers of Vive Zene did not feel that the Dokanj group trusted each other enough to probe the really burning issues.

“That’s why I say it is hard, because they know each other, they have been in the social club for so long, we have been working with them for so long and still they don’t trust each other on this level of trauma.”
Jasna Zezevic, director Vive Zene

When asked about how they felt when they first came to the respective organizations, most of the women claimed that they had not worried about meeting women of another nationality. Two women in Forum Zena said that they had been nervous before their first contact with the organization. One was a participant, a Bosnian Serb, who had worried that she would be
accused by Bosnjak women who had lost their husbands. The other was Amela Salkic, Bosnjak returnee who is now co-director in the organization.

"We sometimes tell it like a joke, it is funny, because I came scared. I came in to the office, there were a lot of women, and I... usually it was normal to expect some kind of reaction, that someone will tell me something bad, I was in some way researching the situation. But there wasn’t any negative reaction, any bad reaction.”
Amela Salkic, co-director Forum Zena

A common argument for trusting the other people in the organization, no matter what nationality, was that everyone was there for similar reasons.

Belma Zulcic was absolutely sure that without the trust that had been built up over the Fokus meetings, one Bosnian Serb woman would never have dared to tell what she knew about the location of mass graves.

“I think in real conversation and in working together people can recognize if you are telling the truth and that is a way to develop trust.”
Belma Zulcic, main assistant to the director, Fokus

Here Belma touches on an interesting issue, that it is not just talking, but doing things together, which builds trust. Talk can be cheap, and it is in the way people behave that you see what their word is worth.

When it comes to trusting the wider group of the other nationality, most participants in both Vive Zene and Forum Zena claimed that trust and nationality was not an issue and had never been, that it is all about individuals, basically the same line of arguing that was used for co-operation. The people who were guilty of bad things were singled out from the larger group. But the issue of not knowing who was guilty and how to deal with that uncertainty was also brought up by some interviewees. When a war is fought in the name of nationality, negative generalization is one of the weapons. How do you turn that around to positive generalization once the war is over?

The organizers of Forum Zena know what a fragile thing trust is. They know that all their work in bringing people together and getting them to talk to each other and forming some kind of relationships can be ruined with one list of names from the Hague, or one rumour of a rape in some isolated village. Amela Salkic illustrated the volatile situation with a fictive example of someone spreading the rumour that a Bosnjak woman had been raped by Bosnian Serbs.

“Can you imagine how local people who lives here, Serbs, will think when they hear that? They will say ”Why is she saying something like that now? We hate her, she lies.” Bosnjaks will start to be afraid, because maybe that was something that happened somewhere in some village before. Because of that, we live in fear and hate, fear in Bosnjaks, hate in Serbs. The making of the fear is something that happens here continuously. When that fear stops, then the people can talk, then they can accept everything.”
Amela Salkic, Co-director Forum Zena

The relationships formed are fragile because trust is not built up only between individuals, but within a society. In a place like Bratunac, where the High Representative and the ICTY have been taking turns in removing people from office when their involvement in war crimes, their support of fugitive war criminals or their obstruction of the return process is revealed, the foundation for a general kind of trust is missing. That makes the specific kind of trust, between individuals, so much harder to build and so much easier to break.
5:4 Future

Reconciliation is built to last. If it does not last, it never was reconciliation but rather ceasefire or peaceful co-existence with an inevitable best before-date. In my interview guide I used questions on voting to try to get an idea of the interviewees’ feelings about the future of their country.

Most interviewees again professed their non-nationalistic thinking by saying that they could vote for a politician of a different nationality and that it was about the person, not the group he or she belonged to. Some of the participants had strong views on the dangers on nationalistic parties in general, arguing that they were the cause of the war and making no differences between the nationality of the nationalists, so to speak.

“Of course I could vote for a Serb politician, but only if I could be sure that he would be able to be a leader for all nationalities, like Josip Bros Tito.”
Participant D, Forum Zena

While one of the interviewees was an elected official in the municipality of Bratunac, more participants seemed to share a general distrust of politics and politicians. This was something that Forum Zena and Most tried to counteract with Forum Zena encouraging women to engage in politics and Most encouraging women to vote for female politicians.\(^{70}\)

5:5 Change

The parameters of this project makes it impossible for me to say anything definitive about the possible changes that has taken place as a result of the organizations’ activities. I could only ask participants and organizers about what changes they saw or felt.

To some the important change was that they had somewhere to go outside of their home. One Vive Zene participant found a new experience in sharing the other women’s feelings and pain.

“... Except for the fact that I cry more, (laughs), because we start to talk and when I hear how lonely the other women are I find myself in the role of other women and I feel for them. Basically, sharing those feelings, that is what is new.”
Participant B, Vive Zene

But since most of the participants held that they had never had any kind of problem with accepting, trusting and co-operating with people of other nationalities, there was in most cases no issue of change of attitude.

“I haven’t changed my opinions because people were the same even before the war and I didn’t have problems with that. We are all the same, perhaps it is just that we pray in three different ways here, to the same god, let’s put it that way. But we are all the same flesh and blood and everyone feels the same thing. My personal attitude, in my life at least, I try to help people and if I am not able to help anyone, for sure I am not going to hurt them.”
Participant D, Vive Zene

But looking at what participants said in other parts of the interviews there were signs of change. After attending Forum Zena workshops and having the organization’s office as a

\(^{70}\) Both Forum Zena’s and Most’s work in this area is parts of a national campaign to get more women into politics. A gender equality law was adopted in 2003 and gender equality and empowerment of women is one of three Millenium Development Goal priorities in Bosnia-Hercegovina. Marshall, Venancio and Sirco 2004
coffee stop on every trip into town, participants testified to feeling more at ease with people of
the other nationality. Small things, such as feeling confident enough to say “Hello” to
somebody and be sure to get a “Hello” back, can make a lot of difference in an environment
of distrust.

"She listens to me, I listen to her. And she will understand me a little bit, at least enough to say Hello to me in a
nice way. When she found out about my problems and I found out about her problems. No matter of the woman
who I meet, no matter of nationality, now when I meet her on the town I say Hello to her in a nice way. ”
Participant D, Forum Zena

None of the organizers thought that they worked with simple issues or quick solutions.
Change takes time.

"And it was hard, it was really hard. But with every meeting, or you can also say with every sentence, every
word it was a little bit easier.”
Belma Zulcic, main assistant to the director, Fokus

The Dokanj group had been on the brink of splitting a few times when the issues discussed
became too difficult and both of the organizers I talked to expressed uncertainty as to how
long it would take to get results. The only thing they knew was that it was not going to be
enough with the initially scheduled 15 sessions. Azra Arnautovic from Vive Zene and Belma
Zulcic from Fokus both brought up the women´s lives outside of the group as a possible
obstruction to any progress they might make in the group.

"But those women are under the influence of their husbands, even though their husbands are dead, they are still
so much present in their lives because that´s how the way they were raised, that´s the way it is. Because they still
have difficulties to understand that they have rights to bring decisions for themselves. That´s something that they
don’t understand. They don’t understand that they can be creators of their lives, they can be engaged into
something and nothing spectacular will happen. Because we always try to link, to make that link between what is
going on in the present situation with something inside of the person. We try to draw some parallel lines, in order
for them to understand it easier. And that they adopt it as we teach them. We always try to give some additional,
traditional note, to all of that, how everything was before, how it is now, what has changed. What has changed
around them, and what has changed inside of them, because of what has changed around them. So basically the
process is developing.”
Azra Arnautovic, psychotherapist, Vive Zene

In Forum Zena, pessimism got the better of the activists from time to time, but not enough to
make them give up. During one recent campaign to spread information about what happened
in Srebrenica, the organization received threatening calls and had their phone cut off for
several hours, a popular way of intimidating activists in the Bratunac area. It was not so much
the harrassment and the stress that drove Stanojka Tesic to the edge of her patience, but the
frustration over how little had changed.

"And then you ask yourself "How much more?”, because if ten years isn’t enough to accept something, how
long does it take?”
Stanojka Tesic, director Forum Zena

5:6 Reconciliation

The interviewees were asked if reconciliation meant anything to them and what it meant or
what their definition of reconciliation was. Their answers reveal the range and complexity of
the term. Almost without exception, the interviewees would end up talking about what is
lacking in order to achieve reconciliation in Bosnia-Hercegovina. No matter how pleased the
woman claimed to be in her own life and with her own multinational relations, she always
saw that whatever reconciliation is, it has not been achieved in Bosnia-Hercegovina yet.

To the organizers of Vive Zene, and other activists, the conspiracy of silence is one of the
major obstructions in the reconciliation process. In Forum Zena and Fokus there were talk of
the victims’, Bosnjak, Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Serb, need to be acknowledged as victims
before they can move on towards reconciliation. That was seen as directly tied to the
perpetrators admitting their guilt. To several participants reconciliation meant going back to
the ways of Yugoslavia, where everyone got along. But one of them, as soon as she had said
that, had to add that what happened, happened within the borders of former Yugoslavia.

"Because we are of the same country. It’s not that someone came from outside and attacked us, and we had to
defend, we have done it between ourselves. For some strange reason.”
Participant B, Vive Zene

This is an interesting point. In a post-conflict situation, people understandably long for the
times before the war, before they lost their homes, their families, their sense of security. At
the same time the origin of the conflict lies in what was before. The aim of successful
reconciliation work after a war like the one in Bosnia-Hercegovina cannot be to rebuild
relations exactly as they were before the conflict started because that would only lead to
history repeating itself. But it is the same people who lived in the country before the war who
have to share it afterwards. This issue is something I have not seen covered in writing on
reconciliation.

The interviews revealed that there is something unsatisfactory with the term reconciliation.
Many claimed that they had no individual need for reconciliation with random people of other
nationalities. “Why should I reconcile with someone who has done nothing to me?” was a
common answer when I asked about the meaning of reconciliation, without me suggesting
that the term was supposed to be interpreted in that “post-schoolyard-brawl-shake-hands-and-
say-you’re-sorry kind of way”. It was obvious that many felt that at least some part of the
prescribed reconciliation process was a bit phoney, or at least unnecessary.

At the same time, several of the interviewees also talked of the necessity of each individual
thinking about their own responsibilities and their own guilt as well as their own losses.

"For me it means something that a person needs to clear up in their own mind. And I, every person needs to
think about: Where was I before the war, where was I during the war, where I was after the war, what have I
been doing, how much contributed I to everything that happened?”
Participant A, Vive Zene

The interviewees shifted between denying that there is an individual need for reconciliation
between innocent people and saying that everyone must question themselves and their roles in
what had happened. It seems to me that the interviewees tried to express the gap between the
knowledge that an individual very well may be innocent and the feeling that there is a twisted
kind of group identity that is at least partly responsible for the war, and that an innocent
person may commit themselves to that group identity. This feeling was all the more strong
because people could recognise it in themselves.

“And again I have to say that I am not responsible for that what happened in Bratunac but I feel uncomfortable
with myself because I am a part of that people, I belong to that nation. The Serbs did it but I didn’t do it but it
was done by Serbs.”
Stanojka Tesic, director, Forum Zena
To a person of mixed descent, such as Vive Zene’s director Jasna Zezevic, whose father is Bosnjak and mother is Croat, the question of reconciliation and of speaking of the past, became a highly personal issue. Before the last war, she had no idea that her father’s family had been driven out of their home in the 2nd world war.

"But when war started, I was splitting because one part of my family in Croatia they have one story and my aunts here they have different story, from 2nd world war. I am really confused and I learn a lot about trauma, psychology and everything and I can’t find reconciliation in myself and then I look at these women who don’t have education in this field of psychology, how can they understand if I can’t in myself... really find some connection, what is the truth?"
Jasna Zezevic, director, Vive Zene

There was a parallel shift from the individual level of reconciliation to the community level and back again. It is not something that can be worked at only on the personal level, the person needs to feel that others, that society is working towards the same goal. But this is not the case, according to all organizers.

“That what we do here, is always unique cases, personal cases, we speak about small communities, little number of women can hear each other. But they cannot speak on the other, like TV, radio, public tribunal because there is still a fear.”
Stanojka Tesic, director, Forum Zena

To some women, reconciliation was little more than the end of war and the possibility to return home. To one woman, it was all she asked for. To another it was not necessarily a positive thing, but she saw no options. Somehow she had ended up in the middle of a war that drove her from her home and left her and her husband unemployed. When the war was over she found herself in another part of the country knowing that if she were to go back to her old home, she would probably be in an even worse economical situation, and in a minority position in a possibly hostile environment. To her, reconciliation meant being polite to the Bosnian Serb neighbours when she went back to her parents for a visit. She acknowledged that the war was probably forced onto them as well, and that they followed orders from leaders. But she could not be friends with them, in the same way that she was before the war.

Another woman saw reconciliation as a personal feeling of relief, but a relief she will only have when all war criminals are arrested.

“Only way for reconciliation, that is relief, is when war criminals are arrested and taken away from here. Like for example, concrete in my case, if you meet a person that you know, and I meet her, I meet that person every day, the person who came in front of my house and took my husband away. When those persons are removed from here to be judged by somebody, that is when we can have reconciliation.”
Participant A, Forum Zena

That woman was one of the two who talked explicitly about forgiveness, even though the question of forgiving can be interpreted as being the undertow of the “Why should I reconcile with someone who has done nothing wrong to me?” argument. While she stated that man exists to forgive her fellow beings, she also made it clear that there are things that cannot be forgiven. Her definition of reconciliation shows the bridge between the individual and the societal level. As much as people talked about the need for everyone to look into themselves and question their own consciences, the community level always came up as an obstruction to that introspective effort. Over and over again, people returned to the arrests of Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic as the most important steps towards reconciliation. As long as those two men are free, there will be an ongoing crisis of confidence in Bosnia-Hercegovina. The
thousands of people still missing are another shadow that fall over the reconciliation process.  

Belma Zulcic does not hesitate on the influence of political decisions and positions on the work Fokus is trying to do. She described one catastrophic seminar where the activists had actually feared for their lives because of the aggressions in the air.

"Yes, it was... unbelievable tension, tensions and really, many accusations, many, it was really hard but as I said to you, everything depends on the local political situation, on the political activities in the last time. So if something happened lately, something bad, so everyone is really upset and it is very easy to have those problems re...lived really. But on the other hand perhaps in another time or another place this meeting could have been totally different in Stolac, so...

Belma Zulcic, main assistant to the director, Fokus

Looking back at what Govier and Ericsson writes about reconciliation the thinking of the participants and organizers show both more and less complexity. When expressing how they feel that they should think about reconciliation, it seems less, when expressing their own interpretations, it seems more. I have already mentioned the issue of how to deal with nostalgia for the past and the necessity to build something new post-conflict. The personal feeling of reconciliation is something I feel the interviewees’ stories also add to the theories of reconciliation. The total material of the interviews lends a much smaller weight to forgiving than Govier does. This could be a result of my interviewing, there were no direct questions on forgiveness. But it could also be an expression of how forgiving is the part of reconciliation that is the furthest away from being realized in Bosnia-Hercegovina today. People do trust some people and some co-operation is at best voluntary and at worst unavoidable, but as long as those who consider themselves victims do not feel acknowledged as such, they find it very hard to forgive, no matter that it is possible to forgive without having been asked to. I return to the “less” part as an interpretation of the top-down communication on reconciliation in the conclusion.

6 Conclusion

“Poems and stories, are not pills, manifestos or blueprints of utopia, but ways of coming at life, as private as a kiss and as public as a morgue.”

James K. Baxter

While from the start I worked, not with a set hypothesis but with the research question and every effort to have an open mind, in my heart of hearts I did believe that sharing stories of life had to play a positive role in reconciliation. During the fieldwork my confusion grew in time with my embarrassment over how naive I initially had been. I realised that I had seen the grassroots and the leaders as having influence over each other only in very public ways when it comes to reconciliation. The subtle and hidden flows of influence, for good and bad, I did not factor in. It makes everything more complex, but it also makes everything make more sense. Because if talking is so good, and so much talk is going on, why aren’t we all just getting along? That question is the negative form of my research question. The answer to them both is that while talking and sharing personal experiences is good, it is not done in a vacuum. These stories are not just shared with the persons present in a reconciliation-positive meeting, they are also lived and told in a world outside of that meeting. This influences the impact the storysharing can have on the individuals involved and on the larger society.

71 According to the IRCR, the more than 14 000 people are still missing in Bosnia-Hercegovina.

72 Quoted in Burt 2005, p85
The essence of this thesis lies in the gaps that I saw when I talked to women trying to get along in Bosnia-Hercegovina. These paradoxes, or contradictions, could of course be the result of people only telling me half the truth and not being consistent with the other half, not getting their stories straight, to use tv-cop language. But I don’t think so. I think it is because the contradictions are real and there is no straight story.

The first paradox is that the women benefiting from the described organizations’ multinational reconciliation work seem to be the ones in least need of it. They already have a positive attitude towards people of other nationalities, in fact they would not be in the organizations if they didn’t. It’s self selective entry. Is it also wasting time preaching to the converted? No. They may not need converting, but they need all the encouragement they can get. As I hope I have shown, these women are doing exceptional work, as in both outstanding work and work that is an exception to what is going on around them. They have lived through war, been bombarded with propaganda (not to mention actual bombs) and have to face their losses and the distrust and sometimes hate of other people every day. There is no guarantee that they get support for their positive attitude to multinational life at home or anywhere else outside of the organizations. Having a place to go to where they can exercise and strengthen that attitude in active storysharing is good.

But what about the people who stay away from the multinational organizations, who don’t want to be reconciled, those that could be seen as the truly needy ones? Following Ericsson’s and Cockburn’s preconditions for successful reconciliation work as described in chapter 4, it would seem that they are not ready for that kind of contact anyway. To gain anything from that kind of carefully set up and profound encounters you have to have in some way already accepted the idea of reconciliation, even if you are not there as a whole person yet. To get the diehards to come to that point, what is needed more than anything else is a society that is making an overt change to a reconciliatory, multinational, non-segregational, non-discriminating attitude. If they feel support for their isolationist stance from the community in general, they have no reason to question their beliefs and actions. Unfortunately I don’t think that it necessarily follows from this that the diehard haters will open up if they feel pressure from overall society to do so. The role of victim and outsider can be very seductive and arguably some of Bosnia-Hercegovina’s problems are based in the tendency of some groups to always cast themselves in the role of the injured party. Heavy leaning from above on them to change might result in an even stronger cultivation of isolation and outgroup hostility. This is not to say that they should be left alone in the hope that they will only nurture their distrust and fear in silence, and not actually try to do anything about it. If there are organizations such as the ones described in this thesis showing that not only is multinational relationships and co-operative work possible but mutually beneficial, and the authorities show that discrimination and segregation is not acceptable, the examples might lead to an attitude change even in the most negative, and that can eventually get them to a point where they can gain from the reconciliation work of Cockburn’s and Ericsson’s type. A propaganda-busting media situation with balanced coverage of national issues would probably also help to promote an attitude change.

Another paradox is the three strands that run through the discussion on reconciliation and what it needs. First there is the claim that there is no need for reconciliation between two people who have not caused each other direct pain. Second is the claim that individuals from one group can recognise that individuals from the other group are not responsible for what they personally have suffered. And third is the seemingly opposing claim that everybody who
belongs to a group needs to recognise what that group has done to other groups and take some kind of responsibility for it. Reconciliation both is and is not an individual issue.

There is actually two contradictions here. One is lodged between the individual and the group, between what the individual knows about herself and what she feels about the group she belongs to. This is a contradiction that the interviewees had no problems seeing in others as well as themselves. While I have an individual identity I also share a group identity and while I have no total control over the group I cannot deny all responsibility for it either. If someone has taken my group identity and turned it into a reason for violence I must respond to that, one way or another. Sharing a personal story that reflects both me as an individual and my own take on my group identity is a non-violent, open and exploring way of responding. Sharing life experiences has a tendency to make you see things in a different light, including your own identity. Talking may cause thinking. Maybe it is that invisible warning label on conversation that keeps people from talking about the war. Listening to a life story can give acknowledgement to victims, a foundation to build trust on for the sceptical and a reason to start looking at themselves for everyone.

The other contradiction is in the idea of reconciliation itself. It is something that is needed on a societal level, but must be experienced and acted out on the personal level. Telling a story is one way of bridging the gap between the individual and society.

Another gap is between individual and the authorities; municipal, regional, entity level and national. I see this gap partly expressed in the interviewee`s version of reconciliation as something much less than what Govier and Ericsson envisions. Reconciliation is built into the Bosnia-Hercegovinan constitution and ordinary people may not know the exact words of the constitution but they do know that reconciliation is something that is prescribed from above. But the version of reconciliation that has reached the grass roots seems to be both simplistic and condescending, the shake-hands-and-say-you´re-sorry kind of reconciliation I referred to in section 5:6. It is a mix of that ordinary people should further complicate their relations with persons they have no personal grudge against by seeing those relationships as in need of reconciliation, and that they should forget what has happened and just get on with their lives. That this leads to some confusion and does little to improve already strained relations between citizens and authorities is only to be expected. There are public campaigns to improve multinational relations and encourage reconciliation in Bosnia-Hercegovina. To look at how they formulate reconciliation and how they work, or could work, is a topic for a study I would love to do, or read, in the future.

As I wrote in the introduction, starting out with this project I had some ideas about the surplus values of storysharing, supposing that storysharing has a fundamental value as a tool in reconciliation work. The surplus values would be that storysharing can be low tech and done with relatively small financial resources. While I still believe that this is true I think it is important to point out that these two characteristics in combination does not add up to that storysharing is low maintenance. The human resources input, to talk corporatese, is big. And while storysharing can be low tech and cheap, that doesn’t mean that it has to be to have value. Vive Zene needs money to have two paid psychotherapists leading the womens group in Dokanj. When it comes to the technical side, the organizations I interviewed did not make use of any kind of technological aids in their work. But in other situations, for example where geography or issues of personal safety makes it impossible for the participants to meet

73 Of course, the organizations are not working in a stone age environment, they have telephones and faxes and computers. What I mean is that they do not use technology in the specific reconciliation work.
in person, communication technology has great facilitating potential. On-line communication makes real time conversation possible and exchange of taped stories can add to the alternative perspectives that so much of this thesis has been about. Technological equipment can also help by offering a way of expressing personal stories that is non-verbal. My point here is that you don’t have to have the technology to do it.

Reconciliation is about bridging gaps. After a war there is a gap between people who have lost faith in each other. There is also a gap between the past and the present, a gap left by all that was lost in the conflict. There is a gap between the individual and the society that betrayed her to be a society and becoming chaos. All these gaps have to be traversed. A story told in earnest and listened to in the same spirit binds a tightrope over the gap for storyteller and listener. But there is a whole lot else besides that influencing the success of the tightrope walkers.

Working on this thesis I inevitably see all the questions I did not ask and wonder about what answers I would have got. But at some point you have to stop asking questions and start analysing the answers you already have received. I hope that the questions I did ask has given me enough answers to make a relevant point and that the questions I did not ask are the ones I will come back to in another project.

7 Postscript

On a hill sits a shepherd, quietly watching his grazing sheep. Up the hill comes a man in a suit, carrying a briefcase. Hello, says the shepherd. Hello, says the man in the suit. Then the man in the suit asks the shepherd: If I can guess the correct number of sheep in your flock, will you give me one of them? Sure, says the shepherd. The man in the suit takes a computer out of his briefcase and starts computing away. After a little while he smiles at the shepherd and says: You have 321 sheep in your flock, correct? That is correct, says the shepherd, collect your reward. The man in the suit picks an animal but before he leaves with it the shepherd asks: If I can guess your profession, will you return my animal to me? Sure, says the man in the suit. You’re an expert, says the shepherd. That is right, says the man in the suit, how did you know? Well, says the shepherd, first: you turn up here without being invited, second: you tell me things I already know and third: give me back my dog.  

While making no claims whatsoever of being an expert I did invite myself to the organizations described in this thesis and there is a risk that this document will only tell them things they already know. But I know that I got a lot more out of it than the man in the suit and I thank the interviewed women for sharing their knowledge, stories and experience with me. Hvala.

I would also like to thank my supervisor, Anders Hoeg Hansen for his advice throughout the project. He set the standards from the start and he has not allowed me to slack off since.

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74 From a joke told by Dubravka Kovacevic
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**Internet resources**
International Red Cross, [www.icrc.org](http://www.icrc.org)
Kvinnna till Kvinnas information page on their co-operation with Most, [http://www.oktk.se/landinfo/bosnien/sam_most.html](http://www.oktk.se/landinfo/bosnien/sam_most.html)
Office of the High Representative in Bosnia-Hercegovina, [www.ohr.int](http://www.ohr.int)
Sida, Swedish International Development Agency, [www.sida.se](http://www.sida.se)
Vive Zene, [www.vivezene.ba](http://www.vivezene.ba)

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