Introduction to *Special Issue*: linking mental health and psychosocial support to peacebuilding in an integrated way

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Across the world, many communities have been affected by conflict, violence and war. The impact of this suffering can vary enormously and ranges from political division to economic hardship, and from infrastructure destruction to social fragmentation. No matter which lens is used to understand how conflict affects society, human suffering remains the common denominator. However, global definitions of peacebuilding and international practice do not sufficiently recognise the impact of violent conflict on psychosocial wellbeing, nor do they recognise that mental health and psychosocial support processes are essential and need to be integrated. The goal of this Special Issue is to profile a selection of relevant contemporary efforts aimed at bringing the fields of mental health and psychosocial support and peacebuilding closer together, and to make the case for the need for an integrated approach.

Keywords: linking peacebuilding and mental health and psychosocial support, reconciliation

Introduction: background

War and conflict fragments societies and weakens the social fabric that governs relationships and the capacity for recovery. In the aftermath of conflict, the causes of interpersonal conflict might still exist and may even worsen due to violence. A return to conflict is also very likely to occur in post conflict countries, where people have witnessed and experienced large scale violence, destruction, displacement and personal loss. The natural ties, rules and bonds between people, and within communities, that strengthen coping and resilience, are also often destroyed. However, the ability of individuals and societies to cope with such extraordinarily painful experiences and the consequential distrust and fear is limited, with the breakdown of coping strategies often triggering psychosocial trauma. Furthermore, restoring the social fabric that binds and supports people is essential for those who have experienced serious traumatic events. Feeling connected to others is essential for sustainable peace.

Lack of integration

Research in this issue suggests that organisations working in the field of peacebuilding (PB) and those working in mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) rarely cooperate. Nor are their efforts integrated in an ecological way. Global definitions of PB do not sufficiently recognise the impact of violent conflict on psychosocial wellbeing, nor do they overtly recognise that in order for sustainable and positive peace to be built in post conflict societies, MHPSS processes are essential and need to be integrated. Our aim with this *Special Issue* is to profile a selection of contemporary efforts and ways of thinking about PB and MHPSS that demonstrate and make the case for an integrated approach. The common thread throughout this issue highlights that the key issues surrounding linking these fields needs to happen in a way that ensures that people and

communities in (post) conflict societies are offered holistic, multidisciplinary and context sensitive interventions. Furthermore, these should target MHPSS programmes at the individual, community and state level of society, while also be integrated into PB processes to build sustainable peace.

The journey so far
In 2014, *Intervention* contained a *Special Section* dedicated to peacebuilding and psychosocial work. This led to an interesting and diverse collection of papers. The editors, Hamber, Gallagher & Ventevogel (2014) argued that, all too often, MHPSS practitioners focus on improvements in wellbeing of individuals and families, while not sufficiently taking into account that these take place within larger processes of societal change. Practitioners should, therefore, be more cognisant that MHPSS interventions could contribute to *'building a wider peace or creating a social context that could impact more positively on overall psychological wellbeing'* (ibid. p.9). They ended their introduction by expressing their hope that a wide debate on this matter would follow.
Since that 2014 *Special Section*, a number of steps have been taken by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR, Cape Town) and the War Trauma Foundation (War-Trauma, Amsterdam) to heed the call by Hamber, Gallagher, & Ventevogel. A conference hosted in Johannesburg in May 2015 obtained an initial sense from practitioners and academics from 15 countries on how they understand the nexus between MHPSS and PB within their relevant fields. One of the key recommendations that emerged from this conference was the need for more research to understand what examples of an integrated approach to MHPSS and PB already exist, what theoretical models underpin existing integrative interventions and whether there is any evidence for the assumption that an integrated approach is more likely to build long-term peace (Bubenzer & Tankink, 2015). To this effect, an

extensive literature review was conducted in 2017; an abbreviated version of which is part of this issue. One of the overarching findings of the review is that both MHPSS and PB are required to restore and develop healthy human relationships, and that both fields have the same overarching goal: to enable people affected by conflict to realise their full potential and be able to live productive and peaceful lives. The reviewed literature also indicates that while there is an increasing awareness of the need to bring some of the knowledge and tools traditionally belonging to the field of MHPSS into PB interventions (and vice versa), this is not yet practiced in a way that is fully integrated from the outset, nor that is holistic at a systemic level.

Mapping current practice and insights of professionals in both fields
To complement the literature review with concrete contemporary data and insights from the field, and to identify (thereby also creating relationships with) organisations and individuals around the world working in the fields of MHPSS and PB (a recommendation of the 2015 conference), a mapping study was conducted via an online survey taken by 62 organisations from 25 countries (Bubenzer, van der Walt, & Tankink, 2017). More specifically, the aim was to begin to ascertain whether these organisations acknowledge the nexus between MHPSS and PB, and to establish whether and how they are integrating an awareness of the other fields' components into their work. The survey found that 92% of respondents agree that interventions aimed at building sustainable peace would benefit from an approach which links PB and MHPSS. As one participant stated: *'it is difficult to reconcile when one is still mentally disturbed.'* A further finding was that practitioners perceive the gap between MHPSS and PB to be based on a lack of knowledge and opportunities for engagement with the other field.

The study also points to a number of myths, notably the concern that MHPSS is considered a humanitarian activity, whereas PB is inherently political in nature. Therefore, it is suggested that many believe that an integrated approach would either compromise political neutrality of MHPSS aid workers or that practitioners in the PB field tend to link MHPSS with a narrow definition of trauma and trauma healing. These expressions show that the siloed positioning of both fields fosters assumptions and myths of *'the other field'*, and highlights some of the conceptual and definitional myths that need to be addressed for an integrated approach to be developed.

How psychosocial interventions integrate, influence, interact with and are linked to social transformation, remains under theorised and under researched (Hamber et al., 2014). In order overcome these gaps, both fields need to get to know each other better, work more closely together, demystify their aims and objectives and define relevant overlapping concepts in a way that works for both disciplines. Additionally, there is a need to engage the international donor community to support this effort and the emergence of new opportunities; this was a recurring request from a spectrum of stakeholders involved in this project. Donors create chains of supply and demand, which directly shape the characteristics of humanitarian aid and indirectly the formation of policy. One respondent of the mapping study clearly referred to these boundaries by remarking: *'the link between the two areas still has to be actively made. Often work goes where donors provide support. Few donors have acknowledged the relevance of combining the two fields.'*

Key concepts

The IJR and WarTrauma project has identified that finding common definitions for key concepts that underpin this work is an important first step. The following section briefly defines the relevant concepts (Bubenzer & Tankink, 2015).

Mental health and psychosocial support

MHPSS is defined in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee guidelines for MHPSS in Emergency Settings (Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), 2007, p.1) as *'any type of local or outside support that aims to protect or promote psychosocial wellbeing and/or prevent or treat mental disorder'*. The term *'psychosocial'* emphasises the dynamic relationship between psychological aspects of experience (our thoughts, emotions, feelings and behaviour), our wider social experience (our relationships, traditions) and values and culture (International Federation Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support, 2009; Hamber et al., 2015, p 3.). Interventions in this field range from the provision of basic services and security at the individual and community levels to community and family supports; non-specialised (mental health) services and specialised services (IASC, 2007). The psychosocial and contextual sensitivity of an intervention is essential (Hamber et al., 2015). Clear consensus has developed amongst MHPSS practitioners that MHPSS activities in (post) conflict settings should not only focus on assisting individuals and families with *'problems'*, but should also include interventions to strengthen the resilience and coping mechanisms of communities and society at large, and to promote overall wellbeing of individuals and communities (IASC, 2007).

Peacebuilding

PB consists of the range of interrelated issues, actions and tools used to promote just and sustainable social, economic and political structures and relationships – at all levels of society. It is concerned with short-term responses to complex and violent conflicts and long-term responses to build the capacity of societies, preventing them from drifting back into violence (conflict prevention). PB is an integral part of helping stable societies develop economically, politically,

socially and culturally. It does this by addressing the intangible and tangible psychological, relational and structural elements of complex issues in an integrated way.

Reconciliation

In essence, reconciliation is the process that generates mutual acceptance by two or more groups after a period of conflict. '*At its simplest, reconciliation means finding a way to live alongside former enemies – not necessarily to love them, nor forgive them, nor forget the past in any way – but to coexist with them, to develop the degree of cooperation necessary to share our society with them, so that we all have better lives together than we had separately*' (Bloomfield, Barnes, & Huyse, 2003, p.12).

Transitional justice

In order to assist conflict affected societies to come to terms with past legacies of large scale human rights violations, a range of processes and mechanisms have been developed that constitute a field today called '*transitional justice*'. Transitional justice is largely described as constituting the judicial and non-judicial measures that can be implemented in post conflict contexts to redress the legacies of human rights violations and to repair affected communities and society. These measures include: criminal prosecutions, truth commissions, memorialisation, material and symbolic reparations programmes and various kinds of institutional reforms, all with the ultimate goals of ensuring accountability and achieving reconciliation.

Social fabric

Founded in social identity theory, social fabric is used to explain how conflict affects the nature of societies and social relations. Social fabric is comprised of social links and relations forming a society. These links and relations are comprised of norms, experiences and expectations governing social interaction (Alcock & Sadava, 2014).

The social structures established out of social interaction are acknowledged as the social fabric of a society. These are fundamental to creating unity, harmony and peace.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis underlying the thinking that underpins this *Special Issue* is that if the fields of MHPSS and PB are linked or integrated, interventions in both fields will benefit by achieving more sustainable outcomes. An enhanced commitment to work together on developing such an approach, while working towards understanding similarities and differences between the fields, is a crucial step in this process. How such a linkage should be operationalised remains to be defined. Future research will illustrate if an integrated approach will suffice or whether indeed an entirely new approach, which merges key elements of both disciplines in a way that responds to contemporary challenges, is needed. Or as one respondent in the mapping report asserted: '*I think we definitely need to present evidence that links mental health and PB. Even "reconciliation" is not a term that we discuss frequently [within our organisation] – it seems to be no longer an in vogue idea! So, we really could use research and policy writing that clearly links individual mental health AND community healing/trauma recovery with stronger PB outcomes*.' We hope to contribute to this knowledge base with this *Special Issue* of *Intervention*.

This issue

Aside from the literature review referred to above, titled: *Building sustainable peace through an integrated approach to peacebuilding and mental health and psychosocial support: a literature review*, the following contributions described below further enrich this volume.

Noting the rise in cases of suicide, domestic violence, and substance abuse in northern Uganda, Maryam Rokhideh writes about the pressing need to better understand the complex dynamics and experiences of

individuals and communities navigating post conflict life. The article *Peacebuilding and psychosocial intervention: the critical need to address everyday post conflict experiences in northern Uganda* examines how different actors in the field, such as community leaders, traditional authorities, local government officials and nongovernmental organisations, have addressed the psychosocial conditions of local people and the implications thereof on post conflict recovery processes. Rokhideh shows that psychosocial interventions in northern Uganda were mainly short lived, targeted at specific groups, disconnected from the wider post conflict recovery process and failed to respond to the daily needs of the population. She states that psychosocial interventions must be responsive to the needs and changes that arise during the war-to-peace transition.

Narrative based historical memory work contributes to building an understanding of the contemporary dynamics of a society or context. In her article, *A reflection on narrative based historical memory work in peacebuilding processes,* Theresa Edlmann explores how hearing contrasting stories and perspectives might help individuals to change the way they remember conflict and to embark on *'narrative repair'.* Although there are risks in undertaking this work, it has the potential to help people move out of their fixed or rigid narrative realms into new, positive and less violent narrative spaces and relationships.

Chantal Marie Ingabire, Grace Kagoyire, Diogene Karangwa, Noella Ingabire, Nicolas Habarugira, Angela Jansen & Annemiek Richters write about the contribution made by the community based sociotherapy (CBST) model to Rwanda's transitional and restorative justice process. Their article, *Trauma informed restorative justice through community based sociotherapy in Rwanda,* positions CBST as complementary to the state centred, top down and mostly judicially oriented transitional justice mechanisms the country has implemented. The authors argue that social relations between genocide survivors and perpetrators, as well as their offspring, and individual psychological healing are interdependent and that both components of restorative justice contribute to social change through time within respective communities. Their findings suggest that sociotherapy as a psychosocial peacebuilding approach effectively contributes to different forms of social change at community level.

In her article, *Exploring the link between trauma and truth in post conflict societies: comparing 'post conflict' Northern Ireland and post apartheid South Africa*, Kjelsie L. Hass compares the relationship between truth and trauma in Northern Ireland and South Africa through interviews with professionals working in the field in both countries. Two important thematic findings were revealed, which include the necessity to expand the discussion of experiences of trauma in post conflict societies and how the ways in which truth is experienced by, or presented to, an individual may impact how one recovers from trauma. Both themes suggest important considerations that should be recognised in future conversations when discussing the extent to which truth may dissipate trauma in societies attempting to move forward in the aftermath of violent conflict.

In the field report, *Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience programme: experiential education toward resilience and trauma informed people and practice*, Kathryn Mansfield describes the restorative justice based educational programme Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR), which was developed in response to the need to respond to the surge resulting from the 11 September 2001 events in the USA. A grant given to Eastern Mennonite University's Center for Justice and Peacebuilding (CJP) enabled the development of STAR to assist community leaders to help affected communities. STAR promotes a multi-level response to traumatic events by integrating information about how to simultaneously promote individual, community and societal wellbeing and resilience. STAR is not value

neutral and teaches community leaders about trauma caused by collective violence. In her contribution, *The intrinsic interlinkage between peacebuilding and mental health and psychosocial support: The International Association for the Human Values model of integrated, psychosocial peacebuilding*, Katrien Hertog describes the integrative model developed and used by the international NGO the International Association for Human Values (IAHV). The IAHV model integrates psychosocial factors into peacebuilding by going beyond traditional mental health work to transforming mindsets, attitudes, wellbeing and behaviour of conflict affected individuals. The way in which IAHV combines these two aspects is an important case study for the wider exploration of an integrated approach. Hertog states that the integration of a full range of psychosocial factors into peacebuilding, is not limited to the integration of MH and PSS, and can go beyond, depending on the relevant context.

The personal reflection, *Snaga Žene: a model in healing trauma beyond psychological treatment* by Branka Antić-Štauber by documents the remarkable journey made by the Bosnian organisation Snaga Žene (*'Power of Woman'*) to support women returning to the villages of Srebrenica and Potokari after the country's brutal war. The report presents an ecological model of rehabilitation developed in response to a rapidly growing need to assist female returnees with the immense psychological, social and economic challenges experienced during the process of returning or resettling after the war. Recognising the many challenges faced by women, who had experienced the brunt of the war, Snaga Žene provides long-term services (from 2002 to the present day) along the framework of the ecological model. The approach includes the provision of psychological therapy and trauma awareness, the restoration of trust and social connections, conflict resolution skills and, notably, economic skills development and support components. It is an emotional reflection of the struggle and developments of the organisation and their participants.

Conclusion

Despite the compelling arguments made in this *Special Issue* by the profiled practical models (STAR, IAHV, CBST) and experiential accounts, many questions remain to be answered as to how best to position MHPSS and PB vis-a-vis one another to attain the most effective outcomes. As Mansfield concludes in her article '*how do we measure the impact on peacebuilding and development (and in justice, health care, community building, religious and disaster response organisations) of people doing their work in more holistic and trauma informed ways?*' Ingabire et al. challenge us '*to find ways to effectively contribute to transitional justice on other levels of society by effectively contributing to peacebuilding initiatives in Rwanda [in order] to become more trauma informed*'.

Practicing what Professor Barry Hart has termed '*psychosocial peacebuilding*' (Hart & Colo, 2014) may be the starting point of a disciplinary rapprochement. Psychosocial Peacebuilding (PSPB) is a holistic approach that integrates the theories and practices of MH, PSS and PB for the purpose of laying a strong psychosocial foundation for sustainable peacebuilding, not just in the aftermath of violence. Developing a set of practice guidelines underpinned by a new theoretical framework may well be the most urgent next step. This must be followed by longitudinal multi-disciplinary field research that is able to provide evidence for the fact that PSPB more sustainably guides individuals, communities and societies towards peace and human development.

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