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Article

## Constructing “Ideal Victim” Stories of Bosnian War Survivors

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### Abstract

Previous research on victimhood during and after the Bosnian war has emphasized the importance of narratives but has not focused on narratives about victimhood or analyzed post-war interviews as a competition for victimhood. This article tries to fill this gap using stories told by survivors of the Bosnian war during the 1990s. In this analysis of the retold experiences of 27 survivors of the war in northwestern Bosnia, the aim is to describe the informants’ portrayal of “victimhood” as a social phenomenon as well as analyzing the discursive patterns that contribute to constructing the category “victim”. When, after the war, different categories claim a “victim” status, it sparks a competition for victimhood. All informants are eager to present themselves as victims while at the same time the other categories’ victim status are downplayed. In this reproduction of competition for the victim role, all demarcations that were played out so successfully during the war live on.

### Keywords

Bosnia; crime; narrative; perpetrator; victim; victimhood; war

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Previous research on victimhood during the Bosnian war often has presented a one-sided picture of the “victim” and “perpetrator”. The picture of victims is often exemplified by killed or raped and displaced adults and children. The picture of perpetrators is exemplified by soldiers or policemen who have displaced, raped, and killed civilians. Some research on the post-war society in Bosnia, however, presents a more complex picture of the “victim” and “perpetrator”. Victims are partly exemplified by individuals killed in the war and partly by individuals who survived the war but lost relatives or were displaced or raped during the war. The picture of the perpetrator is exemplified partly by former soldiers and policemen who had killed and raped as well as participated in the displacement, and partly by economic perpetrators who became rich during the war (Androff, 2012; Delpla, 2007; Fischer & Petrović-Ziemer, 2013; French, 2009; Helms, 2007; Kiza, Rathgeber, & Rohne, 2006; Stefansson, 2007; Steflja, 2010; Stover & Shigekane, 2004; Webster, 2007; White, 2003; Zarkov,

2007; Zdravković-Zonta, 2009). These two concepts of “victim” and “perpetrator” are objects of a general post-war discussion on a symbolic level. This social phenomenon becomes clear during trials at tribunals (Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2015; ICTY, 2015a, 2015b) where war crimes are dealt with or in other general inter-human and inter-institutional interaction, but as my research shows, the correlative discussion also appears in research interviews.

The Bosnian war can be seen as a particularly illustrative case of war sociology, based on the ethnic mix of the population prior to the war. War antagonists often knew each other from before the war. Serbian soldiers and policemen carried out mass executions, forced flight, and systematic rape and set up concentration camps in their effort to drive away Bosniacs<sup>1</sup> and Croats from northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina.

<sup>1</sup> Bosnian Muslims began to identify themselves as Bosniacs during the war. The term “Bosniac” is actually an old word meaning “Bosnian”, which is now used both in an official context and everyday language.

The warfare was directly targeted against civilians (Case No.: IT-95-8-S; Case No.: IT-97-24-T; Case No.: IT-98-30/1-A; Case No.: IT-99-36-T; Case No.: IT-99-36-T; Case No.: IT-97-24-T. J).

Post-war Bosnians do not portray their victimhood only in relation to the war as a whole but also in relation to the specific actions of themselves and others during and after the war (Basic, 2015a, 2015d). How is one's victim status decided? Being an "ideal victim" seems desirable here; it upholds some sort of general status that can be set next to other status groups, for example "war criminals" (Christie, 1986). This study shows that stories of Bosnian war survivors are built on these and other social categorizations.

The article analyzes verbally depicted experiences of 27 survivors from the war in northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina. One aim of the article is to describe how the actors portray the social phenomenon of "victimhood", and the second is to analyze discursive patterns that interplay in the creation of the terms "victim" and "perpetrator". My research question is: How do the interviewees describe victimhood after the war? With this study, I try to access the phenomena of victimhood by analyzing the interviewees' stories, namely their own descriptions in relation to themselves and others (Baker, 1993[2006]; Blumer, 1986[1969]; Riessman, 1993).

In the following, I attempt to illustrate how victimization markers and the creation of the terms "victim" and "perpetrator" are exposed when interviewees talk about (a) war victimhood, (b) post-war victimhood, and (c) economic victimhood.

The following analysis showed that the Bosnian War survivors, in telling of war and its aftermath, attempt to establish their suffering as the worst. I argue that this is important for two reasons: 1) it illustrates that victimhood for these survivors is a desirable status, and 2) the survivors are claiming the legitimacy of their victimhood in relation to other victims, not just perpetrators.

## 2. Analytical Starting Points

This study joins those narrative traditions within sociology where spoken stories are considered as being based on experiences as well as being discursive. The general starting point of the study is interactionistic with focus on how people present their social reality (Baker, 1993[2006]; Blumer, 1986[1969]; Riessman, 1993). The interviewees' stories as well as the analysis of them could, in light of this perspective, be seen as activities that create meaning. Narratives are interpretative because they attempt to explain the world, but they also need to be interpreted. In this way, different social phenomena, such as conflict, competition, and victimhood, are created and re-created. In addition to this general starting point, I perceive the terms "con-

flict", "competition", "conflict point of interest", "social norm" and "ideal victim" as particularly relevant components in the specific stories that I have analyzed.

### 2.1. Conflict and Competition

Simmel (1955[1908]) understands social interaction as an interpersonal interaction—an interplay that can assume and display a variety of social forms. Conflict and competition, for example, are specific forms of interaction. Such forms of interaction often emerge in the post-war relations between the individuals and groups. Simmel (1955[1908]) argues that, in contrast to perfunctory understanding that implies that conflict disrupts the relations between parties, conflicts should rather be seen as an expression of the actors' powerful involvement in a situation, and conflicts fulfill an integrative function between involved parties.

Simmel (1955[1908], pp. 61-108) argues that conflicts and competition may keep fighting parties concentrated on a point of interest. Simmel (1955[1908], pp. 61-108) argues that points of interest enable struggle between fighting actors. He believes that focus on mutual points enables antagonism in the same way that absence of focus or the lack of conflict objects dampens tensions. Collins (2004, pp. 34, 79-109, 150-151, 183-222) offers similar thoughts, arguing that social life is shaped through a series of rituals in which individuals are interlinked when a common point of interest awakens their attention. When people move between different situations, earlier situations merge with the new ones. In consecutive interactions, involved individuals show respect and appreciation on behalf of objects seen as especially important.

When writing about conflicts, competition, and conflict points of interest in the following analysis, I am addressing the *verbal struggle* that occurs in analyzed sequences of the empirical material (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). From these sequences, different images of "victims" and "perpetrators" emerge.

### 2.2. Status of "Victim" and "Perpetrator"

This article contributes to a rich literature on war/genocide and victimhood. Some of this literature also addresses the "competition of victims". For example Bartov (2000), Moeller (1996), Olick (2005) and Olick and Demetriou (2006) discuss German claims to victimhood after the Second World War, claims that were often made by comparison to Jews. Furthermore, Holstein and Miller (1990) talk specifically about "victim contests". They argue that notions of victimhood reflect morality and claims about right/wrong, insiders/outside, etc.

Christie's (1972) study on concentration camp guards during World War II in Norway is imbued with a certain war interaction that includes the maintenance

of normality in various relations, partly between those guards working for the Germans, killing and torturing in the Norwegian camps, and partly between Yugoslav war prisoners who had been placed in Norwegian concentration camps and the Norwegian general public after the war (Christie, 1986). This relationship seems to be characterized by closeness and distance between actors where collective expectations of what is culturally desirable are defined (societal norms). Some guards portray the detainees as dirty and dangerous perpetrators—a threat against wartime’s existing order. The general consciousness, after the war, portrays the guards as mad and evil perpetrators because in Norway, after the war, there was a need for a dehumanized picture of the enemy, a real and distant perpetrator. The result from Christie’s study shows that the guards killing and torturing in the camps were ordinary Norwegians, and his point is that other Norwegians in wartime Norway would have done the same as those guards if they were the same age, had the same educational background, and had found themselves in the same situation.

Christie’s (1972, 1986) studies show a connection between societal norms and the “victim” and “perpetrator” statuses. Collective expectations of that which is culturally desirable are sometimes informal and unspoken and thus difficult for an outsider to understand. These norms often become clear when someone violates them and the environment reacts. Through this reaction, an image of the “ideal victim” is created. With the term “ideal victim”, Christie (1986) wants to describe that individual or individuals who, when subjects of crime, most easily will obtain the legitimate status of a victim: the individual should be “weak” and have a respectable purpose or honorable intentions when the attack occurs, and it should not be possible to blame the individual for being there. Furthermore, the ideal victim needs to have some influence to claim victim status. Ideal victims need and “create” ideal perpetrators. The perpetrator is expected to be large, mean, inhuman, and evil and without relation to the victim. The ideal perpetrator is a distant creature. He or she is a stranger who is not regarded as totally human (Christie, 1986).

The study of Lois Presser (2013) paints a diversified image of the social reality, especially in a war situation, where an act seen as righteous for one side is the worst atrocity for the other. The split logic of the diversified reality is produced and reproduced, inter alia, through stories. These stories produce and reproduce dominant actors in these violent situations (perpetrator), actors who acquire some kind of *permit* to hurt the inferior actor (victim). In an interesting way, Presser highlights how the dominant actors define themselves as being so *powerless* that they could not avoid hurting the inferiors. The dominant actors are given a permit from society to use violence, but they also seem

to have been caught in a *violence-interactive web* without a way out.

Presser (2013) writes that Tutsis in Rwanda, prior to and during the genocide in 1994, were called “cockroaches” and “dogs” and that Jews in Nazi Germany were called “rats”. Disparaging those who are the target of a violent attack means that an object of lesser complexity than the perpetrator is created, which confirms the *justification* of the violence. Presser notes that dominant perpetrators are often under the influence of stories that are produced, reproduced, and distributed throughout the society. She argues that the new social order that emerges in society during war results in the dehumanization of victims.

The “victim” category is not an objective category; it is in fact created during interaction between individuals, in the definition of the specific social situation. It could be seen as an abstraction or a social type (Åkerström, 2001; Bartov, 2000; Brewer & Hayes, 2011, 2013; Christie, 1986; Confino, 2005; Holstein & Miller, 1990; Kidron, 2004, 2012; Maier, 1993; Moeller, 1996; Olick, 2005; Olick & Demetriou, 2006). According to Holstein and Miller (1990) and Åkerström (2001), victimhood could also be seen as a product of moral creativity. It should not be possible to question the moral responsibility of an ideal victim. Brewer and Hayes (2011, 2013) argue that the portrayal of an ideal victim often has real consequences—that it does not exist only as a mental construction. For a specific category to achieve victim status, there must be some common interest that acts on behalf of the victims; in other words, there must be someone who has an interest in ensuring that the category achieves victim status. These activities sometimes take place on an institutional level and could be transferred to an individual level, as a conversation topic, for instance (Åkerström, 2001; Androff, 2012; Bartov, 2000; Brewer & Hayes, 2011, 2013; Christie, 1986; Confino, 2005; Delpla, 2007; Fischer & Petrović-Ziemer, 2013; French, 2009; Helms, 2007; Holstein & Miller, 1990; Kiza, Rathgeber, & Rohne, 2006; Kidron, 2004, 2012; Maier, 1993; Moeller, 1996; Stefansson, 2007; Steflja, 2010; Stover & Shigekane, 2004; Olick, 2005; Olick & Demetriou, 2006; Webster, 2007; White, 2003; Zarkov, 2007; Zdravković-Zonta, 2009).

The competition over the victim role is a comprehensive and tension-filled theme in my analysis. The viewpoints of the above-mentioned theorists seem useful in serving my goal of understanding the interviewees’ stories about victimhood, both as an analytical starting point and as a subject for nuance.

### 3. Method

The material for this study was collected through qualitatively oriented interviews with 27 survivors from the war in northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina. The ma-

terial was gathered during two phases. During phase one, March and November 2004, I carried out field work in Ljubija, a community in northwestern Bosnia.

Ljubija is a part of the Prijedor municipality. Before the war, the residents of Ljubija lived in two administrative areas (Mjesne zajednice). Upper Ljubija was ethnically diverse, and the residents lived in flats for the most part. Lower Ljubija was predominately inhabited by Bosniacs, and they mostly lived in single-family houses. The Ljubia region is known for its mineral wealth. There was plenty of iron ore, quartz, black coal, and clay for burning bricks as well as mineral-rich water. Most residents worked at the iron mine before the war. The war began in Ljubija in the beginning of the summer of 1992 when Serbian soldiers and police took over control of the local administrative government without armed resistance (Case No.: IT-97-24-T.; Case No.: IT-99-36-T.).

In Ljubija, I interviewed 14 people who were living there at that time and performed observations at coffee shops, bus stops, and the local marketplace and on buses. I also collected and analyzed current local newspapers being sold in Ljubija during my stay. I interviewed two women and five men who had spent the entire war in Ljubija, together with three women and four men who had been expelled from the town during the war but had returned afterwards. Six of these fourteen interviewees were Serbian, three were Croats, and five were Bosniacs.

Ljubija is a small community. Most of the pre-war population knew each other or had at least heard of one another. I experienced the beginning of the war in Ljubija personally as a member of those groups of people who were expelled from the area. I knew from before the war most of the interviewees and those mentioned during the interviews. I also possessed earlier knowledge about some of the events that were described in the interviews, which occurred during the war. Thus, the fictitious names that appear in the analysis (for example, Milanko, Dragan, Sveto, Milorad, Klan, Planić Mirzet, Savo Knezevic, Alma and Senada Husic, Bela, Laki, and Laic) are real people who are not unknown to me. This association, of course, affected the execution of the study. I was, on one hand, aware of the possible danger that my acquaintance with some informants and my knowledge about certain war events could affect the scientific nature of the text—and I worked intensely and continuously to be value-free in the analysis. On the other hand, my own experiences, from the war in Bosnia helped me more easily recognize, understand, and analyze social phenomena such as war victimhood.

During the second phase, April through June 2006, nine former concentration camp detainees were interviewed. They were placed in the concentration camps by Serbian soldiers and police even though they were civilians during the war. These individuals who were in-

terviewed, together with four relatives, all now live in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. Three women and ten men were interviewed. The majority of the interviewees come from the municipality of Prijedor (to which Ljubija belongs). Ten interviewees are Bosniacs and three are Croats. Parts of the material collected in 2004 and 2006 have been analyzed in other reports and articles. These analyses are based on the above-described material and with partly different research questions (Basic, 2005, 2007, 2013, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d).

To understand the dynamics concerning the upholding of the victim and perpetrator, this study analyzes a limited context in northwestern Bosnia, more specifically the area around Prijedor. I seek to place my discussion in relation to other studies on Bosnia and the region so that the reader can understand the extremely polarized environment that exists partly because of collectively targeted crime during the war (including concentration camps, systematic rape, mass executions, etc.), and partly because of the competition for victimhood after the war.

From the above, we see that informants belong to different ethnic groups, but the informants' ethnic background is not specified in the analysis that follows. I have not focused on ethnic background, hoping that this approach results instead in pointing the analytic focus towards social phenomena such as victimhood and competition.

When preparing for the interviews, I used an interview guide designed after, among other influences, the above theoretical interests. During the interviews, I strived for a conversation-oriented style in which the interviewer takes the role of a sounding board and conversation partner rather than an interrogator; the interview is designed as a so-called "active interview" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). The interviews lasted between one and four hours and were carried out in the Bosnian language. A voice recorder was used in all interviews, and all informants agreed to that. The interviewees were informed about the study's aim, and I pointed out that they could terminate their participation at any time.

The material was transcribed in the Bosnian language, usually the same day or the days just following the interview to ensure good documentation and to comment with details<sup>2</sup>. By commenting in the transcript, I produced a "categorization of data" (Ryen, 2004, pp. 110-112, 123-127). In encoding the statements, markers for victimhood and competition for the victim role were identified in the material. My choice of empirical examples was guided by the study's aim and how distinctly those empirical examples illustrated

<sup>2</sup> Relevant parts of the transcribed material were translated by an interpreter (some parts I translated personally). The aid of an interpreter has been helpful to minimize loss of important nuances.

the analytical point I wanted to highlight. For this reason, some of the more eloquent informants are heard more often than others.

The material from the interviews is analyzed based on a tradition from the qualitative method (see Silverman, 2006[1993], as an example). The above-mentioned theoretical interests—Simmel's view on competition and Christie's term "the ideal victim"—are not only applied here but also are challenged and modified with nuance.

This study shows that the analyzed post-war stories seem to be marked by competition for the role of victim. Here I want to emphasize that although this study aims at understanding the interviewees' stories, which sometimes speak of violent crimes experienced during the war, it does not seek to identify or point out individuals or groups as guilty. The interviewees' distribution of responsibility is at the center, namely their victim images, reproaches, accusations, and condemnations.

#### 4. War Victim

Individuals who were expelled from northwestern Bosnia during the war in the 1990s are, in legal terms, a recognized victim. They were subjects of crimes against humanity, and most were subjects of various types of violent crimes (Case No.: IT-95-8-S.; Case No.: IT-97-24-T.; Case No.: IT-98-30/1-A.; Case No.: IT-99-36-T.). Many perpetrators have been sentenced by the Hague Tribunal and the Bosnia and Herzegovina Tribunal on war crimes (Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2015; IC-TY 2015a, 2015b).

An analysis based on Christie's (1986) view regarding the informants' stories about the expulsion from northwestern Bosnia could add nuance to the images of the "victim" and "perpetrator". Pre-war acquaintances between the antagonists could further complicate the definition of an "ideal victim". Serbian soldiers and policemen and Bosniac and Croatian civilians in northwestern Bosnia often knew each other well from before the war, which has probably affected descriptions after the war.

Here is an example of altered relations with neighbors and acquaintances in Milanko's story. Milanko was a child during the war, and he told me how he saw his neighbors being battered and executed. He stayed in northwestern Bosnia during and after the war. These are Milanko's words on the spread of excessive violence during the war:

I feel sick from it, they put on their uniforms and go out to the villages to rape and kill women. Not just Dragan but also Sveto and Milorad and a bunch of others. How do they sleep now, do they worry for their children?....They abducted Planic Mirzet before my eyes. Milorad and the son of Sava Knezevic were the guilty ones. It was Milorad in person who

deported Alma and Senada Husic, together with many others, from Ljubija....In 1992, 1993, it was Milorad, Sveto, Klan who ruled and decided, they were gods. They did as they pleased. I just don't understand why nobody arrests them now?

In Milanko's story, we see that the conflict is portrayed through personified terminology (it is "Mirzet", "Dragan", "Sveto", "Milorad", and others) and maybe because of this personification, it is done in rather accusatory terms. The perpetrators' actions are most clearly shaped through concrete drama and described in terms of "uniform", "rape and kill women", and "arrests".

In categorizing a person as a perpetrator, one also instructs others to identify the result of the acts by the perpetrator. Attributing to someone a perpetrator status implicitly points out the perpetrator's complementary contrast—the victims (Åkerström 2001; Androff, 2012; Bartov, 2000; Brewer and Hayes 2011, 2013; Christie 1986; Delpla, 2007; Confino, 2005; Fischer, Petrović-Ziemer, 2013; French, 2009; Helms, 2007; Holstein and Miller 1990; Kidron, 2004, 2012; Kiza, Rathgeber, Rohne, 2006; Maier, 1993; Moeller, 1996; Olick, 2005; Olick and Demetriou, 2006; Stefansson, 2007; Steflja, 2010; Stover, Shigekane, 2004; Webster, 2007; White, 2003; Zarkov, 2007; Zdravković-Zonta, 2009). The previous empirical example shows how "perpetrator" and "victim" are constituted at the same time: The acts of the perpetrator take evident form as concrete drama and an explicit designation.

In Milanko's description "Planic Mirzet", "Alma and Senada Husic", and "many others, from Ljubija" are portrayed as ideal victims according to Christie's conceptual apparatus. These individuals are portrayed as weak during the war, and their purpose and intent cannot be seen as dishonorable. The perpetrators "Dragan", "Sveto", "Milorad", and "a bunch of others" are depicted as big and evil. What problematizes the image of an "ideal victim" in Christie's term is that the perpetrators and victims are not strangers to one another. They know each other well from before, and there are relations between them.

Milanko also demands law enforcement action against those who clearly meet the definition of a perpetrator ("I just don't understand why nobody arrests them now?"). He seems, by emphasizing the others' victim status, to construct a distinction against the perpetrators.

We see examples of relations after the war, concerning trials and interpersonal and inter-institutional interaction in research reports from war-victim organizations. A predominant number of Bosniac and Croat war-victim organizations appreciate and accept the efforts of tribunals, in contrast to Serbian war-victim organizations, which often distance themselves from the tribunals' findings (Delpla, 2007, pp. 228-229). Steflja (2010) argues that this administration of justice may

cement the antagonism and social identities that were actualized during the war. Another important point made by researchers, in noting that these actions, on the institutional level, frequently get transmitted to the individual level (Åkerström, 2001; Androff, 2012; Bartov, 2000; Brewer & Hayes, 2011, 2013; Christie, 1986; Delpla, 2007; Confino, 2005; Fischer & Petrović-Ziemer, 2013; French, 2009; Helms, 2007; Holstein & Miller, 1990; Kidron, 2004, 2012; Kiza, Rathgeber, & Rohne, 2006; Maier, 1993; Moeller, 1996; Olick, 2005; Olick & Demetriou, 2006; Stefansson, 2007; Steflja, 2010; Stover & Shigekane, 2004; Webster, 2007; White, 2003; Zarkov, 2007; Zdravković-Zonta, 2009). The stories in my empirical material seem to be influenced by (or comply with) the rhetoric of war-victim organizations and the tribunals.

In addition to the distinction between “victim” and “perpetrator”, the descriptions also reveal a closeness between the antagonists. Nesim is a former concentration camp detainee now living in the Scandinavian countries. He was handed over to the soldiers during an attack on his village. Here is his description of the transport to the concentration camp:

Those sitting in the van started looting, they wore camouflage uniforms, Ray-Ban sunglasses, black gloves, we were shocked, the impossible had become possible....When I saw how they beat those men which they picked up, and when I saw who guarded them by the railway, they were my workmates, this made the shock even bigger. One of them had worked with me for 14 years, and we had gone through good and bad times together, we shared everything with each other...I just froze.

Nesim places himself in a clear victim role, and he portrays the soldiers and policemen who expelled him and his neighbors as dangerous. Descriptions of objects such as “camouflage uniforms”, “Ray-Ban sunglasses” and “black gloves” are used in an effort to depict the soldiers’ actions as threatening. Nesim also uses dramaturgy when he talks about the shock he experienced (“the impossible had become possible”). When Nesim accentuates his victim role, he upholds and enhances the image of the perpetrators using dramaturgy and charged conflict points of interest.

Several interviewees who were displaced from northwestern Bosnia said that they saw their friends, neighbors, or workmates while they were being exiled. Continuing with Nesim’s description of the situation when “old friends” came and battered two inmates:

Nesim: One was frightened, everyone knew Crni, he was a maniac. I knew Crni from before when he worked as a waiter at the station and was normal. Now everyone was mad. I knew most of them, and it was hard finding a place to hide.

That which Nesim emphasizes in his story is fear, assault, and death in the camps. The reason for the difficulty in clearly defining “the ideal victim”, according to Christie’s (1986) perspective, is to be seen in Nesim’s depiction. My interviewees claim that those who suffered in the camps knew their tormentors. This familiarity can complicate a clear definition of the ideal victim according to Christie. Even Nesim’s portrayal of the perpetrators may give them some kind of victim role when they are described as mad (“he worked as a waiter at the station and was normal. Now everyone was mad”). Furthermore, what Nesim perceives as war crime others may perceive as deeds of heroism. Reality can be multifaceted, especially in a wartime situation, where something that is perceived as a righteous deed by one side could be seen as a hideous crime by the other. This is probably most clear in reports from the Hague Tribunal and the Bosnia and Herzegovina tribunal on war crime (Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2015; ICTY, 2015a, 2015b). A large majority of those indicted by the Tribunal begin their statement with the words “nisam kriv” (“not guilty”).

Presser (2013) means that the social reality is diversified, especially in a war situation. In the eyes of the perpetrators, this war victim was a deviator who did not respect the current social order (or rather the current disintegration of social order according to victim’s perspective) and therefore should be punished. Interviewee dramatizes the described situation, aiming at presenting the perpetrators’ actions as morally despicable and the victim position as a typical example of submission and weakness (Åkerström, 2001; Androff, 2012; Bartov, 2000; Brewer & Hayes, 2011, 2013; Christie, 1986; Delpla, 2007; Confino, 2005; Fischer & Petrović-Ziemer, 2013; French, 2009; Helms, 2007; Holstein & Miller, 1990; Kidron, 2004, 2012; Kiza, Rathgeber, & Rohne, 2006; Maier, 1993; Moeller, 1996; Olick, 2005; Olick & Demetriou, 2006; Stefansson, 2007; Steflja, 2010; Stover, Shigekane, 2004; Webster, 2007; White, 2003; Zarkov, 2007; Zdravković-Zonta, 2009). The image of the perpetrators and victim does not seem to exist merely as a construction of the mind. It seems that stories about perpetrators and victim still live, even long after the war.

Implicitly, interviewees create the correct morality when they reject the actions of the perpetrators. In other words, interviewees’ rejection, which reveals itself during the conversation, contains a moral meaning. Interviewees construct the morally correct action regarding the perpetrators’ action in contrast to that which they told us.

Stories about war violence, victim and perpetrator are examples of a certain war interaction that includes upholding normality in different relations, partly between perpetrators and victim, and partly between the perpetrators and the narrator. These stories are permeated with retold distance between actors where the

war's social order is defined. The interviewed in this study portray the perpetrators as dangerous, mad, and evil—on one hand as a clear threat to the pre-war prevailing order, and on the other, as an ideal enemy, a real but distant criminal.

### 5. Post-War Victim

Examining interviews, observations, and articles in newspapers, I found that developments during and after the war in northwestern Bosnia led to individuals' being categorized in four ways. The "remainders" consist of individuals who lived in northwestern Bosnia prior to, during, and after the war. Dragan, Milanko, Sveto, Milorad, Klan, and Crni belong to this group. Then we have the "returnees", comprising those individuals who were expelled from northwestern Bosnia during the war and now have returned to their pre-war addresses (returnees). Individuals mentioned here who are in this group are Bela and Laki. The "refugees" are individuals who came as refugees to northwestern Bosnia from other parts of Bosnia and Croatia and now have settled in the new area (i.e., like Ljubo, who appears later on). Finally, we have the "diaspora", the individuals who were expelled from northwestern Bosnia during the war and stayed in their new countries. The "diaspora" is represented by Planic Mirzet and Nesim, who both live in Sweden, together with Alma and Senada Husic, who both live in the USA. Individuals belonging to the "diaspora" usually spend their vacations in Bosnia.

The individuals who appear in the material seem to be relatively melded together, and interaction between them exists. Members of the different groups talk to each other when they meet in the streets or cafés in Ljubija (field notes). Analyzed newspapers also exhibit an image that could be seen as a common denominator for all four categories—all are constructed as an antipode to former politicians who are portrayed as corrupt and criminal.

In the interview narratives, however, there are clear distinctions; categorizations are made on the basis of being victims of the war. Conflict competition produces jealousy. For example, the "remainders" and "refugees" see the "returnees" and "diaspora" in a negative way. On the one hand, "returnees" and "diaspora" have a better economic situation than the "remainders" and "refugees", which has created jealousy. On the other hand, the "refugees" do not want to assimilate and have in time become the majority in northwestern Bosnia, which in turn has forced the "remainders" to follow their norms and values.

When people began returning to northwestern Bosnia, relationships changed between the involved parties. The area was flooded with "refugees" who arrived during the war. They lived in the houses and flats of "returnees" and sabotaged their return. On one

side, we have new perpetrators ("refugees") who, during the return, were assigned the role of distant threatening actors as strangers in the community (Bartov, 2000; Christie, 1972, 1986; Holstein & Miller, 1990; Simmel, 1964[1950], pp. 402-408; Moeller, 1996; Olick, 2005; Olick & Demetriou, 2006). On the other side, we have victims who received help and recognition from the surrounding allies and the local police, which made the *ideal* in the very concept disappear. Members of the returnees and diaspora were no longer "weak".

Christie (1986) argues that the ideal victim role requires an ideal perpetrator who is expected to be big, evil, and a stranger. During the war in northwestern Bosnia, the "returnees" and the "diaspora" confronted the "perpetrators", as mentioned in the previous section, who appeared big, evil, and inhuman. However, they were obstructed from being *ideal* perpetrators because they were not unknown to their victims. They were neighbors, living in the same town, being work-mates, which meant that there was a relationship between victim and perpetrators.

Markers of victimhood and the construction of the terms "victim" and "perpetrator" appear in the analysis of stories about returning after the war and refugees' arriving during the war. The following quotations give us an example of returnee stories in which a wartime perpetrator appears. Bela and Laki describe their first visit to the community from which they were expelled during the war:

Bela: Ranka and Anka (both friends of the interviewee) became pale-white, I asked them what was wrong, and they answered, here comes Laic. He had raped them lots of times during the war. I asked him what he wanted, and he answered that he had come to pay a visit to his neighbors. I told the police, and they chased him away. Go to hell you fucking pig, whom did you come to visit? (Bela talks angrily and shows how she "aimed" at Laic.)

Laki: Personally, I was not afraid. I was not a pig like they (war-time perpetrators), not even during the war, they should be afraid and ashamed. They killed innocent people, women, and children, I did not.

In these interviews, Bela and Laki portray themselves as both wartime and post-war victims. They separate the "returnees" from the "remainders". Conflict points of interest appearing in the description are "raped them lots of times", "you fucking pig", and "they killed innocent people, women, and children". Bela and Laki point out that it was the "remainders" who raped women and killed, and abused during the war. Following Christie's (1986) analysis of ideal victims, there is a reason the "returnees" are portrayed as victims. They described themselves as weak during the war and in some way even now when returning. They came to vis-



it their home town from which they were expelled during the war and where they, using Christie's words, had a respectable errand when the expulsion took place (during the war). No one can criticize them for having been in northwestern Bosnia in 1992 or for being there after the war.

The development of events in other parts of Bosnia and Croatia flooded northwestern Bosnia with "refugees". These individuals could be seen as victims—the refugee status is often charged with victimhood. "Refugees" occupied the houses and flats of "returnees" and, according to informants belonging to the "remainders", "returnees", and "diaspora", they actively sabotaged their efforts to return. These new perpetrators ("refugees") were, after the war, given the role of distant actors, strangers in the society (Simmel, 1964[1950], pp. 402-408) as well as being viewed as dangerous and threatening perpetrators (Christie, 1972; Christie, 1986). In an interview with the author<sup>3</sup>, Laki describes the refugees' resistance to return, and Milorad and Sveto describe the decay in society that came with the "refugees":

Laki: On St. Peter's Day, they (refugees) gathered round the church, and the drunkards' stories were all the same: Let's go to the mountains and beat up the Turks (demeaning word for Bosniacs). They came and then there was trouble.

Milorad: At my first contact with them (refugees), I thought they cannot be normal but after spending every day, for five years, with them, they become normal to you....You can see for yourself what Ljubija is like nowadays. It is wonderful for someone who has lived in the mountains without running water, electricity, and water closets. For someone like that, asphalt is the pinnacle, but all those who lived here before know what it was like then. The cinema, bowling alley, everything is ruined. The sports arena, Miner's House, everything is ruined.

Sveto: Downstairs from me, you hear chickens, where Said (Sveto's acquaintance) used to live. People and chickens do not live together, they never had. I don't know where they used to live before. Let us go to the pub tonight and you will see. The way they behave and talk is outrageous....We are a minority, we have no place there anymore. Before it was only five percent of those who visited the pub who had rubber boots and sheepskin vests, the rest had jeans or other normal clothes. Nowadays, the majority wear rubber boots and sheepskin vests.

<sup>3</sup> The transcripts is part of a single conversation between Laki, Milorad, Sveto and the author.

Studies on the post-war relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina show that relations between the "victim" and "perpetrator" are characterized by a combination of rejection and closeness as well as competition between them (Åkerström, 2001; Androff, 2012; Bartov, 2000; Brewer & Hayes 2011, 2013; Christie 1986; Delpla, 2007; Confino, 2005; Fischer & Petrović-Ziemer, 2013; French, 2009; Helms, 2007; Holstein & Miller, 1990; Kidron, 2004, 2012; Kiza, Rathgeber, & Rohne, 2006; Maier, 1993; Moeller, 1996; Olick, 2005; Olick & Demetriou, 2006; Stefansson, 2007; Steflja, 2010; Stover & Shigekane, 2004; Webster, 2007; White, 2003; Zarkov, 2007; Zdravković-Zonta, 2009).

In the prior quotation, Laki, Milorad, and Sveto seem to agree that the criticism raised against the "refugees" is well founded. The conflict points of interest can be seen when they say: "everything is ruined", "we are a minority", and "beat up the Turks". "Refugees" are depicted as a threat, they destroy the environment ("everything is ruined"), and they are rowdy ("there was trouble"). Laki, Milorad, and Sveto portray their own victimhood in relation to the decay of society and newly arrived "refugees".

In this context, "refugees" are portrayed as a community hazard or as external actors or, using Simmel's terminology, as strangers. According to Simmel (1964[1950], pp. 402-408), strangeness is characterized by a combination of nearness and remoteness, respectively nonchalance and commitment. The foreigner's position in the group depends on nearness versus remoteness throughout the relationship. When the issue of distance towards the foreigner is more dominant than nearness, we have a special relationship with the stranger—he is not a member of the actual group, but he is present.

In the Stefansson (2007) analysis, we can see that refugees who arrive at a community during the war can be perceived as a danger and a threat (as an "invasion" and "attack"). These individuals are often presented as dirty, poor, and primitive. This perception could be interpreted as an articulated identity construction carried out by individuals who want to describe themselves as different, being clean, rich, and modern.

In the depiction that Laki, Milorad, and Sveto sketch, there is a similar relationship. These actors' rhetoric projects the image of "the refugees" as strangers and a danger to society. Those refugees who ended up in northwestern Bosnia are described as the worst thing a society might experience. They are singled out as guilty for the cultural decline and the destruction of infrastructure.

The language in these quotations conveys an image of great polarization between the categories. On one side, we have the "remainders" and "returnees" and on the other the "refugees". The informants declare themselves as distant from the "refugees", but still there are signs of nearness between them. The actors

portray themselves as being part of two entities, one of which consists of “remainders” and “returnees” and the other of “refugees”. A competition at a symbolic level emerges between the two entities. The quotations may be seen as an arena for different swings between “us” and “the others” in which the image of victimhood is upheld. The conflict points of interest reproduce a certain competition because they keep the demarcation between victim and perpetrator alive.

Victim attribution often becomes a subject for discussions and negotiations (Åkerström, 2001; Androff, 2012; Bartov, 2000; Brewer & Hayes, 2011, 2013; Christie, 1986; Delpla, 2007; Confino, 2005; Fischer & Petrović-Ziemer, 2013; French, 2009; Helms, 2007; Holstein & Miller, 1990; Kidron, 2004, 2012; Kiza, Rathgeber, & Rohne, 2006; Maier, 1993; Moeller, 1996; Olick, 2005; Olick & Demetriou, 2006; Stefansson, 2007; Stefija, 2010; Stover, Shigekane, 2004; Webster, 2007; White, 2003; Zarkov, 2007; Zdravković-Zonta, 2009). Changing circumstances in the context may motivate different descriptions while similar petitions of victims can emerge from seemingly different situations. In this study, we have seen that everybody portrays themselves as victims but that a big difference appears among the different victim categories. To be tortured, killed, or banished is a dissimilar type of victimhood from feeling discriminated against or feeling that the environment is destroyed by primitive refugees. The latter example is about how the environment acted on the divergence of the collective expectations about what is culturally desirable in the society. In this reaction, a picture of “danger” is partly portrayed: a “threat” against society and the picture of an “ideal perpetrator” (Christie, 1972, 2001).

## 6. Economic Victim

Markers for victimhood and the creation of the concepts “victim” and “perpetrator” are also made visible in stories about the riches of “returnees” and “diaspora”. Ljubo is a “refugee” who prior to the war was an industrial worker in a town in northern Bosnia. During and after the war, he worked in an elementary school in northwestern Bosnia. He notes how “the rich get richer” after the war:

Do you know what I think is wrong here? Many people were expelled from here, that is a fact. Many have stayed also. Those who stayed do not have any money to buy their flats and those who live abroad can afford to buy out their flats and then sell them for 30,000 Marks<sup>4</sup>. They (diaspora) come on vacation here, and at the same time they earn money. Where’s justice in that, I would confiscate everything (the returners’ and diaspora’s properties).

<sup>4</sup> Approximately 15,000 euro.

Ljubo does not describe himself as the ideal victim, according to Christie (1986). Ljubo, amongst other things, draws attention to the following points of interest: the lack of justice after the war. Ljubo’s story reflects considerable jealousy. He displays envy and remoteness towards “returnees” and “diaspora”. Ljubo is claiming the property of those abroad because this property makes the rich richer; in actuality, it means that those treated unjustly before are still treated unjustly. When we reach so far into the discussion, we could ask this question: Who is the victim in this situation? Earlier we have pointed out that “the ideal” disappeared when returning. Now, in addition to “returnees” and “diaspora”, we have “remainders” and “refugees” who could claim the victim status. They are poor, weak, and dependent on the financial resources possessed by returnees and the diaspora. “Remainders” and “refugees” are portrayed as *economic victims* while “returnees” and “diaspora” are portrayed as some kind of *profiteers* (or economic perpetrators). Radovan and Lana, who both stayed in northwestern Bosnia before, during, and after the war, explain this problem as follows:

Radovan: It is easy for these from Prijedor, they have returned with money and received donations in order to repair their houses. Gino (a mutual acquaintance who was expelled from northwestern Bosnia now living in Austria) should thank the Serbs because he would never have such a car if it wasn’t for them.

Lana: Another problem is that the returnees have money, the refugees are at the bottom, and this creates a rift. Hate rises, but no one thinks about who deserves to be hated, the returnee or the politician who hasn’t given me anything even though I fought.

Some points of interest charged with importance concern the economic success of the “diaspora” and “returnees” owing to their expulsion during the war and the surrounding world’s recognition after the war (“received donations” and “would never have such a car”). Radovan’s and Lana’s description portrays “diaspora” and “returnees” as rich. Those with a bad economic situation are victims, too, according to their description.

The competition of victimhood after the war in Bosnia can be analyzed as a clear battle about meanings in victim status. The arguments of the interviewees depend on the different interpretations that imply the alternative enunciation about who the victim is. The actors apply different meanings to victim status when they ascribe themselves or the other position as victim and perpetrator, and motivations differ. It seems that the different ascriptions of a status as victim or perpetrator that are analyzed in this study are rhetorical productions that partly define “victim” and “perpe-

trator” and partly the argument that itself constructs the definition.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

This article analyzes the retold experiences of 27 survivors from the war in Bosnia. The primary goal was to describe how actors present the social phenomenon of “victimhood”, and the secondary aim was to analyze discursive patterns that contribute to constructing the terms “victim” and “perpetrator”. Previous studies have often presented a one-sided picture of the “victim” and “perpetrator” during and after the Bosnian war. Researchers have emphasized the importance of narratives, but they have not focused on narratives about victimhood or analyzed post-war interviews as a competition for victimhood that can produce jealousy.

Development taking place during and after the war has led to populations’ being described based on four categories. One consists of “remainders”, namely those who before, during, and after the war have lived in northwestern Bosnia. Another is “refugees”, those who were expelled from other parts of Bosnia and Croatia into northwestern Bosnia. The third is made up of “returnees”, those who were expelled from northwestern Bosnia during the war but have returned afterwards. The fourth is the “diaspora”, individuals who were expelled from the area during the war and stayed in the new country.

Within the dynamics of upholding the victim and perpetrator, there has arisen a competition for the victim role after the war (Christie, 1986; Bartov, 2000; Moeller, 1996; Olick, 2005; Olick & Demetriou, 2006; Holstein & Miller, 1990). The competition among the “remainders”, “refugees”, “returnees”, and “diaspora” seems to take place on a symbolic level, and the conflict points of interest are often found in the descriptions of the war-time and post-war periods (Simmel, 1955[1908], pp. 61-108). The remainders argue that the refugees, for instance, do not want to assimilate, that in time they have become the majority of the society’s population, which in turn pressures the remainders to follow the refugees’ norms and values. Furthermore, the returnees and the diaspora are criticized for having a better economy than remainders and refugees, making the latter jealous.

All interviewees portray themselves as victims, but it seems that they all are about to lose that status. Those who remained might do so because they are still under the shadow of war events; the refugees because they are portrayed as strangers and fit the role of ideal perpetrators; and finally, the returnees and diaspora because they have achieved recognition from the surroundings and have a better economic situation. This situation can produce and reproduce a certain competition for victimhood that re-creates and revitalizes those collective demarcations that were played out so

clearly and in such a macabre fashion during the war.

Interpersonal interactions that caused the war violence continue even after the violent situation is over. Recollections from perpetrators and victim of the war do not exist only as verbal constructions in Bosnia of today. Stories about violent situations live their own lives after the war and continue being important to individuals and social life. Individuals who were expelled from northwestern Bosnia during the war in the 1990s are, in a legal sense, in a recognized victim category. They suffered crimes against humanity, including most types of violent crimes (Case No.: IT-95-8-S; Case No.: IT-97-24-T.; Case No.: IT-98-30/1-A; Case No.: IT-99-36-T). Several perpetrators were sentenced by the Hague Tribunal and the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina on War Crime (Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2015; IC-TY, 2015a, 2015b). The crimes committed in Prijedor and Ljubija are qualified as genocide according to indictments against former Serbian leaders Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić (Case No.: IT-09-92-PT; Case No.: IT-95-5/18-PT). All of the interviewees in this study experienced and survived the war in northwestern Bosnia. These individuals have a present, ongoing relation with these communities: Some live there permanently, and some spend their summers in Prijedor and/or Ljubija (Basic, 2015a, 2015d). An analysis of the processing of experienced or described violent situations in a society that exists as a product of a series of violent acts during the war must be conducted in parallel both at the institutional and individual levels. Institutions in the administrative entity Republika Srpska (to which Prijedor and Ljubija now belong administratively) deny genocide, and this approach to war-time events becomes a central theme in future, post-war analysis of the phenomena “victimhood,” and “reconciliation” (compare Becirevics’ (2010) analysis of denial of genocide in Bosnia). The existence of Republika Srpska is based on genocide committed in Prijedor, Ljubija, and other towns in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Case No.: IT-09-92-PT; Case No.: IT-95-5/18-PT; Case No.: IT-97-24-T; Case No.: IT-99-36-T). Denial of genocide enhances post-war, interactive and discursive competition for the status of “victim”. Therefore, it is very important to analyze the political elite’s denial of the systematic acts of violence during the war that have been conveyed by the Hague Tribunal, the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina on War Crime, and Bosnian media. The narratives in my empirical material seem to be influenced by (or coherent with) the rhetoric mediated in these fora. When informants emphasize extermination and the systematization of violence during the war, they produce and reproduce the image of a mutual struggle on a collective level. The aim of this struggle seems to be that the described acts of violence be recognized as genocide (Becirevic, 2010; Bartov, 2000; Confino, 2005; Kidron, 2012).

The stories of the actors after the war in Bosnia

play an essential role in the tension-filled mosaic of everyday interaction where politics and legal actions in Bosnian society and individual identity formation and recreation combine when the individual grapples with issues such as: How shall I move on after the war? Should I forgive the perpetrators, and in that case, how? Thus, it is important to study the narratives of these actors. Throughout their narrations, some individuals can make a confession or exert a certain self-esteem; others can take the chance to explain for themselves and the audience, to express regret over their actions and possibly restore their social status. Without this type of processing, war victims risk living an existence without confession, and the war perpetrators risk becoming permanently bound to their acts—what Simmel (1955[1908], p. 121) calls “the most horrible irreconcilability”—clearly an unstable future foundation for a post-war society.

One interesting question that could not be answered with this article is if—and in the case of yes, how—these different categories analyzed here attract attention in Bosnia today, where the ethnic conflicts that created the war now once again are gaining power. Another interesting perspective on these problems, which could not be investigated in this study, is how the different victim categories will be understood in the future. What significance will be given to war and post-war victims and economic victims in the development of Bosnian society?

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