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## **Reconciliation and Implacability: Narratives of Survivors from the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

**Goran Basic**

### **Purpose:**

Previous research on post-war society emphasized structural violence with subsequent reconciliation processes. Researchers have focused on the importance of narratives, but they have neither highlighted narratives about reconciliation nor analyzed conditions for reconciliation in post-war interviews. This article tries to fill this gap by analyzing the stories told by survivors of the Bosnian war during the 1990s. The aim of analyzing the retold experiences of 27 survivors of the 1990s war in north-western Bosnia is to evaluate markers of reconciliation and implacability, as well as those of reconciliation being actualized in the narratives. Stories on implacability, reconciliation, and conditions for reconciliation are not shaped only in relation to the war as a whole, but also in with regard to an individual's wartime actions and those of others. In these stories, implacability is the predominant feature, but reconciliation is said to be possible if certain conditions are met. Examples of these conditions are justice for war victims, recognition of perpetrators of crimes, and emotional commitment from the perpetrator (by showing remorse and shame, for example).

### **Design/Methods/Approach:**

The material for the study was gathered through qualitative interviews with 27 individuals who survived the war in north-western Bosnia and Herzegovina. This study joins those narrative traditions within sociology where oral presentations are seen as both discursive- and experience-based (Potter, 2007[1996]). An interactionally inspired perspective on human interaction, through symbols and an ethno-methodological perspective on human stories (Blumer, 1986[1969]; Garfinkel, 1984[1967]) is a general starting point. In addition, I perceive the concept of reconciliation as an especially relevant component in those specific stories that I analyzed.

### Findings:

The struggle has to end before reconciliation takes place, Simmel (1955[1908]: 117-123) argues, and the difficulty of ‘forgetting’ war memories in many cases seems to generate an unforgiving attitude, especially when the stories are specific and emotionally strong with a concrete course of events and filled with names of individuals and places (for example, “Rade”, “Zuti”, “Dragan”, “Keraterm”).

Atrocities during the war also raise the question of unforgivable crimes. Ricoeur and Derrida believe that forgiveness either includes “the unforgivable” or does not exist. This study shows that some violent war crimes are described as particularly difficult to forgive. The analysis of interactive consequences of violence shows that the latter is intimately associated with earlier personal experiences. Anger is sometimes expressed with charged emotional terms, with very little space for reconciliation, and guilt sometimes gets transferred over the whole category (not only the individual/individuals who committed atrocities).

The features of reconciliation seen in the interviewees’ stories are imbued with conditionality. Forgiveness and reconciliation are depicted as possible to achieve, but only if guilty war criminals are punished and also show remorse and shame for their atrocities.

It seems that one of the most important conditions leading to reconciliation in postwar Bosnia is justice for the war victims. Many war criminals have been arrested or convicted by the Hague tribunal and Bosnia and Herzegovina war crime tribunal for crimes committed during the war, but many are still at large. Simmel (1955[1908]: 121-122) argues that forgiveness is required to achieve reconciliation. The picture that emerges from the analyzed narratives is that it is easier to forgive someone imprisoned for his atrocities.

Reconciliation through a truth committee to which the perpetrators confess their crimes as an alternative to judicial punishment is based on the idea of exposing a perpetrator’s feeling of remorse and shame (Braithwaite, 2006[1989]: 69-107; Christie, 2004: 92-100). The purpose of these feelings is not to condemn the criminal but to give him a possible way out by showing remorse and shame for his actions and thus “be forgiven”. Even here, there is an obvious condition; namely, through participation in a truth commission, the perpetrator avoids a judicial trial and potential punishment. The interviewees did not like the idea that participants

in a truth commission avoided being punished, i.e., they were sceptical of this path leading to reconciliation.

In the stories on reconciliation, it is highlighted that the perpetrators now are shameful (or should be ashamed), and an expulsive shame is stipulated, aiming at stigmatizing and excluding single perpetrators. This way, one not only condemns the misdeeds but also points out the individual as a criminal who has lost the right to be a part of the collective. This kind of shame, when single perpetrators are "sacrificed" to achieve reconciliation between groups, is presented as reconciliation on a macro-level.

An interesting question that could not be resolved in this article is what the limits are in models of international tribunals and truth commissions. In this sense, I mean that sociology can address the dysfunctionality of both processes. Another interesting aspect of the problem that could not be investigated in this study is how various actors in the reconciliation fare in the future. What significance will be awarded to the reconciliation question in Bosnian society?

#### **Originality/Value:**

The aim of this article was to analyze the retold experiences of 27 survivors from the 1990s war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I have examined verbal markers of reconciliation and implacability and analyzed the described terms for reconciliation that are being actualized in the narratives. Previous research on post-war society emphasized the structural violence with subsequent reconciliation processes, as in South Africa (Sampson, 2002), Rwanda (Applegate, 2012), and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Cehajic et al. 2008). Researchers have emphasized the importance of narratives (Hatzfeld, 2008, 2005a,b; Broz et al. 2005; Broz 2008), but they have not focused on narratives about reconciliation or analyzed conditions for reconciliation in post-war interviews. This article tries to fill this gap by analyzing stories told by survivors of the Bosnian war during the 1990s. The research issue is from which normative orientations and from what social values the assumptions draw for moral sense and social intelligibility, and how do these normative orientations and values then guide the actions of individuals as well as communities in post-war societies? The war as a whole (its structure and its political character) and individuals' wartime actions are not independent of each other. Personal troubles are addressed in relation to social issues like reconciliation. Post-war reconciliation in Bosnia is closely connected to the war period. The reconciliation process seems to correlate

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with the war period's interactive dynamics, and events taking place during the war affect interpretations regarding a possible reconciliation.

This analysis used, among others, Simmel (1955[1908]), Ricoeur (2004[2000]), and Derrida (2004). Their use is not typical for scholarly discussions of interviews, and for this reason, I intend for the study to cast a fresh light on the existing literature.

**Keywords:** reconciliation, conditions for reconciliation, narrative, forgiveness, implacability, shame, justice, perpetrator, emotion

#### About the author(s):

**Goran Basic** is a lecturer in sociology at the Department of Sociology, Lund University. His research concerns fieldwork in Bosnia and Herzegovina, he has written articles on the post-war society and carried out an evaluation of a project in the juvenile care. Basic's dissertation –When collaboration becomes a struggle. A sociological analysis of a project in the Swedish juvenile care is based on ethnographic material. Basic is currently analyzing the collaboration between border police and coastguard in the countries of Baltic region.

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