

Bridges, Children, & the War in Bosnia: A Conversation with Senija Tahirovic & Vahida Salinovic-Bjedic

Gonzalo Bacigalupe

This article is based on a conversation with two women psychologists from Bosnia who attended the last AFTA pre-meeting workshop and were visiting the Center for Victims of Torture in Minneapolis. The quotes are based on an edited transcript that highlights the substance of our conversation. During the interview I shared my own interest in the connection between intimate and political violence and asked them what they thought North American therapists needed to know about their work. Their immediate response was to attend to the context in which their psychological work is sited, a residential children's center called Most. As they explained: "*Most* in Bosnia means *bridge*. It symbolizes the relationship between the Norwegian people and the Bosnian people since the Norwegian government has supported us financially."

Senija explained that she has worked since 1993 as a psychologist in Most: "My job as a psychotherapist is to work directly with the children and to take care of all individual problems for each child in the residence. Some of the children need long-term psychotherapy, others need it for only a few months. Most of them have been victims of torture in the war and have some behavioral, emotional, and learning problems, plus trouble sleeping and nightmares."

"What do we try to accomplish? Ours is a residential center and we try to generate an environment very similar to the family life these children had previous to the war. There is a social worker who works directly with the children 24 hours a day. There are teachers and preschool personnel. We try to carry on whatever mother or father did in their own families, from cleaning clothes to

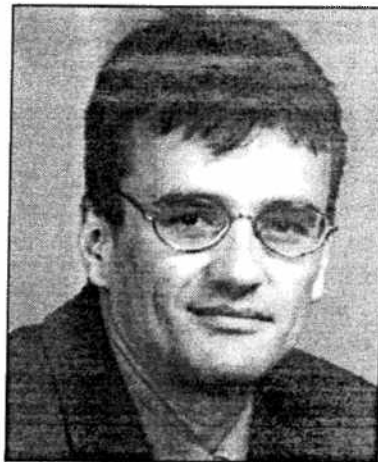
teaching social manners, doing homework, and other chores. We want to create a normal life because it's really very difficult sometimes when they come and they haven't had what we would call a normal life living in a refugee camp."

Since 1994 Vahida has worked in Empaty (Empathy), a center that serves refugee women and children. The center provides opportunities for the women to learn new work skills and support each other. It is "not really psychotherapy," Vahida tells me. Empaty has two mobile teams who visit the villages and refugee camps to offer their services and a playroom has been set up for the children.

It is very difficult to be prepared

Asked about the lessons from the last three years of work that may have a universal value, Senija says: "The war situation was new for all of us, we were not prepared to confront this situation. I started just by using my intuition, but later many international organizations organized trainings for us that were very helpful. We have access to literature about trauma, torture, and methodologies to work with victims and survivors. In the university, before the war, we learned about the consequences of a single traumatic source, but we didn't learn about torture, we didn't learn about war crimes or about being severely traumatized so many times."

"I think that nobody can be prepared for that because nobody can imagine you can work with clients who have lost both parents, witnessed their execution or lived right at the edge of the fight between shellings and with soldiers who wanted to kill your ten-year-old child. It is very difficult to be prepared for that kind of



Gonzalo Bacigalupe

Our education didn't prepare us for this, but we have to work and try our best. We really try to help the child. What we can do is to establish a very good contact with that child and to establish a situation where the child can trust you. It's very important in our therapy when the child can trust you and the child can sit in your office or outside in the park and can speak about his or her terrible experience. Very often a child wants to say a lot during the first session but some of them need a longer period to open their hearts. It is hard for a child to say everything they went through in the war. We are not very sure that we work at our best, but we are very satisfied when we see a child who couldn't sit and draw and after three or five months he can sit, draw, play, and interact with other children."

What they need and don't need from abroad

Trainings from outside experts have been extensive and frequent in Bosnia in contrast to the experience of other countries that have suffered the devastating aftermath of a civil war. I asked them about the effects of those outside expert trainings.

"The trainings have been very useful to learn new techniques like network therapy, mind-body work, and dealing with emotions. It was important to learn in an experiential way to work with some techniques rather than just sitting and hearing about trauma. It was very useful to have a seminar about ourselves as therapists, to be stimulated to continue our job because it is so difficult with so many children. What we don't need is somebody coming from abroad and asking us many questions, writing it all up, shutting his notebook, going away and leaving us without any feedback or new information but writing a doctoral dissertation. It has happened and we are very angry about that. It has not happened so often but some people come to use our situation."

I suggested that it is like a re-traumatization process, working with traumatic experiences and lives and being robbed of your own experiences of validation, thus introducing new forms of pain. Vahida, affirmatively, reports, "Yes, it is our own experience of trauma." Vahida mentions another important theme, problems with demobilized soldiers, "They come back from the front line, are unemployed, have lost a sense of what normal life is, have trouble with their wives, and are traumatized. We learned about working with the children and the women, now we are unprepared to connect with the soldiers."

I suggested thinking of the experiences in Central America after the peace process during the last decade.

This latter work integrates community work with demobilized soldiers and guerrillas from opposing factions and their families as they return to live "the normal life." Many of them have been in war since they were kids. Suddenly they have a bed, a time to have lunch, and have to decide on their own where to walk, and they have been trained for those skills after living in the jungle or hiding in an urban setting for a decade or more. These soldiers had a hard time but have also developed communities of a different kind, communities of war that disappear as they become civilians. In this regard, Senija suggests the need, "to organize some kind of occupational activities and some psychotherapy, though many men don't like psychotherapy."

The worst part is over

"[In Bosnia] the worst part is really over, [however] we have to continue helping people in the post-war period. It will be very important to learn how to establish a good contact with clients for them to trust you, and the problems of demobilized soldiers will need to be resolved with some kind of family therapy."

It will be a challenge for families to find new identities for themselves since coming back to what existed previously is only a dream. In this regard, I asked about the impact of the war on the ways men and women relate. They report on the dilemmas brought by the enormous number of women who were raped and experienced other forms of abuse in concentration camps. However, the realities of former neighbors and communities at war bring them back to other core issues, coming to terms with anger and the potential for revenge. Senija asks, "How do I respond to the questions of a child who is confused because she knows who killed her father or mother? Children can't understand why this happened, but neither can I. We need time."

The future

I was curious about the future of their work and the development of institutional links since they believe the reality of trauma will continue to haunt people in Bosnia for years to come.

"We plan to be part of other institutions who take care of children, like a child protection agency. We have to start conversing with the governmental authorities and to find other ways of supporting our work."

They have also been considering writing about some of their experience but they do not have enough time and money for that. They highlight, though, that the agenda should come from inside rather than from someone coming from abroad. This precaution is balanced by a deep recognition of those like the Center for

Torture Victims, and other institutions that have aided their work (including our invitation to attend the AFTA pre-meeting conference).

I was really honored to have had this conversation with Senija Tahirovic and Vahida Salinovic-Bjedic. They tell us a lot about commitment and the fight for meaning and healing. It was a conversation that reminded me of an Australian aborigine's speech at the Conference on World Hunger: "If you have come

to help me, you can go home again. But if you see my struggle as part of your own survival, then perhaps we can work together."

Gonzalo Bacigalupe is Assistant Professor at the University of Massachusetts Boston, a member of the Sexual Abuse Team at Judge Baker Children's Center, Harvard Medical School, and Associate Consultant with Latin American Consultancy Services.

RANDY GERSON MEMORIAL GRANT

American Psychological Foundation

The American Psychological Foundation (APF) announces the Randy Gerson Memorial Grant to be given in 1998. The grant has been created to advance the systemic understanding of family and/or couple dynamics and/or multi-generational processes. Work that advances theory, assessment, or clinical practice in these areas shall be considered eligible for grants through the fund.

Who is eligible

Applicants from a variety of professional or educational settings are encouraged to apply. To be eligible for consideration, applicants must have a doctorate (or equivalent Psy.D., or Ed.D.). Awards will be given on alternate years to students and professionals. The 1998 grant will go to a professional.

Application should include

- A statement of the project proposed for grant consideration
- A rationale for how the project meets the goals of the fund
- A budget for the project
- A statement about how the results of the project will be disseminated (published paper, report, monograph, etc.)
- Personal reference material (vita and two letters of recommendation)
- The nominee's official transcript

Amount of grant

\$5,000 to be given every other year, beginning in 1998.

Deadline

February 1, 1998

For additional information

Contact Starla Crandall, APF Awards and PR Officer, American Psychological Foundation
750 First Street, NE, Washington, DC 20002. Phone: (202) 336-5843. E-mail: smc.apa@email.apa.org