Identity, ethnic boundaries, and collective victimhood: analysing strategies of self-victimisation in postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina

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Published online: 05 Apr 2020.

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Identity, ethnic boundaries, and collective victimhood: analysing strategies of self-victimisation in postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina

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ABSTRACT
Characteristics from the social construction of 'self' and of 'others' in Bosnia-Herzegovina show that the creation of a positive self-image in this post-war society is strongly connected with collective self-victimisation of one's own in-group. An objective hermeneutical analysis of narrative interviews conducted with Bosniaks, Bosnian Croats, and Bosnian Serbs reveals five self-victimisation strategies: Two dissociative strategies, which conspicuously reproduce the dichotomy of victim and perpetrator along ethnic lines and candidly reinforce the ethnic boundaries – moral alchemy and double relativisation – and three strategies, which seem to transcend the boundaries between ethnic in-group and out-group – the associative strategies of subjectification of war, the externalisation of responsibility, and silence. A subsequent contextualisation of the identified strategies indicates, however, that, ultimately, associative strategies are equally conducive to the further manifestation of ethnic boundaries.

Introduction

A key scene in Danis Tanović's Academy Award-winning film 'No Man's Land' (2001) shows a Bosniak[1] and a Serbian soldier who have gotten stuck in a trench between the lines during the Bosnian War. In their joint effort to escape from this unfortunate situation, they draw closer; they talk about their prewar lives and recognise that they have many things in common – even some common acquaintances. However, it comes as no surprise when, in the firestorm of bombshells, the question arises of who is responsible for the destruction of the common past; of their lives as they were before the murder and devastation. The two soldiers start to swap accusations until the armed Bosniak points his weapon at his opponent and asks one last time: 'Who started the war?'

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Through the ratification of the December 1995 *General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, the Dayton Agreement, the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina officially ended. Following three and a half years of violence between Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, which left approximately 100,000 people killed and over two million displaced, a deeply segregated society emerged along ethnic lines. Politically, Bosnia-Herzegovina is divided into two largely ethnically homogeneous entities: the Serbian-dominated *Republika Srpska* (RS) (representing approximately 49% of the territory) and the *Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina* (FB&H) – each with its own political structure and administrative organisation. The FB&H itself is further divided into ten cantons that are either predominantly 'Bosniak' or 'Croatian' (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2016). The country's ethnic segregation, however, is effective in many other ways. In ethnically-divided schools, one-sided '(hi)stories' are told and taught (Pašalić-Kreso 2008), ethnic parties still dominate the political sphere, ethnic divisions delineate the media landscape, while a law aimed at ensuring equal participation among the three 'constituent nations forces people to declare themselves as either Bosniak, Croat, or Serb (Džihić 2012). The belief in one's own cause, in one's own victimhood, is still effective on all three sides (Jansen 2007; Bougarel, Helms, and Duijzings 2007; Helms 2013). Twenty-five years after the war's end, the question of who is responsible remains salient.

Around the world, conflicting parties engage in self-exculpation and self-victimisation. Denying one's own responsibility and guilt and the fight over one's own victim status seems to be a constitutive part of many conflicts: Self-victimisation is the chosen mean for protecting one's own we-ideal in the context of collective violence and war as shown, for example, with Kosovo (Andrighetto et al. 2012), Croatia (Sokolić 2018), Northern Ireland (Ferguson, Burgess, and Hollywood 2010; Baumann 2010), and the Middle East (Vollhardt 2009; Shnabel and Noor 2012). However, relatively little systematic attention has been paid to how collective victimhood is maintained in situations that confront people with 'alternative' perspectives on reality, e.g. reality perspectives according to which in-group members are perceived as perpetrators.

Although Bosnia-Herzegovina is characterised by its ethnic segregation, Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs still live together in one nation state and the pragmatic necessities of everyday life force them (at least occasionally) to interact with members of the other ethnic groups. These interactions at least potentially pose a threat to their respective definitions of the past as well as their self-perceptions of being the exclusive victim of the conflict (Mijić 2014, 2018). Having been inspired by these observations, the research outlined in this paper addresses how self-victimisation is maintained in the context of ongoing confrontations with conflicting reality perspectives. More precisely: Drawing on a hermeneutical, i.e. a reconstructive analysis of thirty narrative interviews

conducted in Bosnia-Herzegovina between 2007 and 2009, the paper seeks to illuminate the manifestations of self-victimisation in this post-war society; it explores its relevance with regard to identity and ethnic boundaries as well as the strategies that perpetuate self-victimisation over time; it shows how these strategies can be divided into dissociative strategies that strengthen ethnic boundaries, associative strategies that transcend ethnic boundaries and (temporarily) construct a common victimhood beyond ethnic belonging, and, finally, enquires about what facilitates one or the other strategy.

Before proceeding to its empirical component, the paper first elaborates on the identity-stabilising functions of self-victimisation in (post-)conflict constellations by referring to existing research on collective or 'competitive victimhood', which is discussed in light of theories on identity and the concept of ethnic or symbolic boundaries. Additionally, the account of the research results is preceded by a section devoted to the study's methodology, which introduces the data corpus used as well as the qualitative 'objective hermeneutics' approach. It will demonstrate that this reconstructive method, developed by the German sociologist Ulrich Oevermann, is most appropriate when it comes to the question of how identity is created in context of crises. By focussing on the reconstruction of 'structural patterns' within the collected interviews and not (primarily) on their informational content, the study contributes to an analytically-substantiated understanding of post-war identities. Moreover, it offers contributions to two further research areas: collective victimhood literature, since it focusses on the hitherto unconsidered question of how people maintain their collective self-victimisation over time; and, literature on ethnic boundaries by reflecting the effects of self-victimisation on the (re-)construction of boundaries between antagonistic ethnic groups.

Functions of self-victimisation – an analytical framework

During the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, people were exposed to an accelerated ethnic mobilisation – to the construction of 'bright' ethnic boundaries (Alba 2005; Wimmer 2008, 979–82) – which was accompanied by a reduction in the identity on ethnic belonging (Verdery 1994, 38; Wimmer 2008, 982; Ignatieff 1994). This reduction continues to be enforced in many ways. To date, the consolidation of the individual's identity or self-image in Bosnia-Herzegovina remains strongly connected with the consolidation of its (ethnic) we-image. Drawing on Norbert Elias, this strong bond between 'I' and 'we' complements the vulnerability of identity when one's positive image about their ethnic in-group is challenged (Elias and Scotson 1994, xliii).

Within the context of previous research on perceived collective victimhood, it is reasonable to assume that the persistent victimisation of one's own (ethnic) in-group – collective self-victimisation – is considered a promising

strategy to maintain a positive we-image (and with it a positive I-image) in the light of potential external delegitimation (Shnabel and Noor 2012; Noor et al. 2012; Shnabel, Halabi, and Noor 2013; Bar-Tal et al. 2009; Bar-Tal 2000; Andrighetto et al. 2012; Ferguson, Burgess, and Hollywood 2010; Baumann 2010; Vollhardt 2009). A significant share of research focussing on how self-victimisation functions is represented by social psychology. Without explicitly discussing collective or competitive victimhood or self-victimisation, sociology, however, also addresses the social impacts of (in-)directly experienced or contrived collective suffering (Alexander et al. 2004; Giesen 2004). In reference to the sociological and social psychological literature on collective victimhood, three distinct functions of self-victimisation in regard to identity and group boundaries can be identified:

(1) The stabilisation of group boundaries through self-victimisation. Both sociological and social psychological analyses note that 'chosen traumas' (Volkan 1988), 'cultural traumas' (Alexander et al. 2004), or 'self-perceived collective victimhood' (Bar-Tal et al. 2009) serve outwardly as accelerants, and inwardly as social glue. Namely, collective victimhood is constitutively conducive to the emergence and maintenance of social in-groups and, correspondingly, social out-groups. Past victimhood experiences are regularly invoked to escalate conflicts (Noor et al. 2012, 351), as, among others, Volkan (2002) and Ignatieff (1994) demonstrated for former Yugoslavia. Within groups, narratives of past suffering not only bind contemporaries together but also 'sustain the close bond between current members of the in-group and the older generation who lived through the injustices' (Noor et al. 2012, 358). In his reflections upon nation states as 'survival units', Elias also addresses this intergenerational dimension of collective suffering (Elias 2001, 222–23). In this respect, collective self-victimisation contributes significantly to the constitution of a deep-rooted 'we-ness', i.e., to the construction and stabilisation of historically-consolidated symbolic and social boundaries between in-group and out-group (Barth 1969; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Wimmer 2013).

(2) Self-victimisation promotes a feeling of moral superiority. In (post-) conflict situations, people 'engage in CV [competitive victimhood] as an attempt to restore their dimensions of identity that have been compromised by the conflict' (Noor et al. 2012, 360). In other words, self-victimisation supports those in coping with (identity) crises and the uncertainties associated with wars and their aftermath because the narratives of one's own victimhood provide convincing explanations about 'who' is responsible and differentiate unambiguously between good and evil (Bar-Tal et al. 2009; Noor et al. 2012). A survey conducted in 2005 in Bosnia found that a majority of Bosnians interviewed – 89%

of Bosniaks, 80% of Serbs, and 73% of Croats – held the opinion that their group had only fought defensive wars (Kostić 2008, 395) and defined their respective armed forces as defenders (Kostić 2008, 395). Highlighting that the 'in-group was left with no choice but to resort to violence as a means of self-defence' (Noor et al. 2012, 359) and that the violence used within these acts of self-defence never went beyond what was absolutely necessary, hence, reduced feelings of guilt. Thus, by engaging in competitive victimhood, people emphasise their own moral and civilisational superiority. In other words, they not only try to preserve the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' (see (1)), but also their respective we-ideal, i.e., the in-group's charisma (vs. the out-group's iniquity), and therewith their individual I-ideal (Elias and Scotson 1994; Lamont 1992).

(3) Self-victimisation is the chosen mean to gain the support and sympathy of external third parties, which also protects the respective we-ideal. A central objective of self-victimisation is to gain international support (Bar-Tal et al. 2009, 246; Münkler 2003; Baumann 2010). Therefore, by describing themselves as victims, groups can refer to norms and values that are valid beyond ethnic boundaries and place themselves under the guise of universal legitimation. For this reason, each conflicting party makes great efforts to persuade all parties involved that they are the exclusive victims. Victimhood in (post-) conflict situations is highly competitive and the competition over who suffered more is conducted as a zero-sum game.

However, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, as described above, people are not able to completely avoid the perspectives of the (ethnic) others. Hence, they are forced to find ways to interact with each other without jeopardising their particular 'truth' and, accordingly, their we-ideal. As Noor et al. point out,

> [i]t is worth inquiring […] why and how groups manage to perceive themselves as the exclusive victim of a conflict even though objectively […] contexts that give rise to CV [competitive victimhood] involve mutual victimization. In other words, even if one group experienced greater loss than the other […] it is clear that the other group must have undergone severe suffering as well. How can this suffering be entirely dismissed? (Noor et al. 2012, 353)

The empirical analysis presented in this paper, thus, aims to reconstruct these strategies for maintaining collective victimhood in the presence of the out-group's reality perspective. As the following section elaborates, the objective hermeneutics approach is considered the most promising method to uncover these strategies, since it does not focus on the question of what people intend to express; rather, it focusses on latent meaning structures, which are 'not restricted to the actor's discursive knowledge and are independent of

their subjective intentions and meanings (and, in this sense, "objective")'
(Lueger et al. 2005, 1147).

Data and methodology

The analysis draws on thirty unstructured (narrative) interviews conducted in
three successive cycles with individuals (age 35–65) of different ethnic alle-
giances (twelve Bosniaks, nine Serbs, seven Croats, and four 'Others') in
various parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina (FB&H and RS; rural as well as urban)
between 2007 and 2009. The interviews were conducted in Bosnian/Croatian/
Serbian and lasted between one and a half and three hours; one-third of the
interviewees were women. The interviewee selection was based on maximum
variation sampling to ensure a range of perspectives. According to
a prevalent rule within qualitative research, the selection categories were
not specified in advance, but derived from the data itself (Glaser and Strauss
2009). The respective data collection phases were therefore always followed
by data analysis, which in turn determined the categories for further data
selection. This strategy was repeated until the analysis ceased to reveal any
new insights – first by collecting data based on maximal contrast, then by
collecting data based on minimal contrast. The core benefit of this 'circular'
approach is its tight integration of the analysis process with the collection of
data, which has a positive effect on the validity of the collected data. All
interviews were recorded and transcribed. The confidentiality of information
supplied by the interviewees and their anonymity was respected. To further
ensure anonymity, all personally-identifiable information was altered.

The narrative interview (Schütze 1976) method is considered the most
appropriate way to collect data useful for a reconstructive analysis. Narrative
interviews are characterised by the fact that the interviewees are not con-
fronted with closed questions, but rather encouraged to narrate. The general
objective is to gain insights into the speaker's system of relevance without
them being over-influenced by the interviewer's questions. Therefore, every
interview started with a broad opening question. The interviewee's opening
narration is followed by immanent questions, i.e., questions that refer only to
topics brought forward by the informant ('You mentioned xyz, can you please
elaborate on that?') and, as appropriate, by exmanent questions, which refer,
for instance, to current political or social events.

The main objective of the empirical analysis was to work out the interviewees'
perceptions on reality as well as their (mostly unconsciously-adopted) strategies
of dealing with potential ambivalences. The *Deutungsmusteranalyse* (interpreta-
tion pattern analysis), first introduced into scientific discussion by Oevermann in
1977, is considered to be the most appropriate method for achieving this goal.
According to Oevermann, interpretation patterns are commonly shared, wide-
spread, and stable (world) views and understandings within a community or

a society. They guide the practices and activities of individuals and justify these very activities; they offer definitions of situations and help to anticipate the future and thus reduce the complexity of reality. As long as they provide adequate interpretations and successfully guide interaction, interpretation patterns usually stay implicit, 'unknown', and unconscious. In situations of crisis – situations when the patterns no longer seem 'useful' or are confronted with alternative or competing reality conceptions – they become explicit and open to reflection (Oevermann 2001). Oevermann states that interpretation patterns are nevertheless rarely directly accessible. Reconstructing them requires reconstructing the 'latent sense structures' or the 'objective meaning structures' of expressions. Analysing these 'hidden' meaning structures is the central aim of objective hermeneutics (Oevermann et al. 1987; Wernet 2013). Unlike different types of content analysis, this approach does not focus on the information content of a text (e.g. an interview), but on the reconstruction of a specific case structure. Put differently, the primary interest is not the question of *what* people are talking about but rather *how* they talk about specific contents and *in which ways* they express them. Furthermore, this approach does not ask about the speaker's intention, i.e. it does not ask for the subjective sense but rather for the 'objective' meaning of the text. The key strength of the objective hermeneutics approach is its capacity to uncover this 'how' – the structures or 'strategies' for dealing with specific crises that people usually deploy unconsciously and that therefore cannot be ascertained simply through direct questions. These structures can be reconstructed by drawing on the knowledge of 'rules'. According to objective hermeneutics,

> rules define the horizon of action alternatives and the meaning of these alternatives [...] Rules generate action by 'tacit knowledge'. They are not consciously applied by actors. Like linguistic rules, [...] rules in general enable the actor to create meaningful action [...] Because the interpreter shares the same rules as the object of examination, it is possible to understand the meaning of action (Wernet 2013, 237–38).

The method's interpretation procedure is based on four principles: (1) The (temporary) exclusion of context, that 'helps to differentiate analytically between the meaning of a text as such and its meaning in a certain context' (Wernet 2013, 239); (2) focussing on the text's literal meaning, i.e. focussing 'on what was said and not on what somebody might have wanted to say' (Wernet 2013, 241), since 'only the text provides a solid database in which interpretations can be criticized and controlled by others while the accuracy of assumptions about what someone possibly wanted to say cannot be checked' (Wernet 2013, 241). Thus, focussing on the literal meaning of the text is critical with regard to the validity of the interpretation; (3) sequentiality, since 'structures generally unfold in a process of reproduction' (Wernet 2013, 242); (4) extensivity, which analyses every element of a selected text

sequence very carefully and does not skip words, pauses, or other expressions. This principle, as well, 'tries to make sure that interpretations are grounded in the text itself and not in subjective concepts about a case' (Wernet 2013, 244).

By following these principles, objective hermeneutics aims to carve out a case structure, or a specific and recurring way of how the respective interviewee copes with particular tensions or crises. A case, however, must not be seen only as the expression of an 'individual social constellation, but also as an expression of general structures' (Wernet 2013, 236), which cannot be studied as such. This is because they

> do not appear beyond or outside of cases [...] Therefore the reconstruction of the structure of a case allows two directions of generalization. First, a case appears as a token of a type. It presents a special and insofar typical disposition for solving a certain problem. Second, this special and typical solution is only one way of reacting to a general problem (Wernet 2013, 236).

Reconstructive methods generally ensure reliability by verifying that a once-reconstructed case structure reproduces itself within and beyond the case (Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2010, 25–26).

Not the least due to the analysis' extensivity, it is beyond the scope of this text to portray each individual step included in the objective hermeneutical reconstruction carried out within the research presented in this article. The following chapter focusses on the results of the analysis, i.e. the reconstructed case structure. The quoted interview passages serve only as examples to elucidate the results.

Strategies for maintaining self-victimisation: the results

The interview analysis reveals unambiguously that self-victimisation is a central identity-related pattern of interpretation in the narrations made by the persons interviewed for this study. The structural interpretation pattern of self-victimisation reproduces itself across all interviews – irrespective of gender, age, or ethnic origin. The analysis, however, also reveals, that the explicit dichotomy of victim and perpetrator is not easy to sustain. A variety of strategies enabled the interviewees to maintain their reality perspective, according to which their in-group must be considered exclusively as victim of the war and its aftermath, and thereby also to maintain a positive self-image despite the ongoing confrontation with alternative reality perceptions.

It became apparent that the identified strategies for maintaining one's self-perception as a victim could be divided into dissociative and associative strategies. Dissociative strategies are characterised by their explicit reproduction of the victim-perpetrator dichotomy along ethnic lines and hence reinforce ethnic boundaries. Associative strategies, on the other hand, seem to

transcend either the victim-perpetrator dichotomy or the ethnic boundaries themselves. In this respect, associative strategies may entail opportunities for change and increase the chances for overcoming post-war divisions.

In the following, the paper refers to selected passages from the collected interviews to illustrate the strategies described above. However, as mentioned in the methods section, a detailed outline of the analysis itself would go beyond the constraints of the article. Therefore, to reduce the need for extensive contextual information, incisive paragraphs were chosen that revolve around similar topics.

Dissociative strategies – consolidating ethnic boundaries through self-victimisation

'Moral alchemy'

Q: You have mentioned Mladić and Karadžić before. Karadžić …

I: Okay, they have caught Karadžić, but what is with Mladić? They could have had caught him a hundred times. It's the responsibility of the international community. They are in fact the only ones responsible for this. […] they have tortured the poor Croats until they have caught Gotovina. How much they have tortured poor Croatia? But why Gotovina? Gotovina has just defended his country. What else? […] Gotovina went to Knin to free his homeland. […] The deceased president Dr. Franjo Tuđman told the Serbs, DON'T GO! WE ARE NOT GOING TO EXILE YOU. We are not going to displace you from your houses. Nobody will hurt you. Don't flee […] you may all stay in your houses. No, Milošević commanded them to leave their homes. And that is when the international community, the press came, and filmed them and they whined 'look, the Croats are deporting us.' (Croat, male, 65, RS)

In the preceding passage, the speaker, a Croat male (65) who currently lives in a mostly-abandoned village near Prijedor (RS), is referring to Operation 'Oluja' ('Storm'), which took place in the summer of 1995. The military operation was implemented by Croatian armed forces to regain control of the Croatian Krajina region around Knin, which had been under Serb control since 1991. According to the UNHCR, 500 Serbs were killed and another 200,000 Serb civilians were displaced during this operation and its aftermath (Human Rights Watch 1996). Ante Gotovina, a former Croatian general, was charged with war crimes committed during this military action.[2] Although Operation 'Oluja' was mostly restricted to Croatia, it also plays a decisive role in the collective memory of Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Serbs.

At the content level, the interviewee initially draws a comparison between, first, Gotovina and Franjo Tuđman – the latter of whom was the Croatian president between 1990-1999 – with, second, Radovan Karadžić, the former

political leader of the Bosnian Serbs, their former military leader Ratko Mladić, and the former Serbian president Slobodan Milošević. The ICTY indicted Karadžić, Mladić, and Milošević for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Mladić and Karadžić were sentenced to life in prison in 2017 and 2016 and 2019 respectively, while Milošević died in prison in 2006 before a verdict was reached. If Tuđman had not died in 1999, he most likely also would have been charged with war crimes.

In this comparison, the interviewee emphasise that the Croats were treated unjustly regarding Gotovina's persecution because his actions – in contrast to the doings of Karadžić and Mladić – have been vindicated (Sokolić 2019). However, within this paragraph, Croatian 'victimhood' is further created when the interviewee addresses Operation 'Oluja' – for which Croatia has been widely criticised – but emphasises that there were no Serbian casualties. The Croats rather became the victims of Serbian deceitfulness.

The objective hermeneutical interpretation of the interviews suggests that one way to solve the problem of being confronted with challenging perspectives of reality is to question the 'objective truth' of inconvenient observations as well as the 'truthfulness' (Habermas 2007) of alternative narrations. The dichotomy of victim and perpetrator becomes a dichotomy of *true* victim and a *created, constructed*, and *invented* victim. Here, the counter-narrative is delegitimised as 'fake news'. This strategy reveals itself most clearly in the Croat male's cited paragraph. The speaker argues that the 'ostensible' displaced out-group members were not violently expelled at all. These people were rather relocated by their own leaders, to feign 'ethnic cleansing' and gain sympathy, or to systematically settle them in particular regions in order to change the local population structure. The mechanism at work here transmutes victims into created or invented victims and lastly into perpetrators, while simultaneously transforming perpetrators into victims of the out-group's deceitfulness. Drawing on Robert K. Merton, this mechanism can be characterised as 'moral alchemy' (Merton 1948).

Double relativisation

Interviewees occasionally, however, also recognise that members of their own ethnic in-group could have committed (war) crimes and that people who have committed those crimes must be punished, as the following – also Croatian male – interviewee (50) from the Posavina Region (FB&H) points out:

> There have been transgressions on all sides. All people who have committed war crimes have to be punished. But, all of us know what Karadžić has done. He has issued the command to go to Srebrenica and to massacre, to kill. How many? 12,000 people. That's not nearly the same. Croatia was an internationally-recognised state when Operation Storm took place! With recognised borders. Recognised by the West, by all powers. A recognised state. Even if you go there to clean up … The people there didn't want to recognise the Croatian government. You have to do something with these people. When a criminal

wants to rob a bank, you have to go there to prevent it. That's the same thing. [...] In my opinion, Gotovina is not guilty. (Croat, male, 50, FB&H)

The speaker is referring to two different incidents during the wars in the former Yugoslavia: First, to the Srebrenica massacre in which, according to official estimates, about 8,000 male adolescents and men were killed by Serbian forces and paramilitaries. As the former political leader of the Bosnian Serbs, Radovan Karadžić is considered responsible for these atrocities. Second, the speaker is referring to the aforementioned 'Operation Storm'.

He opens the paragraph by omitting that there may be also Croats who have committed war crimes. One would tend to assume that such recognition would undermine an idealised attitude to one's own we-image. By systematically paying attention to how the interviewee is talking, the analysis succeeded to reveal that it is actually an effort to relativise in-group crimes that is taking place. Therefore, the interviewee applies two strategies: First, he compares acts of violence against Serbs with the crimes committed by Serbs. His line of argument in this respect has two striking features. Although a Croat, he does not refer to crimes committed against Croats, but to the Srebrenica massacre, which is recognised as Europe's worst atrocity since the Holocaust. Furthermore, the interviewee exaggerates the number of casualties in order to further morally disqualify the Serbian out-group. This disqualification can be seen as a preparation for the second strategy: the legitimisation of the in-group's violence by reference to its defensive character. In other words, acknowledging the out-group's suffering does not end the competition over whose suffering is more legitimate (Noor et al. 2012, 357; Bar-Tal 2000). People still try to present the crimes committed by members of the in-group as legitimate acts of self-defence.

In the end, like the strategy of moral alchemy, this double relativisation – i.e., the relativisation of one's own we-ideal, which itself is relativised – supports the stabilisation of the we-ideal at the expense of the out-group's ethnic moral integrity. In this regard, *moral alchemy* and *double relativisation* must be considered as dissociative, as separating strategies, since they reproduce the dichotomy of victim and perpetrator along ethnic lines and hence reinforce ethnic boundaries.

Associative strategies – self-victimisation beyond ethnic boundaries

Subjectification of war

I was born in 1953 in the socialist system, where life was easy-going and beautiful–I don't know how to describe it–without any physical or psychological burdens. During the Tito years, life was beautiful. [...] When Tito died, when Yugoslavia fell apart, this damned war came and did what it did: It made us all enemies. (Bosniak, male, 51, FB&H)

By focussing on the question of how individuals talk about war (rather than on what they say about it), the hermeneutic interview analysis revealed that the recent war is repeatedly, i.e., in multiple interviews, characterised as an occurrence not made by human beings. Rather, it is seen as an external event that overwhelmed 'innocent' people and set them against one another. The quote from the interview with a Bosniak male (51) from the Posavina region (FB&H), is one of many incisive examples of this strategy of subjectification of war. The philosopher Slavoj Žižek has previously identified that in the Balkans, 'war is [seen as] a natural phenomenon. It is [considered as] a natural catastrophe, like an earthquake which explodes from time to time' (Žižek 2007, 163) and therefore not only completely independent from humanity but also an active subject. War can thus be treated as something beyond ethical considerations and human responsibility (Hoch 1999, 38). The social function of this interpretation pattern can be described as inclusive: By subjectifying the war, people not only distance their own ethnic in-group from any responsibility and protect their own we-ideal, they also offer the same opportunity to the relevant ethnic out-group. This subjectification of war can be seen as the lowest common denominator in which all parties could agree, as it enables them all to focus on their common suffering and on their common victimisation experience (Noor et al. 2012, 364).

Externalisation of guilt

By subjectifying war, guilt and responsibility are transferred onto war itself. However, the analysis also reveals that, depending on the situation at hand, various others are blamed for the outbreak and course of war. This can happen in four ways: (a) Members of two ethnic groups can align against members of a third ethnic group and make them the scapegoats for the disintegration of Yugoslavia and eruption of violence. This strategy of ganging up against a third party is achievable due to the triad constellation in this specific conflict. Three different coalitions are identifiable: Bosniaks and Croats against the Serbs, who are typically defined as the war's 'central aggressor' as well as the most destructive power in post-war Bosnia; Croats and Serbs against the Bosniaks, who are accused of trying to build up an Islamic state; Bosniaks and Serbs against the Croats, who are considered as fascists. (b) Furthermore, responsibility and guilt can be externalised by reducing the size of the in-group, i.e., by externalising unwanted persons or (sub)groups; for example, the 'paramilitary groups from Serbia', as one of the Serbian interviewees (male/35) describes. (c) Moreover, the out-group can also be separated into the good ones – who are typically nearby – and the more distant, bad ones. For example, the Bosniak interviewee (51) quoted above differentiates between 'our Croats' from the Posavina region and the Herzegovinian Croats, whom he considers as fascists. (d) Finally, the blame for

all the bad things that happened and still happen in the region can be shifted onto foreign or external parties such as the 'international community' or certain nation states.

Silencing war

The analysis revealed one further 'associative' strategy besides the subjectification of war and the externalisation of responsibility: It unveiled that people usually remain silent about everything related to the violent past when interacting with members of the respective ethnic out-groups (Mijić 2018):

> After a short period, just a few months after the end of war, we began to visit each other. As if nothing had happened […] As if this hole had never existed. As if the lines had never existed. (Croat, male, 50, FB&H)

Such an 'as-if strategy' for the benefit of normalising interethnic relations appears quite rational. People remain silent 'in order to suspend or truncate open conflict over the meaning and/or justification of violence' (Winter 2010, 5). Like the subjectification of war and the externalisation of guilt, the tabooing of the war-torn past in interethnic encounters enables members of different ethnic allegiances to interact 'peacefully' in everyday life. Through these interactions, they create new objective and subjective realities (Berger and Luckmann 1966) within which ethnic boundaries become less important.

Like the subjectification of war and the externalisation of responsibility or guilt, the strategy of silencing the war contributes not only to a stabilisation of one's own we-ideal, it also enables the respective 'ethnic others' to cling to their self-image as victims. Here, the question arises whether these 'associative strategies' actually contribute to an erosion of ethnic boundaries.

Discussion: strategies in context

Manifestations of dissociative strategies are specifically discussed in collective or 'competitive victimhood' literature, i.e., strategies that reinforce the symbolic boundary between in-group and out-group by emphasising, for instance, the in-group's moral integrity as distinct from the out-group's moral inferiority. As Lamont (1992) has shown, moral discourses are often involved in creating or stabilising symbolic boundaries, i.e., they are not *only* relevant when it comes to (post-)war situations. The strategies the paper subsumes under the 'associative strategies' label are typically either not considered by literature or only considered in terms of investigating how to end the cycle of competitive victimhood (Noor et al. 2012, 363–64; Clark 2014; Stefansson 2010).

At a first glance, it seems, indeed, plausible to proceed on the assumption that associative strategies are conducive to pan-ethnic integration. It is logical that the *subjectivation of war* and the *externalisation of responsibility* helps to

create a common victimhood identity and enables members of the conflicting groups either 'to think about themselves as members of a common superordinate group' (Noor et al. 2012, 363) or to develop a 'dual identity, that is, identification with the immediate subgroup as well as with the superordinate, common identity' (Noor et al. 2012, 364). It is also reasonable to assume that *silencing* the war facilitates interethnic interaction and supports the pacification of a society. This feature of silence after the experience of violence and war has been discussed by various scholars (Mijić 2018; Clark 2014; Stefansson 2010).

There is, nevertheless, some evidence that associative strategies emerge spontaneously in response to the respective social situation, or – to draw on Erving Goffman – on the 'front stage' (Goffman 1959). In this sense, people 'define the situation for those who observe the performance' (Goffman 1959, 22). 'Back stage', however, the narratives of one's own exclusive victimhood are still effective – since the positive I-image depends on it.

It is thus striking, for example, that dissociative strategies were most prominently applied by Croatian respondents. This should not lead to the assumption that Bosnian Croats are more confrontational than the Bosnian Serbs or the Bosniaks, but must rather be attributed to the fact that the interviewees of Croatian origin identified the interviewer, as 'one of their own'. One Croatian male interviewee (50), for example, puts it very explicitly as follows:

> These stories lead us to political issues and the both of us have a mutual understanding, since we are on the same page. We have … we could have different opinions about something, but we also have a common objective, the objective we are aiming at is the same. However, it's not the same with them, since they only see that somebody else is guilty. Whenever we talked about war, he would always say that somebody else imposed it on us. However, I know that it wasn't somebody else but them alone. (Croat, male, 50, FB&H)

Here, the interview setting is most obviously defined as ethnically homogeneous. It is highly reasonable to assume that this definition of the situation has an influence on the strategies the interviewee typically applies for maintaining his in-group's collective victimhood and therewith his own positive self-image. The assumption that the interview setting's composition plays a significant role regarding which type of strategy is 'chosen' and applied, respectively, can be also confirmed by the interviews with Bosniaks and Bosnian Serbs, who rather typically adopt associative strategies. The aforementioned differentiation between 'our Croats of the Posavina region' – the 'good ones' as one of whom the interviewer is considered – and the fascist Croats from Herzegovina undertaken by the Bosniak interviewee (51), for instance, must be considered within this context. Likewise, the alliance created between Serbs and Croats against the Muslim others is illustrated in the

following passage from the interview with a Bosnian Serb (male/36) from the Doboj Region (RS):

> I feel much better in Croatian towns than in Muslim towns. That's for sure. I grew up in Sarajevo and no matter where I went, I got beaten up. I like the Croat more than I like the Muslim. You know? But I don't hate anybody, I just feel better in Orašje [a town with a Croat majority in FB&H] than in Velika Kladuša [a town with a Bosniak majority in FB&H]. In Orašje, you see just beautiful women, mothers, and grandmothers. In Velika Kladuša, you can see only the eyes of swathed creatures. (Serb, male, 35, RS).

In the case of doubt, people seem to just remain silent. In interethnic encounters, questions regarding responsibility and guilt are often totally screened out and the most fiercely-disputed political issues are typically avoided. It seems reasonable to presume that not speaking about war contributes to pan-ethnic integration. Talking about different perceptions of the past most likely leads to an escalation of the conflict over who started the war and who is responsible for all the atrocities committed during it. Avoiding these conflicts, however, enables people of different ethnic belonging and with different perspectives of reality to interact 'peacefully' in everyday life and thereby possibly create 'new' realities within which 'ethnic boundaries' diminish in importance. This conclusion, however, is based on the assumption that silencing one's own perception of the past or adjusting it depending on the context necessarily leads to forgetting. However, as long as 'ethnically biased' in-group memories are kept alive – the data shows quite clearly that this is the case – associative strategies do not only *not* weaken ethnic boundaries, they even contribute to a further corroboration of one's own version of the past. In keeping silent about war in interethnic encounters, everyone is silently taking for granted their own reality perspective, according to which the respective ethnic in-group is the central victim of war.

Conclusion

The reconstructive analysis of the data shows that in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, 'collective' self-victimisation is a central identity-related pattern in people's narratives; it reproduces itself across all analysed interviews. In accordance with the existing literature about collective victimhood it can be argued that collective victimhood is conducive to a positive we-image as well as to a positive I-image – both potentially compromised by the conflict (Noor et al. 2012, 360). The research presented in this paper, however, not only reveals the existence of self-victimisation in this post-war context and discusses its functions regarding the question of identity. Due to the reconstructive approach, it also succeeded in working out different manifestations of or strategies for maintaining self-victimisation. First, those that conspicuously

reproduce the dichotomy of victim and perpetrator along ethnic lines – the dissociative strategies of *moral alchemy* and *double relativisation*; second, those, which (at least) seem to transcend this dichotomy – the associative strategies of *subjectification of war*, the *externalisation of responsibility*, and *silence*. A subsequent contextualisation of these strategies finally suggests, that which strategy is adopted substantially depends on the situation at hand, in this case, on whether the social constellation is ethnically homogeneous or heterogeneous. There are some clear indications that people in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina deploy dissociative strategies of self-victimisation as long as they interact within ethnic boundaries, whereas associative strategies are adopted when they interact with people of different ethnic background.

In other words, although associative strategies transcend the ethnically-defined dichotomy of victim and perpetrator in a concrete situation of (inter-ethnic) interaction, they do no not necessarily contribute to an erosion of ethnic boundaries in post-war Bosnia. The findings presented in this article suggest that, ultimately, associative strategies – and most of all, the silencing of war – even contribute, in fact, to a further consolidation of the particular reality perspective: By avoiding conflicts with unlike-minded people, one's own narratives about the in-group's moral and civilisational superiority is sheltered from external reappraisal. This final facet should be investigated by further research that takes the interaction situation more precisely into account.

Notes

1. The term 'Bosniak' is used to denote the ethnic group formerly referred to as (Bosnian) Muslims, while the term 'Bosnian' applies to all citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina.
2. The interview took place in 2009. In 2001, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) demanded the arrest of Gotovina, who had been charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in 1995 during and in the aftermath of *Operation Oluja*. Four years later, in 2005, Gotovina was captured and transferred to the ICTY in The Hague. In 2011, he was found guilty on eight of nine counts of the indictment and sentenced to twenty-four years in prison. The verdict dealt a blow to the self-image of Croatia as the victim of war crimes, rather than a culprit; 'The Hague' had failed to recognise the 'purely defensive character' of the *Domovinski Rat* – *their* Homeland War. Then, on 12 November 2012, the ICTY overturned the verdict against Gotovina and with it – at least according to the perception of the Croatian people – the verdict against Croatia. This 'not guilty' verdict was extraordinarily significant for the Croatians, as it was seen as the definitive proof of their own victimhood. For the ICTY's impact on Bosnia-Herzegovinian society, see, for instance, Nettelfield (2010).

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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