

Life Challenges with Psychological Consequences Connected to Growing up in War and Post-War Conditions

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Abstract - The article examines the relationship between the “Don’t Exist” injunction and the developmental conditions of two groups of adolescents: those who grew up alongside parents who experienced war and post-war conditions, and those who grew up in conditions of peace. Growing up in war and post-war conditions means, for adolescents, that they incorporate the injunctive messages “Do not exist” more than those who grow up in conditions of peace. Injunctive messages from parents were expressed non-verbally during the early years of today’s adolescents’ upbringing. The consequence of having high levels of the injunction “Don’t Exist” is observed through the psychological indisposition that we detected with the ESPERO questionnaire. The research results reported in this article refer to research conducted among Croatian adolescents in the spring of 2011. These adolescents were born during the war against Croatia (1991-1995) and were between 1-3 years old. The results show us that there is a statistically significant difference between adolescents raised in war and post-war conditions with adolescents raised in peaceful conditions. Based on the data, seven psycho-educational steps are suggested for the healthy development of a person and for a possible way of life for those who have suffered the consequences of war. In addition to this, the significant contribution of transactional analysis to the understanding of psychological processes in social relationships is highlighted.

Keywords: war; post-war situation; growing up; adolescents; “Do not Exist” injunction

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Introduction

Growing up, especially the first years of a child’s life are important for the overall further development of a person, especially when it comes to growing up in difficult circumstances such as war and the post-war situation. The initial research among children during the war against Croatia indicated increased symptoms

of depression, especially among children who were refugees, but the war left severe consequences on the overall development of children [1,2]. It has been 30 years since the war against Croatia began, but the consequences of this difficult experience are still relevant and call for long-term investment, first in human resources and then in everything else. A society is as mentally healthy as the people who are the bearers of social, economic, religious, pedagogical, political, mental, health-care, and overall growth. In order to gain only a small insight into the consequences of the

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war on young people who grew up as children in the circumstances of the war and postwar period, here is an unpublished study conducted in 2011, based on which we propose possible guidelines for further healthy psychological growth of individuals and communities in the demanding circumstances of postwar communities.

Conditions of war and the war against Croatia

Conditions of war and organized violence are the major causes of suffering and pain in children and young people, all over the world. Listening and watching the news in various media we can see that wars are waged daily in various parts of the world, on all continents. Causes of war vary as well as the consequences, however, in both cases we can see some similarities. So, for example, wars are waged in order to occupy somebody else's territory because it is richer in minerals, because there is a nation that wants its independence that it cannot obtain or because there has been an assassination, a terrorist attack, etc. There are also common consequences such as the destruction of buildings and houses, the presence of refugees, etc. The common element that affects all the people involved in a war is that there are bio-psycho-social consequences, which last over time and also continue to perpetuate themselves in interpersonal relationships. This consequence seems to us the most painful and lasting, as a country can achieve independence; houses, buildings, bridges can be rebuilt; diplomatic relations between two or more countries that were at war can be renewed, but it remains a long and complex task to heal the wounds that people have suffered. This task requires the collaboration of many specialists in various fields, among various institutions and above all among different countries. Keeping in mind the value of every human being and grasping the sufferings that people experience as consequences of war,

having observed, and experienced these closely, we have decided to do something concrete in order to somehow help people in relating to the vicissitudes of war.

The war against Croatia, caused and conducted by the Yugoslav federal army and Serbian extremists, began in 1991 and lasted as a real conflict until 1995, while the war officially ended in 1998. There are many points to observe here, to which we shall dedicate time and space.

In this research, we have focused on adolescents who live in two regions of Croatia. Above all, we wanted to turn our attention to adolescents and young people who come from eastern Croatia, specifically from the Vukovarsko-srijemska region, where the war was the bloodiest and where the consequences of war are still quite visible today.

In order to help the adolescents from this region, we have also included in our research those who grew up in conditions of peace, that is, adolescents from western Croatia, that is, those from the region of Istria. When we refer to adolescents who have lived in war and post-war situations we use three definitions, which are: "adolescents from the Vukovarsko-srijemska region", "adolescents from the Slavonia region" and "adolescents in the war and post-war situation".

More specifically, we refer to schools in the cities of Vukovar and Ilok. On the other hand, for adolescents who grew up in peaceful contexts we use the terms: "adolescents from the region of Istria" or "adolescents raised in peaceful contexts". Specifically, these concern adolescents who attend schools in the cities of Poreč and Pazin. The name used depends on the concrete context in question from time to time.

Our initial interest was to do something for the adolescents in the Vukovarsko-srijemska region; later we saw that the inclusion of Istrian adolescents would have played an important role as it would have helped us to see where the differences between these two different sam-

ple groups were and in what way it would have been useful to intervene so that some desirable changes could possibly take place for the adolescents from the Vukovarsko-srijemska region as well as for those from Istria.

In fact, if adolescents grow up in a peaceful environment, they have a greater chance of being able to find more space to freely express their emotions and enjoy their existence; this does not happen, however, when adolescents find themselves experiencing periods of war or post-war situations, in which unpleasant changes occur, as these kinds of environmental variables hinder the free expression of emotions and the enjoyment of one's existence.

The context of death was daily present during the childhood of adolescents in eastern Croatia (Vukovarsko-srijemska region), among which we did the research, because together with their parents they were directly affected by the war. Living in the context of war means experiencing the fragility of human existence because one's life, as well as that of family members, neighbors and of all fellow countrymen is in serious danger. In such a context, parents have difficulty raising their children, because there is no space for a balanced, peaceful upbringing, appropriate for their children's age. Often the first need to be met in these cases is to manage to survive. It may therefore easily happen that parents, in such moments, are not in a position to satisfy the existential needs of their children and that they send them verbal and non-verbal messages that do not reflect these needs with the risk that the little ones grow up not feeling welcomed.

Transactional analysis as a tool in understanding psychological processes and its contribution to social and positive psychology

Transactional analysis is a personality theory and a theory of interpersonal relationships based on research into ego states (the

Parent, the Adult, the Child), and also a theory of social relationships and interpersonal communication based on which the growth and development of human persons is observed. Although transactional analysis is discussed more in the context of its therapeutic approach, there is a large number of studies that highlight the contribution of transactional analysis to the development of personality psychology, social psychology, the connection with positive psychology and the principles of human communication both interpersonal and intrapersonal. Lapworth and Sills state that transactional analysis seeks to encompass and integrate the three fundamental directions in psychology, namely psychoanalysis, behavioral and humanistic-existential psychology [3]. Among different psychological approaches, transactional analysis is outstanding in the depth of its theory and the large variety of its application [4]. The richness of different developments in transactional analysis, from the psychoanalytic to the constructionist, is proof to its flexibility and integrative potential [5]. Therefore, transactional analysis is used in psychology, psychotherapy, communication approaches and social interactions, and due to the clarity of its approach it has a fruitful effect. Starting with Berne, the founder of transactional analysis, and the authors who continued to develop the theory of transactional analysis, we find various theoretical footholds in explaining the development of human personality, both in the direction of psychological well-being and possible psychological difficulties at the intrapsychic and interpersonal level [6]. Thweatt confirmed the applicability of transactional analysis as one of the introductory courses in the study of psychology based on research among 91 students in 1974. [7]. Müller explained the notion of the unconscious as an aspect of depth psychology in transactional analysis [8]. Van Rijn - Wild - Moran investigated the contribution of the application of transactional analysis and inte-

grative counselling within primary healthcare and observed a reduction in the symptoms of anxiety and depression in individuals [9]. Massey, based on the study of Eric Bern's scientific contribution as well as further development, places transactional analysis under social psychology [10]. As a social psychology, Massey claims, transactional analysis describes internal personal experiences of social living, external observations of social contact, and also the interconnecting processes between persons [10]. Barrow offers a connection between transactional analysis and the emerging field of positive psychology [11]. Because transactional analysis has significant properties as a metalanguage, many positive psychology ideas, according to Napper, can be considered from a TA perspective and translated into TA concepts [12]. On the other hand, positive psychology may be able to support research evidence for concepts from transactional analysis. Grant states that transactional analysis and adult education are both placed within the tradition of humanistic psychology, and they share many underlying ideas, including that human beings naturally tend toward growth, change and autonomy, that adults are responsible for themselves, and that people are inherently good [13]. In her research, Smischenko, describes, how university students were taught a number of transactional analysis models as part of their studies of communication and interaction [14]. The outcome of the teaching was evaluated using a standardized test and found to result in significant change. For the purpose of this paper and related research, we use the concept of injunctions, or in a broader sense of the word, nonverbal relationship between parent/guardian and child.

The "Don't Exist" injunction

Generally, injunctions are the deep convictions of a person they have introjected in relation to the significant figures in their life, especially in the first years of life. These are

messages coming from the state Child Ego of the parent's, issued in relation to the parent's personal suffering: unhappiness, anguish, disappointment, anger, frustration, secret desires.

While these messages are irrational from the child's point of view, they may seem perfectly rational to the parent sending them [15]. According to the classical transactional analysis approach, every person thinks, acts and feels from the position of the three ego states which are: the Parent, the Adult and the Child [16]. Each ego state has its own characteristics which we do not delve into here.

Despite the fact that behind the categorizations of the injunctions there are references to evolutionary models, there are no explicit theoretical assumptions that link them to a frame of reference [15]. Rather it seems that the injunctive categories are based mainly on empirical criteria of clinical practice. Since injunctions are messages that the child accepts to maintain the relationship with the adult who cares for him and to ensure his own survival, it seems natural, according to Scilligo, that they can be linked with attachment theory as a clarifying theoretical model and with the theories proposed by evolutionary psychology regarding the existence, survival and continuity of the species [17].

For a child's upbringing it is necessary to respect the potentiality for Relation, Existence and Exploration, but in the world of human experiences, the relationship with another more mature being is the most important aspect, upon which the development and the enrichment of the other two dimensions, Existence and Exploration, depend. By far, the Existence comes before the Relationship, however, the meaning of the Existence depends on the nature of the relationship, because from it the child derives the feeling of having or not having the right to continue to remain in this world. If the child is not welcomed, it "decides" not to stay alive, as is well

demonstrated by the reactions of children deprived of adequate human contact [18].

The “Don’t Exist” injunction is, according to the Gouldings, the deadliest message and one that can often be conveyed in a subtle way [15]. According to McNeel, this injunction applies to survival and along with other prohibitions (Don’t be Well, Don’t Trust, Don’t be Well, and Don’t be Important) leaves deep scars in children [19]. The injunctive messages that had the most power were those that were embedded in the early environment, in our case war environment, repeated over time, and reinforced by parental ignorance, abuse, absence, neglect, or indifference. The more isolated a child is from the consolation of touch, warmth, affection, and reassurance, that often happens during the war, the more power the injunctive message has [19]. There are different ways in which this message is passed on from parents to their children.

In particularly hostile situations such as war, post-war situations or escape from one’s own city, there are always difficulties for a family and for parents where, in addition to ensuring safety, moving away, facing economic problems etc., they must also look after the children: this is a situation in which the injunction “Don’t exist” can more easily be introjected. In these situations, parents are at risk of not being able to dedicate time and space to their children, decreasing both conditioned and unconditional positive caresses, given the tragic moment in which they themselves live. Strokes are acts that involve recognition of the presence of the other, which can easily happen during the war [16]. Conditional strokes relate to what a person does, while unconditional ones are about the very existence of the person (example of a positive conditional stroke: *It’s nice to see how you help your brother*, example of a negative unconditional stroke: *I don’t want to see you anymore*).

In this case, the children may feel not loved enough, they may feel they are not receiv-

ing enough attention, they may perceive that their hunger for recognition, coming from the Child Ego-state, is not recognized and, consequently, satiated. In a post-war situation, which is a time of extreme poverty, many fathers have had to work hard to earn money by going abroad to keep the economic situation at home afloat.

The family situation was critical for a man both during the war and after the war when, if he survived, he had to go to work hard in unknown places. But it was also the same for the woman who stayed at home with the children, in territories not far from the war zone. In difficult situations like these, there are moments of despair in which the parental couple can feel that their children “weigh” on them; this is a type of environment that favors the construction of the “Don’t Exist” injunction.

The adolescents among whom research was carried out were all born at a time when the war in Croatia was still ongoing (1991-1995). A mother or father, re-proposing the emotions and needs of their childhood, could have been frightened of new motherhood and their unborn child. It is likely that, in raising and caring for the newborn, they had experienced very strong negative emotions but did not even have the faintest awareness of them.

If the child accepts these parental messages, it will tend to regulate its behaviour and mental functions according to injunctive prohibitions [17]. Little by little, the child constructs conclusions such as: Mum and Dad do not want me near them. In fact, they would prefer me not to be there at all. Negative messages from the parent’s Child are examples of injunctions [20]. In addition to the level of family, the development of the “Don’t Exist” injunction during the war is strengthened, because there are people who want to kill fellow countrymen, loved ones, friends and so an individual feels their personal existence threatened. The adolescents who returned to the city of Vukovar found a place so destroyed during

the war that it seemed its implied message was – It is better if it does not exist (because others wanted it to be so). Growing up in an environment characterized by death increases the negative perception of oneself.

The premise of the research hypothesis

According to the research conducted on sample groups similar to what will be our object of study, even today little attention is paid to the difficulties experienced by adolescents who have faced such a traumatic historical moment in Croatia (the war and the death of close people, relatives, compatriots). This also applies to the adolescents from the Vukovarsko-srijemska region, who represent a future worth investing in. Investing in young people is an urgency of the region itself, because there is a lack of social capital [21].

In this context we want to define the problem on which we focus our research in order to also evaluate alternative operational proposals in response to it. The question is, therefore, the following: these adolescents suffer the consequences of growing up in an interpersonal context particularly marked by war and post-war experiences. They experience a strong trauma compared to the past and feel a lack of prospects for their future, given the current difficult conditions on a social, economic-political and cultural level. For these young people it is not easy to re-elaborate painful experiences; for these and other reasons we find young people in these areas who are unable to develop a healthy autonomy and to learn to protect themselves in a constructive way.

“The inner world reflects relational experiences in the personal, interpersonal and physical context. It is the interpersonal context with important figures that has the greatest impact on the content and organization of inner experiences. The set of these experiences constitutes the domination of the experience of

oneself as a placed person, who had no choice in initially being as they are”[17]. If the interpersonal context is welcoming, if the reference figures are attentive and can make themselves available to the needs of those who are still in the phase of growing up, if society also offers social, economic and cultural possibilities for the development of a person, there is greater probability that the person will grow as autonomous and with ego states that are well integrated following a process of separation-individuation [22]. It is more likely that the person in such an environment will be active in their personal growth by experiencing love and freedom, learning to protect themselves and others and identifying themselves by going through the process of differentiation which is the result of the process of release through the continuous work of self-definition and individualization [23].

Context, together with important figures, also favors the desire to exist, to be as one is; it allows a person to express the emotions that are received and verbalized by the important figures. The war and post-war environment, on the other hand, undermine the possibility of a balanced development of a person.

Our goal is to focus on how adolescents who have grown up with important figures in their lives perceive themselves in a psychological sense and, specifically, their own existence. We emphasize that, when we talk about historical moments of peace and make a comparison with wartime periods and wartime and post-war conditions, we do so to highlight the diversity of the lifestyles of the important figures of adolescents among whom our research was conducted. We are interested in how people’s psychological perception varies according to different contexts.

Starting from the above-mentioned considerations on the “Don’t exist” injunction and being aware of what it means for adolescents to grow up in war and post-war situations, this paper aims to verify the following hypothesis:

comparing adolescents who grew up in historical moments of peace with those who grew up in war and post-war conditions, we assume that the former have lower levels of the 'Don't Exist' injunction than the latter.

Subjects and Methods

Participants

The research was carried out among high school students of the cities of Vukovar, Ilok, Poreč and Pazin who were 18 years of age. The number of participants was 448 young people. Although in the design phase of the research we had thought of dividing the sample equally between males and females, we realized that this would not coincide with the real presence of males and females in the schools where we administered the questionnaire. The presence of females is, in fact, higher than that of males. For this reason, 200 males (45 %) and females 243 (55 %) completed the questionnaire. Five participants did not indicate gender. The number of participants corresponds to 80 % of the population of young people among whom the research was conducted. The schools in which the participants in the research were enrolled are: gymnasium, vocational high school, school of economics, technical high school, classical gymnasium. The participants were adolescents over 18 who were being educated according to the school curriculum in Croatian language (there are also schools in Vukovar where the school curriculum is on Serbian language). To conduct the research, we received permission from the Ministry of Science and Education of Croatia.

In our sample group, 200 adolescents come from the Vukovarsko-srijemska region (Vukovar, Ilok) and 248 from Istria (Poreč, Pazin). 47 (10 %) participants come from the city of Ilok, 153 (34 %) from Vukovar, 122 (27 %) from Poreč and 126 (28 %) from Pazin. The sample group of our research is not representative for the population of Croatia, but it is representative for the two regions where the research was conducted, i.e. for the Vukovarsko-srijemska region and for the Is-

tria region. Let us remember that our aim was to compare the data of adolescents who come from historically different regions.

ESPERO questionnaire

The questionnaire we used in the research, the ESPERO, contains fifteen scales that measure ways of thinking and feeling that are created in interpersonal relationships with important people, such as parents and figures perceived to be in the role of behaviour regulators [18]. For the purposes of our research, we only present the scale concerning the "Don't Exist" injunction. The "Don't Exist" injunction is part of the third main factor of the ESPERO questionnaire which concerns the dimension of Existence: it indicates an attitude of devaluing the importance of oneself in the world and the right to live [18]. People with a high level of "Don't Exist" injunction feel that it is not worth being there as individuals and experience little drive and will to live [24]. On the contrary, individuals with a low level of the aforementioned injunction want to live and living is of great value to them.

The scale concerning the "Don't Exist" injunction has 6 items; each item consists of a statement that the subject evaluates on a Likert scale with four alternatives indicated with 1 (undoubtedly false), 2 (somewhat false), 3 (fairly true), 4 (very true). The score of each scale is the sum of the responses to the items that make up the scale. The dependent variable of our research is the level of the scale of the "Don't exist" injunction; the two independent variables are the adolescents from two different parts of Croatia, namely the Vukovarsko-srijemska region and the Istria region. The items on the "Don't Exist" scale describe an attitude of devaluation of the importance of oneself, of the meaning of life, of one's presence in the world and of the right to live. It represents the most fatal message that a person can internalise [17]. In Table 1 we can see some items of the «Don't Exist» scale with psychometric data. We translated the questionnaire according to the new translation standards (Italian-Croatian-Italian).

Table 1. Some items and psychometric data of the “Don’t Exist” scale

Item	tot.	Items of the scale
5	39	It would have been better for me not to have been born.
25	60	Sometimes life seems so hard to me that it would be better to die.
45	33	It would be better if life was very short.
105	51	I do not know what I am doing in this world.
Croatian		Scale average: 9.0, Standard deviation: 3,32, Cronbach’s alpha: 0.75

Analysis plan

In our quantitative research we wanted to compare the statistical means of two independent groups and analyse the means of these groups. Moving on to the data analysis, descriptive analysis is used with the number of participants, the value of the mean, the standard deviation and the standard error, to then arrive at the comparison of the averages. For the hypothesis of our research, analysis is conducted with Student’s *t*-distribution where there are two independent variables (the sample group from Slavonia and the sample group from Istria) and a dependent variable, that is the scale (6 items) of “Don’t Exist”.

Results

All of the participants answered the questions regarding the variable of the injunction “Don’t Exist” (N = 448, M = 9.118, SD =

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of the means of the “Don’t Exist” injunction for Slavonia and Istria

“Don’t exist” injunction	N	Average	SD
Slavonia	200	9,715	3,295
Istria	248	8,637	3,233

3.301). The theoretical scope should be 18, having a minimum of 6 points and a maximum of 24 points. Since none of the participants gave their maximum to all the answers of the «Don’t Exist» injunction, we have as a maximum point the value 23, scored by 3 participants in the research.

From Table 2 we can see that there is an average difference between the Slavonian sample and the Istrian sample. The participants from

Table 3. T test for independent samples (Slavonia and Istria) for the “Don’t Exist” injunction

		Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-code)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95 % Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Infer.	Super.
Don’t Exist	Equal variances assumed	2,987	0,085	3,478	446	0,001	1,078	0,302	0,469	1,687

Slavonia averaged 9,715 and the participants from Istria 8,637.

From Tables 2 and 3 we can observe statistically significant differences between the two samples for the variable of the injunction “Don’t Exist”. These data confirm the research hypothesis. Analysis was carried out with the t-test for independent samples and confirmed that the differences are significant, having the statistical significance 0.001 at the level $p < 0.05$. The adolescents in the Slavonian region have higher levels of the “Don’t Exist” injunction. The results of the hypothesis confirm what we have postulated, namely that the levels of the “Don’t Exist” injunction, present in adolescents in Slavonia, are higher than those of adolescents in Istria who, in fact, have lower levels of the injunction itself.

Discussion

It is quite likely that those who show the “Don’t Exist” injunction at high levels have internal operating models characterized by negative images of the other and of oneself. Among the consequences of having introjected such a negative injunction there are, above all, notable attitudes of hostility towards oneself that lead to an evolutionary arrest due to which a person does not develop a healthy autonomy. When there is a high value of the “Don’t Exist” injunction there is a strong attack against oneself or a strong isolation from oneself and from the world. In fact, the ability to contain and protect oneself, the genuine acceptance and expression of oneself are lacking. With such intrapsychic characteristics, people with high levels of the “Don’t Exist” injunction are at risk of becoming depressed and feeling desperate. On the contrary, people with a low level of the “Don’t Exist” injunction are more likely to be more autonomous, protect themselves and others, accept and express themselves freely.

Stressful situations for important figures are a factor that actively affects the communication level, in the ability of parents to send messages underlying the “Don’t Exist” injunction to their children.

Furthermore, war, as such, is a parallel process with the “Don’t Exist” injunction because it carries out aggression against human beings, an attack on people’s existence. Often the desire of the adversaries is to kill “the enemy”.

The context of the adolescents among whom this research was conducted was destructive rather than constructive and therefore we hypothesise that they had a different, less healthy, perception of themselves than the adolescents who grew up outside the context of war, refuge, return to cities in ruins. The excess of frustrating and unpleasant relational contexts or excessive attachment, of contexts marked by violent death, can induce developments of the self that do not allow the integration of control and freedom and the creation of an inner world permeated with hope and joyful involvement in life, despite the presence of pain and limitations and also a free expression of oneself [17].

Seeing as we have found significance for this hypothesis which reveals processes that we believe are fundamental for human growth, and having found that Slavonian adolescents achieve significantly higher values than Istrian adolescents, some educational points shall be conveyed on which action should be taken for the welfare of adolescents who today, 30 years after the war, are the builders of a better future.

Psycho-educational challenges for the future of adolescents

Here are the seven psycho-educational steps with which we want to promote a healthy co-existence among human beings, having as a vital principle *my life, your life*, instead of the *your death, my life* principle, often present in the

context of war or violent death. These seven steps can be taken by people who interact with children, adolescents and young people who have suffered the consequences of war.

The first step we propose for the psychological growth of persons towards well-being is to clarify and explore the world in which they move. By this we mean their perception of themselves and others, their experience of the past and their expectations. We believe that this can be achieved through empathy towards the other. A favourable change that is fast enough requires collaboration among various institutions [25]. Reidy and associates are talking about the need of political socialization and in the context of Vukovar political socialization involves learning about social relations, including relational power and group status within a multi-ethnic community [26]. The concept of political socialization offers a framework for understanding the origins of orientations that are politically consequential among adults, whether concerning politics specifically or intergroup relations in settings of ethnic divide. Theoretical foundations of political socialization identify its prime representatives to be parents, peer groups, schools, and the media. Parents are leading transmitters of social norms and political orientations.

The second psycho-educational step is related to knowing how to distinguish the facts that have happened with respect to the way in which people recount the facts that have happened in their life. The simple fact of remembering a trauma – whether it actually happened or not – in itself can have beneficial effects on health [27]. This requires a welcoming environment that favors the re-enactment of the trauma.

In everyday life we find ourselves using our language wherever we go and with any person we meet. For this, in this third psycho-educational step we want to clarify how we can use words when we work with people we want to help grow. In educational contexts it becomes

even more necessary to distinguish and pay attention to the words we choose. In the process of human growth it is recommended to use verbs more often than nouns, because the former often indicate a process while the latter designate something that has already happened and is in many ways static, unchangeable [28]. In addition to this, we must start from the experience of young people and their language and self-identification. According to Ross – Puzić - Dolan most young people in Croatia constructed their identifications in a variety of ways, responding to the particular contextual contingencies of the conversation at that particular moment [29]. The context of Vukovar with its various meanings offers different perspectives for identification and self-identification.

Finding and creating alternatives on how to see oneself is a pedagogical principle per se because it frees a person from preconceptions and prejudice: this is meant as the fourth step. This does not mean that a person as such is not good, but we hypothesise that due to the reasons previously described, they may have difficulty in getting out of the only way they have of seeing themselves. Therefore, adding alternatives can be a liberating factor for a person. In the aforementioned Reidy and associates research the data revealed youths' desires and recommendations in Vukovar for more positive intergroup relations [26]. Given this perception, it is essential to discover the factors that might influence such positive expectations, particularly when it seems that parents, peers, schools, and the media are socializing young people in an opposing way.

To truly learn something it is necessary to put in practice together with others what one has learned in theory. From experience one can get results and new perspectives. Since we base our theory on the interpersonal level, we consider that in order to promote optimal growth, people in post-war territories should be encouraged to work together with others,

expressing themselves in a free and protective way. Therefore, collaboration is necessary, because a human being learns throughout his life together with others. In addition to this, it would be necessary to find a link between school / university life and life outside of school. The more this connection is perceived, the more it will be possible to motivate adolescents to study. According to Rijavec - Golub - Jurčec - Olčar developing flow in the academic field is extremely important for the well-being of students, even more important than flow in leisure activities [30]. Encouraging flow experience in the academic field presupposes an interest in the well-being of students. This is our fifth psycho-educational step.

For the sixth psycho-educational step we believe it is important to focus on how to regain trust in people, how to promote one's trust in oneself and also in others. People who have learned and experienced that others behave towards them through devaluation have great difficulty in believing in the good intentions of others. It is not always easy for them to understand the presence of the other in a relationship and understand that this can be beneficial to them. This is why it is important to look into the context from which people come, making them understand what, how and where they have learned to behave in a certain way (empathy), to then show them trust and, thus, increase their inner potential, that is to say boost their self-esteem. Building a space of trust at an interpersonal level, but also at an interinstitutional level, is a radical need in the context of Vukovar. Even more so because from the research of Gvozdanović, young people in Croatia voiced disappointment with social and political institutions, reliance on traditional structures, and the adoption of revived traditional values in terms of identity make unfavourable conditions for the creation of social trust [31]. Trust in political institutions is frequently found at the bottom

of institutional trust ranks in the general population [32].

The seventh step is to give feedback to people, children, young people and adolescents. With this last aspect we intend to convey to them that we are interested in their life and show that there is someone who wants to accompany them in their individual growth. In a school or university context this means at the end of a semester or the school year, giving feedback to children, building a reassuring atmosphere in which a program agreed upon at the beginning of the year does not correspond to a "thing to do, but rather to a goal". Even if the objectives were not achieved, it is still possible to see which paths have been taken to try to achieve certain objectives and to what extent these have at least been approached. The research by Buzov - Batarelo - Kokić - Kurz shows how important professional guidance at school is for adolescents in view of their choosing to start a family but also for career guidance in the future [33].

With the seven psycho-educational steps we highlight the value of the existence of oneself and of the other by giving importance to a person with their a-priori dignity, only for the fact that they are a human being. This means not thinking in terms of exclusion, such as those created in times of war like, *your death, my life*, or in terms of transactional analysis, *I am OK, you are not OK*. The basic premise is to express oneself freely, also capturing the expression of the other person, that is, having a perception of the type *I am OK, you are OK; We are Ok, You are Ok* [34].

"We will work as hard as in the past, with the prospect of giving space for people to become creators, autonomous and capable of building this world; to be truly heralds of genuine globalization: a commitment to dialogue without breaking shop windows, to share goods without stealing, to enrich without manipulating, to innovate without destroying. This is what it means for me to be assertive and not competi-

tive, to be faithful to the *vita mea, vita tua* (*my life, your life*) principle. *Vita mea, vita tua* is the star that we can follow”[35]. In our opinion, this phrase could be used as a slogan against wars of any kind, but also as a slogan in contexts with a high level of conflict.

Based on research conducted among adolescents who survived the war and postwar period, it is evident how important preventive work is on their psychological processes but also on interpersonal relationships in the context of their daily lives, taking into account their closest circle, i.e. family. In addition, we have seen how the concept of injunctions from transactional analysis, based on inherent re-

search instruments, can contribute to the understanding of interpersonal relationships, and thus enrich the development of social psychology.

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Conflict of interest

None to declare.

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