

Narrowing the gap between psychosocial practice, peacebuilding and wider social change: an introduction to the *Special Section* in this issue

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The terms ‘psychosocial interventions’ and ‘peacebuilding’ are often used as umbrella phrases. While each of these covers a widely diverging field, a primary goal of ‘psychosocial interventions’ is to improve wellbeing of individuals and families, while ‘peacebuilding’ tends to focus on communal and institutional processes. Psychosocial practitioners do not often see their work as directly related to social change, while those involved in peacebuilding initiatives can have a limiting focus on individual wellbeing. The authors argue that greater attention should be given to the synergies that could be created by linking psychosocial work with processes of social change and communal recovery, within the context of collective violence and humanitarian emergencies. The articles in this issue of ‘Intervention’ describe experiences within very different contexts (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burma (Myanmar), Guatemala, Lebanon, Northern Ireland, occupied East Jerusalem, South Sudan and Rwanda), but their common thread is that they begin to show how psychosocial work can influence a peacebuilding environment and foster wider social change.

Keywords: peacebuilding, psychosocial work, social change, social processes

In the aftermath of political violence, ‘psychosocial support’ is widely accepted as being of critical importance for the recovery of individuals, families and communities, in addition to interventions focusing on reconstruction and re-establishment of

governance, public services and institutions (Bracken & Petty, 1998; de Jong, 2002, Dress, 2005; Hamber, 2009; Lykes, 2000, Silove, 2004). However, the forms of those supports to be provided or facilitated, and how they should be prioritised, has been the subject of long debate. Interventions within the domain of mental health and psychosocial support may include a variety of different approaches, including psychiatric services, psychosocial counselling, providing and facilitating community based social supports, structured social activities (such as child friendly spaces), provision of information, psycho-education, and awareness raising (Töl et al., 2011). The myriad of approaches, however, has led to a contentious debate about which interventions are appropriate and effective. Initially, this discussion was simplified to a dichotomous tension between those who have favoured clinical treatment for individuals with war related conditions, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with methods derived from psychotherapy, and those focusing on community driven approaches stressing concepts such as a self-help, resilience and community based activities that are also said to have a therapeutic effect (Saul, 2014). Typically, the latter includes group sharing of problems, community dialogue, traditional healing rituals, art projects, theatre initiatives, interpersonal skills development,

training on issues such as human rights and mediation, engagement in livelihood projects, among many others. These types of interventions are sometimes referred to under the 'umbrella' category of psychosocial interventions. Drawing on the work of the Psychosocial Working Group (2003), the 'psychosocial' concept emphasises the close interrelationship and interlinking between psychological aspects of experience (thoughts, emotions and behaviour) and wider social experience (relationships, traditions, norms and culture). Those adopting a psychosocial approach generally share the view that armed conflict not only impacts the mind of an individual, but also the family and the community (Strang & Ager, 2003; Ager, Strang & Wessells, 2006). As a result, psychosocial practitioners are increasingly focusing on the complex relationships between individual trauma and the larger socio historical contexts in which they occur (Fairbank, et al., 2003).

In the last decade, a consensus has emerged around a common framework for a field that has now become known as 'mental health and psychosocial support' (MHPSS). The publication of the 'IASC Guidelines for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings' (IASC, 2007), developed and endorsed by more than 40 organisations, was a major step forward in unifying a hitherto rather fragmented field (Wessells & van Ommeren, 2008). The IASC guidelines have led to a broadly shared conceptualisation of MHPSS interventions as a *system* of overlapping and complementary layers of support and services¹, and this has led to increased coordination and cooperation between those involved in providing interventions focused on improving the psychological function of affected individuals, and those who saw the wellbeing of the individual as embedded in family and community as a primary focus.

However, attempts to build an evidence base for MHPSS have focused primarily on

clinical MHPSS services (by mental health specialists and psychotherapists) and 'focused non specialised supports' such as counselling by trained lay workers or paraprofessionals (Tol et al., 2011). Relatively limited attention has been given to the effects of broad community based psychosocial interventions on collective wellbeing and social connectedness. We believe this is an important issue that needs to be addressed. The *Special section* in this issue of 'Intervention', therefore, aims to reflect on how psychosocial interventions and practices, in both conflict and post conflict situations, may influence the social context. More specifically, can and do psychosocial interventions and practices shape long-term collective social processes of peacebuilding and wider social change, including processes such as development and social transformation? To address this question one has to consider issues from a wider vantage point than what is termed the 'social experience' component of the psychosocial definition given by the Psychosocial Working Group (2003), and quoted above.

Linking psychosocial interventions to peacebuilding

By including this *Special Section*, we hope it will elucidate the interrelationship of social structures and the political nature of society, and how this interrelationship plays out in the lives of individuals and communities. Framing the question in this manner, however, requires a conceptual shift that goes beyond psychosocial practice as improving wellbeing of individuals, families and communities through contextually relevant interventions and treatments. Within this context, the question becomes how such psychosocial interventions can shape, and are shaped by, wider social change, in particular processes of peacebuilding?

Peacebuilding strategies in societies emerging from armed conflict are now commonplace. However, there are only a few studies that focus explicitly on the relationship between psychosocial work and

peacebuilding (Wessells & Monteiro, 2006; Woodside, Santa-Barbara, & Denner, 1999). The United Nations have typically adopted an institutional view of peacebuilding, including among others, activities such as providing basic services, security sector reform, restoring core government functions, and supporting economic revitalisation, (United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office, 2010). Yet, at the same time, others tend to emphasise the so-called grassroots and relational components of peacebuilding, which involve identifying and supporting structures and relationships that will strengthen and consolidate peace (Jennings, 2003). From this perspective, peacebuilding involves people-to-people activities including among many others, promoting cooperation, dialogue and understanding, prejudice reduction work, participating in common activities (e.g. art and theatre) (Gawerc, 2006). This type of work often involves training those at the grassroots (the masses of people affected by conflict, from NGO workers to refugees) and the middle level of society (such as civil society leaders) with *'the cognitive skills of analysing conflict and the communicative skills of negotiation'* (Lederach, 1997). Such activities become venues for building relationships (Lederach, 1997).

Yet, when it comes to undertaking such interventions, especially if led by mental health professionals and called *'psychosocial interventions'*, rather than peacebuilding work, the focus is usually on individual wellbeing without taking into consideration whether the interventions themselves are contributing to building a wider peace or creating a social context that could impact more positively on overall psychological wellbeing.

Altering the wider social context is generally seen as the concern of politicians and activists and beyond the remit of mental health workers.² However, if the conceptual underpinning of interventions, especially those dubbed psychosocial, is that the

psychological and social are interrelated (or in fact indistinguishable, as Williamson & Robinson, 2006 argue), one has to enquire into whether the interventions are in fact impacting on the social context, which could be a key variable in the cause of individual distress.

Psychosocial practice and social change

The authors who have contributed to this *Special Section* have all approached this complex question in different ways. The case studies focusing on Guatemala, East Jerusalem, and Northern Ireland were part of a three-year research project, which also included a focus on South Africa, Mozambique, India, Sri Lanka (not reported in this issue) that attempted to address the relationship between psychosocial practices and social change directly. The study was undertaken by the International Conflict Research Institute (INCORE) at the University of Ulster, with multidisciplinary researchers with expertise in violent conflict from around the globe, and funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). However, also included in the *Special Section* are additional case studies, not part of the original study, focusing on South Sudan and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as personal reflections from authors in Lebanon, Burma (Myanmar) and Rwanda. These add immensely to the debate and focus.

Taken together, these articles produce a range of findings about how psychosocial work can be used to promote peacebuilding and other forms of social change. The articles provide a unique and expansive perspective of psychosocial approaches and their impact on the individual, as well as the wider social context. Broadly speaking, the challenging articles in this *Special Section* show that psychosocial work can have a very positive role to play in the peacebuilding

process specifically. This is primarily evident in the articles at three, albeit overlapping, levels described below.

Addressing psychological needs to prepare people to engage in peacebuilding

Several of the articles highlight the importance of addressing individual psychological needs and capacities as key strategies in preparing individuals to engage in wider social processes and peacebuilding. The article by *Brandon Hamber & Elizabeth Gallagher* argues that one of the focuses of psychosocial programming with young men who feel socially alienated and who face a range of mental health challenges in post peace agreement Northern Ireland, is to develop self-esteem, confidence, communication and interpersonal skills, deal with addiction and anger management, as well as address their capacities to participate in the economy at large. These types of interventions, which Hamber and Gallagher label the *'personal transformation model'*, are seen as the first step needed to equip individuals, in societies emerging from armed conflict, to engage in peacebuilding. By addressing individual needs, the psychosocial programmes enable these young men to make a positive mark on the wider society. Social transformation and peacebuilding work therefore flows from personal transformation.

Other articles in the *Special Section* make similar points. *Ellen Eiling, Marianne Van Diggele-Holtland, Tom Van Yperen & Frits Boer*, in their evaluation of War Child Holland's psychosocial support intervention (I DEAL) taking place in the Republic of South Sudan, show that the programme focuses on psychosocial support that contributes to non violent behaviours and other peacebuilding processes at an interpersonal level. The authors show how the I DEAL intervention supports children (11–15 years of age) to cope with the aftermath of armed

conflict, strengthening social and emotional coping skills, wellbeing and resilience. Specifically, the programme helps decrease fighting and improves relationships with peers and parents, as well as contributing to changes in confidence and participation. In a similar vein to Hamber and Gallagher's *personal transformation model*, Eiling et al. argue that psychosocial interventions, such as I DEAL, reduce violence and strengthen relationships, thereby opening up the potential for individuals to contribute to wider peacebuilding processes.

Similarly, *Brinton Lykes & Alison Crosby*, who reflect on the history of the war in Guatemala, highlight the transformative potential of creative psychosocial methodologies (such as dramatisation, murals, drawing, massage, storytelling, theatre and photography) and feminist rights based interventions and participatory research with Mayan women. The study shows how Mayan women's self-representations and performances during the multiple interventions taking place over a long period of time, further their understanding of their own context and enhance their own agency and activism. The various interventions develop important resources and capacities for the women, offering some psychological relief as well as control at social and community levels. This provides capacities for the women to engage more fully in local and national transformative processes.

Psychosocial interventions may challenge social exclusion and separation

Some articles in this *Special Section* also show how psychosocial interventions can become vehicles for building relationships, and challenge social exclusion and separation. This is most evident in the article by *Barry Hart & Edita Colo* focusing on various psychosocial peacebuilding initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina, beginning with small groups of women. The authors present cases that show the importance of

addressing psychosocial trauma recovery, problem solving and confidence building as transformational processes to meet personal and family emotional and material needs. This, however, is only the first step towards actual encounters between ethnic groups with different narratives of the conflict in former Yugoslavia. In the encounters, which take place in so-called safe spaces, emphasis is put on the importance of listening, storytelling, sharing information, building trust and participant confidence. The article outlines the social action processes needed for intergroup reconciliation. This process, Hart & Colo argue, serves several purposes. First, meeting others and building relationships is an important step in the individual healing process. Second, sustained dialogue processes help reduce tension, stereotyping, out group discrimination and negative attribution. Third, by coming together, the women help transform the conflict in the region relationally, economically and even politically. The latter happens through giving voice to economic and related political matters of their community, much in the same way that Lykes & Crosby argue that women who participate in the various creative workshops in Guatemala are empowered to engage in their context and with each other more fully.

The Northern Ireland article by *Brandon Hamber & Elizabeth Gallagher* also highlights the importance of improved relationships, changed attitudes and behaviours as keys to wider social change. The young men interviewed, who come from different communities (Catholic and Protestant), highlighted the importance of gaining an understanding of the past conflict, exploring their own attitudes and learning about the cultural identity of others as keys to their own wellbeing and emotional health, as well as being of wider value to society. As a result of the programmes, some of the young men now feel equipped to challenge and condemn prejudice and discrimination against those

holding different political views of the conflict in Northern Ireland, as well as foster cooperative interaction that helps previously antagonistic groups build relationships. *Ali Dokmak*, a young Lebanese student, in his personal reflection, also shows how War Child Holland's methodology *Performing for Peace* (P4P) uses youth led theatre and dialogue in Lebanon to gain a better understanding of the past, and in turn build a better understanding of the 'other'.

Psychosocial interventions can create awareness and understanding needed for social change

Additionally, psychosocial interventions can also provide the cognitive skills for understanding conflict, as well as the awareness needed to forward peacebuilding (Lederach, 1997) and promote social change. *Lykes & Crosby* argue that in Guatemala, despite the peace process, Mayan women continue to struggle with the legacy of the war, the recovery process from politically motivated rape and sexualised violence, the ongoing community and domestic violence, as well as racialised gendered exclusion and poverty. The article shows how, through various methodologies, discontinuities and continuities of impoverishment and everyday violence can be re-imagined by the participants. For example, some of the women, through a range of creative psychosocial interventions, show an increase in their understanding of the everyday forms of gendered racialised violence they experienced in their homes and communities. This increases their levels of social and community participation. As noted above, the women in Bosnia and Herzegovina also found their 'voice' in the community and political arena through psychosocial programmes.

Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, through examining the conditions and social processes surrounding death and dying in East Jerusalem, also shows how Palestinians who have lost family members can find

their 'voice', despite living in a repressive environment. The article explores what could be termed psychosocial practices (rather than formal psychosocial interventions) that Palestinians engage in as they try to come to terms with the death of a loved one within a highly militarised and controlled context. Through the narratives of the bereaved, the article shows, for example, how local psychosocial practices and community support can transform a severely painful event – the loss of a child for example – into an act of resistance. This creates new spaces of power and hope, contributing to the belief that the social context that causes so much pain can be transformed. This happens through what Shalhoub-Kevorkian calls a *collective psychosocial embodiment* (including solidarity, sharing and caring) of everyday resistance. This contributes to an inner peace, which also offers the potential for activism and subsequently, social change. Put another way, death, despite its emotional pain, results in the 'awakening of critical consciousness' in the words of Martín-Baró (1996).

Challenges

Despite the value of the impact that psychosocial interventions and practices can have on social change, a number of challenges remain. One of the major challenges is that all contexts are very different. How psychosocial interventions operate within one context will not be the same as another, and distinctive social, cultural, environmental and political factors will influence the potential any intervention has to shape the wider context. In Shalhoub-Kevorkian's case study, for example, the ongoing violence and social division means any intervention or psychosocial practice, will be limited by the perpetual violent and repressive context. In the Guatemalan case study, and that of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a continuity of social and community problems, poverty (certainly in Guatemala) and political division continue to

constrain how much social change (or peacebuilding for that matter) is possible, or can be pushed for by various actors. This creates a paradox: if one is operating within an ongoing repressive or violent context, it may be difficult to do anything other than offer limited individual support to survivors of conflict. Yet, focusing on individuals limits the possibility for social change which, in turn, undermines the potential impact of such support.

The reality of different contexts can also run counter to linear understandings of concepts such as peacebuilding. *Giorgia Doná*, in her personal reflection of working and living in post genocide Rwanda, reminds us of the various social and individual stresses that still exist in the society despite the alleged peace. Not only is the legacy of the genocide palpable, but also low intensity socio political violence remains ongoing, exposing care workers as well as the population to general insecurity, and social, criminal, and accidental violence (from threats to personal safety to road accidents). In Northern Ireland, we are reminded that despite the peace agreement, some young men still live in fear of paramilitaries, are struggling with intergenerational legacies, losses linked to the conflict and remain economically marginalised. As a result, although political violence might be subsiding, many young men remain prone to risk taking behaviour, violence and high levels of suicide. The cases in South Sudan, East Jerusalem, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Guatemala also point to what can be termed the intersections of multiple social and political stresses associated with race, ethnicity, class and gender, all of which continue in different forms both before, during and after political peace agreements. This highlights a key gap in research that still needs to be filled, that is to explain and track the ways in which psychosocial interventions relate to and impact on complex and dynamic social contexts, and how such ever changing

contexts continually shape any interventions.

Finally, a challenge remains in breaking the individualised mindset that still dominates the psychosocial field. This is, of course, not to say that an individual focus has no value. It is clear that individual and group interventions can assist those affected by conflict. The personal reflection by *Kyaw Soe Win*, about his six-year imprisonment in Burma, and how his first hand experience of counselling after he left prison has impacted positively on the lives of the counsellors, as well as those of the clients and wider community, movingly demonstrates the value of individual therapy work.

Conclusions

Although the articles in this *Special Section* begin to show how psychosocial work can influence the peacebuilding environment and wider social change, there is no doubt that this type of thinking is still in its infancy. Too often, psychosocial practitioners do not see themselves or their work as directly related to social change, or see it as their role to actively pursue social change, e.g. through advocacy work or activism. This type of thinking, however, can have a range of limiting impacts.

At the level of individual and community interventions, as Lykes & Crosby argue, a failure to consider how your interventions relate to wider social issues can mean that certain types of individual focused interventions can start to take precedence. This can create a skewed picture of reality and impact on the type of interventions offered. They argue, for example, that an overly narrow focus on sexual harm within the international human rights domain has resulted in a hyper-visibility of the issue (and by extension an extensive focus on interventions such as rape counselling, for example, *authors addition*) at the expense of an understanding of the everyday forms of gendered, racialised and structural forms

of violence that most women face (see Crosby & Lykes, 2011).

At the level of policy, a failure to link psychosocial work with the social context can cause fragmentation between social, political and psychological interventions. The result is that the typical policy responses to the social and psychological problems caused by conflict, especially when thinking about external and internal government and civil society interventions in societies in or emerging from conflict, end up disaggregated and haphazard (Dress, 2005). At the risk of generalising, mental health workers concern themselves with the psychological impacts of war and violence, while those in charge of the development agenda from government officials through to external international agencies and NGOs, focus on socio economic reconstruction efforts. Hamber & Gallagher show that the needs of young men in post peace agreement Northern Ireland are often reduced to a service delivery issue (needing mental health and psychosocial interventions such as counselling, drug awareness or buddy schemes), or are treated as an economic marginalisation problem that can be addressed through job creation schemes without recognising how psychosocial capacities affect whether one can engage in such work, and how psychosocial interventions are constrained by a lack of structural change.

This is not to say that those undertaking psychosocial interventions are completely blind to the impact they might make on the social context, or those involved in formulating wider social policy would have no understanding of individual psychological needs. Rather, the tendency in the wider psychosocial field (as is evident by the *personal transformation model* above) is presenting the '*social*' as flowing from the '*psychological*', or vice versa. For example, a particular psychosocial intervention may enhance the '*social*' aspects of the lives of individuals involved in such programmes

(e.g. skills training, developing livelihood strategies). Thereby creating the assumption that if such social impacts take place, psychological impacts follow, such as income generation which would increase security. This could also include psychological factors such as increased esteem and social participation. Similarly, if direct psychological interventions are undertaken (such as counselling) the individual might be in a better place to improve their life chances by being healthy enough to engage in the community and social life, and the workplace, and arguably even wider processes such as peacebuilding.

But in the final analysis, drawing on Williamson and Robinson (2006), we need to accept that these types of binaries are not an accurate reflection of how people live their lives, and describing an intervention as 'psychosocial' or 'contextual' is not an adequate way of explaining or conceptualising how interventions may or may not influence the social context, or vice versa. We recognise that capturing this complexity is difficult. Some of the articles in this volume begin to elucidate how psychosocial work and the social context can influence one another and this, in itself, is an important contribution to the field. However, how psychosocial interventions integrate, influence, interact or are linked to the social context and changes that might take place still remains under theorised and under researched. It is this gap that the articles in this *Special Section* of *Intervention* are beginning to fill. We hope this collection of articles will open the space to a wider debate.

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¹ These four layers are: social considerations in delivering basic services and security (layer 1) strengthening community and family support (layer 2), focused psychosocial interventions by non-specialists (layer 3) and clinical MHPSS services (layer 4).

² The Latin American tradition of psychosocial work is a notable exception. See for overviews Markez-Alonso, Fernández-Liria & Pérez-Sales, P. (2009) and Pérez-Sales & Navarro (2007).

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