

The Subjective Potential for Reconciliation in the Balkans

NEBOJŠA PETROVIĆ

Sažetak

Fokus ovog članka je na spremnost, volju ili subjektivni potencijal društva i njegovih članova da prihvate ideje i aktivnosti koje promoviraju pomirenje i vode prema pomirenju i suživotu, te da odbace suprotne informacije i aktivnosti koje doprinose konfliktnom pogledu na svijet. Ovaj, više psihološki ili više subjektivni, pristup je svakako važan i može inspirirati autore koji im pridaju pozornost. Nerijetko, u međunarodnoj politici i historiji, jaki strukturalni, politički, ekonomski, sugurnosni i drugi faktori nisu uspjeli pomoći u rješavanju sukoba. Pomenimo npr. Oslo Mirovni Sporazum iz 1993. koji, nažalost, nije donio mir Bliskom Istoku. Slični problemi se mogu također primjetiti u međuljudskim odnosima. Ono što je neophodno u ovakvim sporazumima je obično dobra volja. Kao što stara poslovice kaže: "Gdje ima volje ima i riješenja".

Abstract

This paper will focus on the readiness, willingness or *subjective potential* of a society and its members to accept ideas and actions that promote and lead towards reconciliation, and to refuse opposite information and actions that fuel a conflictive world view. This subjective potential is an important factor that can inspire authors to pay attention to the more psychological or subjective aspects of reconciliation. It is not so rare in international politics and history that strong and positive structural, political, economic and security prerogatives do not help in resolving conflicts. Take, for example, the Oslo agreement of '93, which unfortunately did not bring peace to the Middle East. Similar problems can occur in interpersonal relations as well. What is necessary is usually good will. As the old proverb says: 'Where there's a will there's a way!'

Peace is not an absence of war, it is a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence, confidence, justice.

Baruch Spinoza, 1632–1677

Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.

UNESCO Constitution

It is usually not possible to understand and explain political decisions and behaviour without taking into consideration the individual or psychological level of analysis. Psychological factors are not the only factors, or not necessarily the most important factors in determining and explaining political behaviour. Other factors – cultural, social and political – should also be considered. If we want to adequately explain important social issues, it is necessary to estimate the specific contribution and relative importance of different factors, which vary depending on each particular situation.

However, in existing approaches to problems like peacebuilding and reconciliation, there is not enough attention paid to psychological elements, despite the fact that they are very important and sometimes even crucial in order to get a complete picture of a real state of affairs. This paper is an attempt to fill that gap. The two quotations given at the top of this article, one from the famous philosopher Baruch Spinoza, and the other from the first sentence of the Preamble of UNESCO, can be used to reinforce the importance of psychological factors and to succinctly express what we wish to emphasize.

The etymology of the word ‘reconciliation’ shows that we are talking about reconciling or re-establishing peaceful relationships after they have been disrupted by quarrels, misunderstandings, insults, injuries or other negative situations. In everyday modern life and in the past, in relationships among individuals and among smaller or bigger groups, we can be witnesses to constant larger or smaller conflicts that are obviously followed by constant re-establishment of friendships and co-operation. Otherwise, the level of conflict would increase to the point where the world could not function any longer.

The level of development of human civilization proves that despite the constant conflicts in human history and on all levels of civilization, those other forces, forces of progress and harmony, have always been stronger. This raises the question: why is reconciliation between members of human communities so important? Why would it be important that Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks reconcile when the wars during the first half of the 1990s showed so much bestiality and hatred between these nations? Why is reconciliation between any nations who have experienced bitter conflicts with numerous casualties important?

On the level of the individual, reconciliation is important for the preservation of mental health. The mutual bitterness of enemies works like a mental poison.¹ The desire for revenge, the desire to do harm to another person – even if that person is the enemy – drains us of energy and prevents our mental wounds from healing. Above all, our feelings are within us. The person we hate may not even

know that we exist while that negative feeling is poisoning us and taking away our energy: the energy we need for approaching life in a constructive way; the energy we need for accomplishing goals that might bring us wellbeing.

On the level of a whole society, conflict may re-escalate without reconciliation. That, in turn, usually means a 'good chance' for revenge, but also a loss in all areas and the continuation of suffering. Reconciliation enables opponents to form peaceful relationships and to see each other in a way that is functional for these new relationships. The psychological aspects of reconciliation are crucial, and different psychological factors play a major role in that process. Thus, the safety and security of the society is increased, as well as its resources, and mutual benefit can be obtained.

By reading different books it is possible to find proposed solutions. For instance, books about the South African experience often say that 'truth is the road to reconciliation'. However, in other books and articles, other ways have been proposed (apology, establishment of bilateral relations, repatriation, co-operation). Is 'truth' the only way, or is it the best way, or is there any confirmation that it is universal, that it helps after each conflict? All these are open and disputable questions.

Therefore, we want to answer two main questions. First, what are the constitutive elements of reconciliation and what are its correlates? And second, what are inhibitory and accelerating factors in that long and arduous process? Reading and analysing theoretical approaches of most relevant authors in this field, one can find only different theoretical speculations, not empirical confirmations

Based on what has been said so far, we propose a mediating variable, which we can call *Readiness for Reconciliation*. It might be a good illustration if we compare our model with an agricultural example. In order to get fruit, it is necessary to have not only good seed but fertile ground as well. Or, looking at Figure 1, elements on the left cannot cause reconciliation directly but require mediation through the personal dispositions of any member of a society.

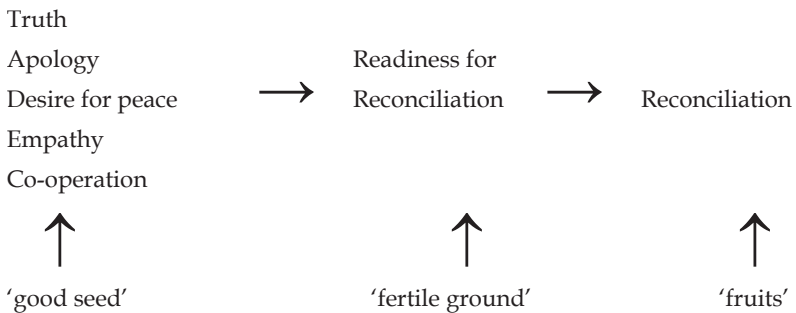


Figure 1: Readiness for reconciliation as a mediating variable

The main goals of our research on this subject were, on the one hand, the attempt to operationalize the 'Readiness for Reconciliation' concept – the prerequisite for establishing long-term, stable peace after intractable conflicts – and, on the other hand, the analysis of the newly achieved construct through its connection with numerous demographic, social and psychological variables. Therefore, we constructed a socio-psychological measuring scale based on the same idea as the research on authoritarianism², by which we could estimate individual potential or 'readiness' to start the reconciliation process. The point of using a scale is that it allows us to estimate the state of readiness for the reconciliation process in the group, subpopulation or society where it is being applied.

The empirical research has been conducted in three phases. The first phase consisted of interviews that aimed to obtain authentic views and opinions from different people (differentiated by gender, domicile, war experience, ideological beliefs, nationality) about different aspects of reconciliation. This phase is particularly important later on in helping to make the operational statements more natural, or less artificial.

The second phase of research was the construction of the measuring scale by which one could determine the readiness or the potential to start and to follow the road of the reconciliation. This was one of the two basic goals of the research. The procedure for construction of a Likert scale was followed, and the sample consisted of 1,116 persons from three countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia.

The third phase consisted of six sets of questionnaires that partially examined the connectivity between the larger number of psychological and socio-psychological characteristics and the readiness to reconcile, which was the second basic goal of the research. Basic psychological characteristics like aggressiveness and anxiety were included, as well as empathy and self-esteem, values and value orientations, preferences of individual and social goals, group identifications (national, for example), types of expectations, fears and hopes relating to the future and so on. In this phase, the sample consisted of 3,648 people from three countries.

In the scale construction, we began with the assumption that 'Readiness for Reconciliation' does not mean the same thing for people with different war experiences. These included: people from different places; people who only saw the war on television while others had contact with refugees; some had relatives, friends or acquaintances in the military forces; some were forced to change their domicile; some had personally experienced war or had war victims among people they were close to. Readiness for reconciliation can, for some people, represent the dilemma of whether to go to the concert of a music star from the state that was until recently the enemy, while for others it can be connected with certain very existential questions, everyday acceptance or backstabbing.

We expected that among all the different people studied, there would be – more or less, or maybe not at all – some basic subjective potential, a certain basic readiness or willingness to react positively or negatively in any of these very different situations, and that people whose potential of this kind is stronger interpret events in a different way from the people whose potential is weaker or

does not exist. In order to determine this basic potential – that is independent from concrete experience – we questioned people from all three countries (Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina), expecting that such a varied sample would enable us to identify those aspects that are vital for reconciliation or the readiness to reconcile.

After the first phase and the compilation of the responses, a general pool of 159 statements was formed and a factor analysis with Mahplan Rotation was performed upon those statements. Following Cattell's scree testing³ of the relevancy of factors we reached a four-factor model. We interpreted the first factor as lack of trust in the ex-opponent's intentions, the second factor as readiness to co-operate in different fields, the third factor as readiness to give and to receive forgiveness, while the fourth factor represented re-attributing human characteristics to the opponent (re-humanization). Each factor forms a subscale of ten statements. Examples of statements from the first subscale are:

- When I hear that someone is one of them I am suspicious and careful.
- They should never be trusted again, even if good official relations are established.

From the second subscale:

- I am interested in successful development of good relations and full co-operation with them.
- Conditions for full co-operation with them should be provided as soon as possible.

From the third subscale:

- I understand that forgiving would help the wounds to heal.
- There is no progress without forgiving, but only endless circling among conflicts and violence.

And from the fourth subscale:

- They are human beings, just like everyone else.
- The acts of those who committed crime do not make all of them mean people.

The reliability of the subscales is expressed through the Cronbach Alpha Coefficient and is 0,89 to 0,94, while the reliability of the scale in total is 0,9673. When the subjects fill the scale in full, these four factors explain 58 per cent of the variance. Special factor analysis on subsamples from different countries shows that the factor structure on these subsamples is practically identical to the factor structure obtained on the total sample, which tells us that it is a more solid and basic structure.

By taxonomic analysis of the responses to forty statements of the Readiness to Reconciliation Scale, one of the basic criteria of the reality of the psychological constructs has been confirmed – criteria of taxonomic discrimination. Therefore, through analysis of the responses of over 3,600 people questioned, we obtained taxons of those who are higher/lower/in the middle of the examined dimension.

Distribution of this characteristic can be presented as Gauss' well-known normal curve (Figure 2, below). This means that the main concentration of the subject's scores is around the average point, and there are fewer people at both extremes – who are either pro- or anti-reconciliation. This is only at a psychological level. However, we should bear in mind the fact that it is not the only level. For instance, in any post-war society, those who are war criminals and war profiteers in any sense are generally those with money and political power. Consequently, they have much more social power and their voice is much louder, leading to the wrong impression – inferring that an entire society is against reconciliation. In fact, people in general strive for a normal life and for the fruits of reconciliation.

The results of the correlative analysis show an extreme negative correlation of nationalism with the new scale in total, and also with its subscales. The negative correlation found between nationalism and the readiness for reconciliation gave us clear empirical confirmation that nationalism is a great obstacle on the road to reconciliation.

Other close constructs (such as blind patriotism and the importance of national attachment) show a similar negative connection with the readiness for reconciliation. We obtained the same tendencies towards social distance to other nations, regardless of whether those nations were involved in recent conflicts or not. The opposite is valid for social distance towards a subject's own group.

Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks who were more ready for reconciliation have *lower* social distance towards all nations for whom that distance was measured than other Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks who are less ready to reconcile or are opposed to reconciliation totally.

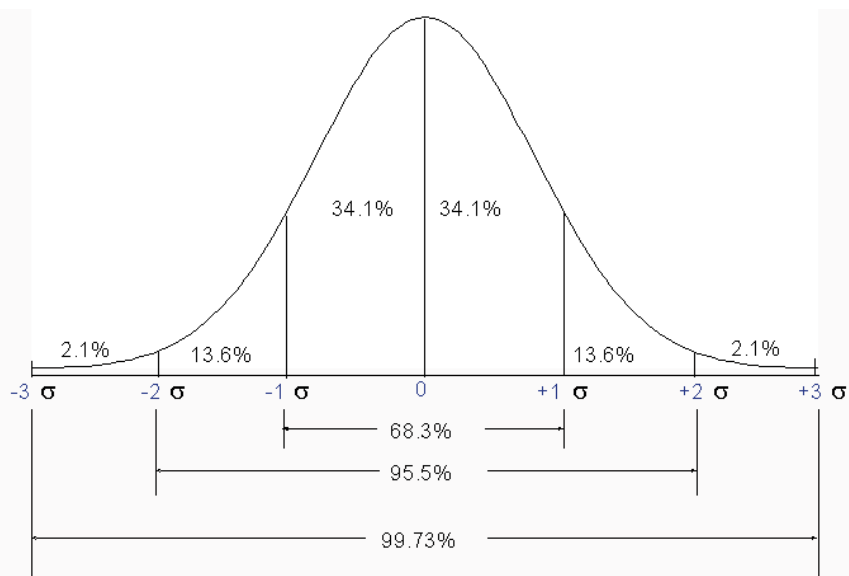


Figure 2: Gauss' normal curve⁴

The greater number of heterostereotypes (stereotypes directed towards members of other nations) are negative, but the subjects who are opposed to reconciliation describe other national groups only in severe devaluing terms – cruel, fascist, fundamentalist – while they describe their own group as understanding, just, patriotic, brave. The subjects who scored higher on the reconciliation scale mark other groups by somewhat ‘softer’ negative words – nationalist, aggressive, untruthful – but also as proud, patriotic or hospitable. Autostereotypes of this group are also more balanced: even though they describe their own group as patriotic and hospitable, they also often choose adjectives like lazy, bragging and so on.

The readiness for reconciliation has an expected and very negative relation with emotions like (often extreme) anger towards other nations. Anger is a huge obstacle on the road to reconciliation – which is logical and to be expected. On the other hand, positive emotions like hope, optimism and faith in a better future are elements that show we are on the right path towards reconciliation among nations.

The readiness to reconciliation has a further negative relation with different aspects of anomie, hopelessness and negative expectations from the future, and a lack of trust in social norms and democratic institutions. In turn, those not ready for reconciliation have expressed confidence in the church and the army as social institutions. When speaking about ideological variables, we can generalize that a clear positive connectivity is obtained between readiness to reconciliation and social, liberal and humanitarian ideas, while that connection was negative when we talked about conservative and traditional values. It is interesting that the relation of the degree of personal experience of trauma with non-readiness for reconciliation is statistically important (0,15), but is far lower than the one might at first expect. This clearly shows that a high potential to reconcile may exist even among those whose war experiences were traumatic while, on the other hand, we can find opponents of reconciliation among those who did not experience the terrors of war at all.

The other important outcome of this research is the fact that we have found empirical proof for the obvious but usually hidden fact that there are many people on all sides who are very similar to each other. During the conflicts, groups were preoccupied with the *minor differences* between them. Narcissism of minor differences, the concept first used by Freud⁵ but recently also by Volkan⁶ or Ignattief⁷, become the last frontier separating one group’s identity from the ‘other’, and members must therefore maintain that difference in order to maintain their separate identity, perceived as their very existence.

Two important socio-psychological theories explain this phenomenon very successfully – Tajfel’s social identity theory⁸ and Turner’s self-categorization theory.⁹ According to these theories, roughly speaking, an individual wants to categorize himself/herself in one (national) group and differentiate this group from out-groups. So, two groups of football fans, who are completely the same for all other people, perceive the other group as absolutely opposite to themselves. Similarly, Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks see themselves as totally different, but when they are looked at from a wider perspective – for instance

if they come to some of the world's metropolises – they can realize how many similarities they share.

According to this research, some of our subjects have – regardless at the fact that they are Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks – very similar views of the world, similar ways of life, value preferences and life goals. At the same time, they are different from their countrymen from the other side of the scale's distribution. The most interesting fact is that people who see the other nations as bitter enemies, who are xenophobic and full of hatred towards other groups, are also very similar in their ideological, social and psychological characteristics with their counterparts from 'the other side'.

When we take into consideration all correlations at once and try to explain and make sense of them, we can find some deeper, even philosophical bases. All correlations are either directly or indirectly connected with hope, with optimism, with the attribution of sense to life, and with the belief in the possibility of realising all human and social potentials. On the other hand, negative correlations can be explained in terms such as fear, helplessness, powerlessness and anomie.

If we understand life in a defeatist way, if other nations and people are looked on as eternal enemies whom we can never trust, if there is no hope and no bright future that we are striving towards – there is nothing else to do but to suffer. However, people who did not lose hope, who are ready to form a vision of a brighter future for themselves and their surroundings, can achieve a lot. That vision can be the strongest engine that will move them forward, that will not let them back down from problems, will allow them positive thoughts during the inevitable obstacles on the road towards reconciliation. And this is a general truth, obtained not only from our research, but a truth well known from the work of psychologists of humanistic orientation, like Erich Fromm¹⁰, and even in the Bible's message of love, faith and hope (and, of course, in other religious and philosophical traditions).

That is human nature. When someone has a clear idea of some future goal, when they have hope, such a person will give all their efforts – they will work hard, they will be responsible, they will take care of others. When a person is helpless and in despair, when they don't see any possibility for improvement in the future, they will take care neither of themselves nor of those around them. They will be ready only for destruction, and in that way a person will destroy themselves.

On the contrary, when a person has some positive goal for which they strive, everything is much easier and there is a great chance they will reach their goals! As Fromm¹¹ pointed out: 'Those whose hope is weak settle down for comfort or for violence; those whose hope is strong see and cherish all signs of new life and are ready every moment to help the birth of that which is ready to be born'.

Endnotes

- ¹ 'Forgiveness', unsigned article, <<http://www.guidetopsychology.com/forgive.htm>>, accessed 10 November 2005.
- ² T.W. Adorno, E. Frenkel-Brunswik, D. Levinson, and N.R. Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality*, Harper and Row, New York, 1950.
- ³ R. Cattell, 'The Meaning and Strategic Use of Factor Analysis', in R.B. Cattell, ed., *Handbook of Multivariate Experimental Psychology*, Rand McNally, Chicago 1966, pp. 174–243.
- ⁴ Picture taken from <http://www.cqeweb.com/Chapters-HTML/Chap4_html/Image71.gif>, accessed 10 November 2005.
- ⁵ S. Freud, *Group Psychology and Analysis of Ego*, International Psychoanalytic Press, London, 1921.
- ⁶ V.D. Volkan, *Bloodlines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism*, Farrar Straus and Giroux, New York, 1997.
- ⁷ M. Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience*, Henry Holt, New York, 1997.
- ⁸ H. Tajfel, 'Social Categorization, Social Identity and Social Comparison', in H. Tajfel, ed., *Differentiation Between Social Groups*, London, Academic Press, 1978.
- ⁹ J.C. Turner, M.A. Hogg, P.J. Oakes, S.D. Reicher and M.S. Wetherell, *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorizing Theory*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1987.
- ¹⁰ E. Fromm, *Revolution of Hope: Towards a Humanized Technology*, Harper and Row, New York, 1968.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9