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Researching norms, narratives, and transitional justice: focus group methodology in post-conflict Croatia

Ivor Sokolić*

UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES), London, UK

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This article is based on the assumption that norms can help better understand one of the expressivist aims of transitional justice, that of building a new narrative about the past. The main argument is that focus groups, as an interactive method of inquiry, are well suited to investigating how this "judicial" narrative interacts with the official and dominant war narrative in Croatia. Focus groups are more adept at this than other methodological approaches since they can effectively reflect independence of opinion; they lead to more truthful answers through spontaneity; they effectively probe taken-for-granted concepts; and they can more easily overcome distrust in post-conflict societies, especially with ex-combatants. The approach faces new challenges in such a situation since recruitment problems, insider/outsider status, and post-traumatic stress disorder, among other ethical concerns, present problems that often arise due to the group process. The powerful and unpredictable effect of the group dynamic can, therefore, provide a deep exploration of social norms, but it can also cause significant upset among participants. In this instance the methodology explores how widely accepted the war narrative is, how it is constructed, and how important the public believes it is not to question it.

Keywords: transitional justice; Croatia; war narrative; focus groups; norms

Introduction

Croatia's relationship with the transitional justice process has from the outset been an ambiguous one. The country generally cooperated with requests put to it by international actors, while spreading a message of defiance to a national audience (Lamont 2010). The Croatian public consequently remains ambivalent about its relationship with tribunal and war crimes prosecutions in general. Mainstream media in Croatia are in opposition to the process, at least when the accused fought on the Croatian side, and large parts of domestic civil society have at the same time generally been hostile toward the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and transitional justice as a whole, especially war veterans' groups (Clark 2012). There is, however, now a shared feeling among human rights activists and journalists that public acknowledgement of and debate about crimes committed against Croatian Serbs have increased (Lamont 2010). It is now more generally accepted that Croats also committed war crimes and recent cases have reflected this, such as those of Norac, Merčep, and Glavaš (Cruvellier and Valinas 2006).[1]

*Email: ivor.sokolic.11@ucl.ac.uk

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This is illustrative of transitional justice's mixed track record so far in Croatia and the difficult environment such efforts have to work in. One avenue for exploring the efficiency of such a process is to focus on the extra-legal or expressivist effects of it. For example, trials at the ICTY did sometimes overtly try to strengthen social solidarity and to incubate moral consensus in the public (despite causing controversy among lawyers) by drawing a line with the past and attempting to achieve a sense of legitimacy in transition (Teitel 2005). An inherent problem with this dimension of transitional justice is that it is attempting to influence individuals' opinions of the war by presenting an alternative narrative. This narrative may at times be consistent with the dominant war narrative in Croatia (e.g. the ultimate verdict in the Operation Storm trial[2]) or it can come into conflict with it. In this sense, there is often competition between the official war narrative and the "justice" narrative being presented by transitional justice authorities. This is, however, not the only source of competition for the dominant and official war narrative, since there is also pressure from other oppositional counter-narratives that can challenge its legitimacy and the legitimacy of the political elites proposing them, such as far-right parties, war veterans' associations, and retired army generals (Banjeglav 2012, 23).

That is not to say that these various narratives cannot at times agree with or support each other. For example, the ICTY verdict in the case of Dario Kordić showed that Croatian military intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina was not of a defensive nature, which has the potential to undermine the dominant narrative's defensive aspect.[3] On the other hand, the final, non-appealable judgment in the case of Ante Gotovina supported the official narrative and was even praised in official commemorations (Banjeglav 2012, 18).[4] The narratives, therefore, interact with each other to create moments of both agreement and conflict.

This paper posits the dominant war narrative (one of defense against a larger Serbian aggressor) as a norm in Croatian society that often comes into conflict with fact-finding efforts, predominantly led by transitional justice authorities. Representing the war narrative as a norm is based on the Declaration on the Homeland War, which presents the war as the "fundamental value" upon which the Croatian state was founded (Koren 2001; Banjeglav 2012). Defined as collective expectations for proper behavior, values, and perceptions of actors with a given identity (Katzenstein 1996), norms related to the process of transitional justice provide a more fruitful target for analysis than harder to measure concepts such as identity, reconciliation, or coming to terms with the past. Norms are, therefore, used as a theoretical framework for analysis, although the aim of the paper is not to contribute to the theoretical literature in the area but to discuss potential methodological approaches to the study of norms.[5]

This analytical framework complements recent work in transitional justice and specifically the work of Iavor Rangelov, who proposes a definition of the term that focuses on the capability of trials to bring about the discursive engagement of actors through public deliberation, involving multiple representations and perspectives of the past (Rangelov 2014, 48). This deliberation has the potential to question the role of nationalism and the complicity of the nation in past events (Rangelov 2014, 49). Rangelov points out that Croatia provides an opportunity to study this dynamic since the predominant war narrative continues to affect judicial outcomes: most cases are conducted in the lower courts (which remain biased) and participation of the accused in the war (if they were a member of the Croatian police or armed forces) is often used as a mitigating circumstance in sentencing (Rangelov 2014, 150). Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) show that we can only have indirect evidence of norms, just as we can only have indirect evidence of most other motivations for political action. This poses a methodological problem since norms can be hard to measure (if

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they can be measured at all), they often only present themselves in interactions between individuals and, consequently, often take a lot of time to observe or study.

The paper argues that the study of norms can benefit from an interactive method of inquiry, such as focus groups, which can help explore discourses that become more apparent through group interaction. They can highlight which narratives are contested, which are reinforced, and which are perceived as threatened by others. This paper will outline how such a methodology was applied in Croatia to interview members of war veterans' groups, pensioners, and history teachers across the country in order to explore the effects of transitional justice in this deliberative sense. It will outline the framework used, discuss some of the issues that were encountered, and provide a brief set of results to highlight the potential benefits of the approach. The aim of the sessions was to, for the most part, discuss war crimes trials, sources on war crimes trials, and who is allowed to discuss them. Discussions sometimes led to sensitive topics that were particularly personal to participants, which brought about methodological issues that are rarely discussed in transitional justice literature and that may add a new set of problems to focus group research. The discussions had the potential to cause significant upset among participants when a high amount of importance was attached to topics, such as the war narrative.

Theoretical background

Institutions associated with the transitional justice process in Croatia, primarily the ICTY and domestic war crimes trials, often had overt expressivist goals in mind as they conducted their work (Drumbl 2007). Expressivism transcends the two principal aims of war crimes trials, those of retribution and deterrence, in that it aims to build a narrative, authenticate it as the truth, and pass it on as such to the society in question (Drumbl 2007). Such broader societal goals stem from transitional justice's aim to have certain extra-legal effects, where the law's conventional concerns with deterrence and retribution receive less emphasis (Osiel 1998). The goals of transitional justice also span different time horizons. In the short term, the goals are more direct: to bring an end to violence and to restore the rule of law, in other words to prevent and punish. In the longer term, they become broader: the establishment of a continuous rule of law, legitimacy, liberalization, nation-building (specifically by defining a community in a state consolidation process), reconciliation, and conflict resolution (Teitel 2005). Often the primary objective of such efforts becomes the attempt to deal with the past and help the public come to terms with it. Rangelov expands this by arguing that trials are a means for public debate that can transform nationalist narratives (Rangelov 2014, 46).

In other words, transitional justice attempts to employ the instruments and mechanisms of law to produce effects on the level of politics, which in turn hopefully trickle down to the level of culture. It can, therefore, come as no shock that these assumptions do not always function as expected since the logic suffers from the fallacy of treating social practices and interactions as though they operate in a rigid and mechanical fashion, when they do not (Gordy 2014). At the very least it is hoped that by highlighting brutality, trials can make individuals willing to reassess their foundational beliefs, as few other events or processes in politics or law can do (Osiel 1998).

Subotić (2009) and Nettelfield (2010) argue that the particular situation of the Croatian state since 2000 allowed the ICTY to be more effective than in other neighboring states. The ICTY took the burden of responsibility for a lot of the unpopular transitional justice work off the hands of the Croatian government (Lamont 2010). Consequently, Pavlaković (2007) asserts that no real effort has ever existed domestically to demystify the war, which means

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that the state managed to keep intact the national understanding of the character of the war and Croatia's role in it.

This paper analyzes how the normative dynamic between a war narrative, on the one hand, and a fact-finding effort, on the other hand, is constructed and what role concepts of transitional justice play in the discussion. Theoretically, a fact-finding effort is a more straightforward concept than a narrative, although in practice it is inherently also highly complex (depending on what facts are being sought). For the purposes of this study, the norm is defined as the willingness and desire to establish the factual truth about events that transpired, regardless of whether they support or contradict the predominant war narrative. The war narrative is concerned with the notion that the most recent war memory must be kept alive and that war heroes must be protected. It is important since it forms a kind of founding, or refounding, myth in Croatia (Banjeglav 2012, 26). It is present in an institutionalized form in the Declaration on the Homeland War (Narodne Novine 2000) and the Declaration on Operation Storm (Narodne Novine 2006). Much like in other societies, this helps the society explain its origins and define what it stands for (Eliade 1963). Such myths are often marked by "monumental didactics" (Osiel 1998, 4), in other words, public recounting of the heroic deeds as a national narrative. In war narratives these are often composed of emotional symbols and images related to struggle, survival, and sacrifice, unlike more pacifistically minded narratives (Pavlaković 2014, 22).

Pavlaković (2014) provides the most comprehensive overview of the war narrative in Croatia by tracing discourses in the Croatian legislature, media, official government, and NGO announcements, as well as domestic academic debates. Support for the representativeness of the results of the focus groups on the nature and extent of belief in the war narrative can be found in several surveys, such as those conducted by the University of Oslo (2011) and the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights (2011).

A range of recent studies, those by Obradović-Wochnik (2013) and Gordy (2014) in Serbia as well as Nettelfield (2010) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, provide inspiration as to how different methods can lead to more in-depth explorations of transitional justice issues in the region. Obradović-Wochnik (2013) explores the war narrative in Serbia through an ethnographic, although broadly multidisciplinary approach. Her book shows how the public in Serbia understand and discuss the conflict, especially secrets from the conflict, on a personal level. The methodological approach manages to provide great depth through a relatively short period of fieldwork (roughly 18 months), albeit at the cost of representativeness and with a particularly individual focus.

Gordy (2014), on the other hand, analyzed the transitional justice process in Serbia for over a decade from 2000 to 2012. Through the use of media analysis and observation of events as they took place (directly or vicariously), the analysis tracks the transitional justice process in real time. This has the advantage of accessing debates and discussions in their natural setting, something focus groups attempt to recreate in a more artificial setting. The disadvantage is the complex analytical frame the researcher is placed in, due to the lack of distance from events temporally, emotionally, and analytically (Gordy 2014, xii). Moreover, current events could drastically change the situation on the ground and, therefore, the scope of the research. Here focus groups provide an opportunity for a much more directed approach to specific issues that the researcher ideally wants participants to discuss (although this is not always possible or desirable).

Finally, Nettelfield's (2010) study of Bosnia and Herzegovina used a variety of methods (survey, ethnographic research, oral history, and archival work) over an extensive period (1998–2008) that included four years of fieldwork. Altogether the study involved over 600 individuals and provides an analysis of a decade of development. This seemingly

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all-encompassing approach provides an interesting view "from below" as well as "from above." Focus groups complement this type of work well since they can verify results provided through survey and ethnographic approaches and, crucially, they provide an insight into what occurs in the group process (while the other approaches for the most part focus on individuals).[6]

Overview of methods and fieldwork

Focus groups were chosen since they can best analyze the complex interactional dynamics that lead individuals to share some truths, withhold others, and build alternate versions of reality in a group (Hollander 2004). They are also good at tackling abstract concepts and investigating issues that could be illuminated by the display of social norms (Lewis 2003, 60). They do not "force" opinions on individuals (as surveys may do) and they reflect the independence of human opinion by further removing the interviewer from the study (compared to individual interviews) and by focusing on social context, where human opinion tends to be created, thereby increasing external validity (Albrecht, Johnson, and Walther 1993, 54; Söderström 2010, 4).

The method is useful in the case of Croatia and transitional justice since it is effective in gaining trust when interviewing ex-combatants (who also made up a large proportion of the pensioners interviewed in this study), whose trust can be hard to attain and who often attempt to provide narratives that fit with their ideas of what the researcher is looking for (Utas and Christensen 2008; Söderström 2010, 4). When constructed with the appropriate care and run properly, they also become effective in discussing sensitive issues. Focus groups are adept at exploring taken-for-granted concepts since, more so than any other interview method, they permit spontaneous expression of ideas by participants by allowing individuals to employ the language that they are used to using to discuss an issue to an extent that is difficult to replicate in a more structured and formal interview (Bertrand, Brown, and Ward 1992).[7] This is useful in a post-conflict scenario since publics that have recently witnessed violence or atrocity (even if from a distance) might hold coping practices that are taken-for-granted in society (Das 2001). Moreover, this spontaneity adds to reliability since respondents are not able to coordinate their answers in advance (Söderström 2010, 4). Much of this can also be completed through participant observation, although this would take longer and the topics of interest may never actually arise (Söderström 2010). The drawbacks of focus groups are related to a lack of representativeness and bias through the group dynamic (for example due to relationships between individuals). This paper, however, focuses on issues that can be encountered in the post-conflict context specifically.[8]

Fieldwork

A total of 52 participants took part in the study across three Croatian cities (Zagreb, Sisak, and Zadar) and several non-urban locations (Đakovo, Zaprešić, Vukovi, Vukovina, and Petrinja). The three target segments for the study were high school and middle school history teachers, members of war veterans' groups, and pensioners (using criterion-based sampling). These were the only controlled factors, although there was an attempt to make the others as diversified as possible in terms of gender and background. Due to organizational issues, it was not always possible to hold a focus group, in which case a mixture of dyads and interviews replaced these.[9] A breakdown of the groups is provided in Table 1.[10]

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Table 1. Overview of focus groups, dyads and interviews.

Location	Group	People per interview
Zagreb	Pensioners	4
Zagreb	War Veterans	4
Zagreb	Teachers	2; 1; 1
Zadar	Pensioners	4
Zadar	War Veterans	6
Zadar	Teachers	3
Sisak	Pensioners	5
Sisak	War Veterans	3
Sisak	Teachers	3
Non-urban	Pensioners	5
Non-urban	War Veterans	5 (Banovina)
Non-urban	War Veterans	2 (Slavonia)
Non-urban	Teachers	2; 1; 1

High school history teachers were targeted because they are central to the process of teaching young people about norms, values, and narratives. The target group was small enough to reach a good portion of the population in each location, somewhat alleviating the lack of representativeness in focus group research. Pensioners, the second target segment, are a highly politicized and large grouping in Croatian society. They are particularly interesting since they lived through Yugoslavia, the Homeland War, the Tuđman regime, and the post-Tuđman period. Moreover, they were educated under a different system than the one currently in place. The third target segment was composed of members of war veterans' groups. As an influential and vocal grouping, they allow for an exploration of attitudes about transitional justice in this significant part of Croatian civil society. The aim was to target veterans' groups that were not consistently being quoted in the newspapers (since their opinions were readily available) and out of the five groups interviewed, two were exclusively for female war veterans and victims. Holding the groups across several locations allowed for a comparison across communities that had different levels of exposure to the war and to the transitional justice process.

Zagreb was used as it is the largest city in Croatia and it remains the political and cultural center of the country. It also provides an example of a large metropolis that was not on the frontline of the war. Sisak was selected because it was directly affected by the war; a domestic war crimes trial dealt with crimes committed in the city; and, as an industrial hub, it has a larger working class population than most cities. Zadar was used since it is in a different region of Croatia than Sisak and was also directly affected by the war. Moreover, the region is known as a hotbed for right wing, often nationalist, politics.[11] The non-urban locations were dependent on where it was possible to find participants.

Questions may be raised as to why cities such as Vukovar, Knin, Split, and Osijek were not chosen, given their relative importance during the war and in Croatian society. First, this study was not targeted at the ethnic Serbian population in Croatia; therefore, there was no need to seek out communities with clear ethnic divides. Moreover, these communities have been investigated in great detail; the lacuna of research on attitudes is not as significant in these locations. Split was not chosen since it is similar to Zagreb and does not have the image of being as staunchly right wing as Zadar. Finally, the region of Slavonia is the largest omission from the study. It is not feasible to focus on all regions of Croatia, but Slavonia offers existing research that this analysis can draw upon (in particular see Blanuša

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2005; Banjeglav 2012; Clark 2012). The region can also be used in the future to expand the scope of this study and validate results.

Four groups were held per target segment, since the most common rule of thumb is that focus group projects in the social sciences tend to consist of four to six focus groups, as information becomes saturated at that point and little new information is gained by conducting more sessions (Morgan 1996). Because of the sensitive and often controversial nature of the topics, the goal was to keep group size relatively small. The focus group questions were based on the media analysis of war crimes trials, both international and domestic, conducted prior to the fieldwork using the agenda-setting tradition (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Iyengar 1991). The question topics can be broadly divided into the transitional justice process as a whole; transitional justice institutions; the dissemination of information about the process; and the public discourse about it. Overall the focus group interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, a digital recording device was used to record discussions, and the moderator also took notes to capture any physical gestures, changes in tone, or other aspects of conversation that a recording device could not. Analysis of the transcripts was conducted using NVivo by undergoing three rounds of coding using discourse analysis, which helped identify and define factors that were then used in Qualitative Comparative Analysis to quantify and attempt to verify results (Ragin 1987).

Problems specific to the situation

During the fieldwork, it became apparent that there were problems associated with the study of norms in post-conflict societies that were not well covered in the methodological or transitional justice literatures. The topics being discussed in the focus groups were not sensitive, but they did touch upon sensitive issues and in the group setting (as opposed to the individual or survey setting) had the potential to upset participants. The challenges to the researcher focused on recruitment problems and general suspicions; insider/outsider status; and ethical concerns, in particular the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Recruitment and suspicion

The study employed snowball sampling to recruit participants within the chosen target segments. In other words, participants referred the researcher to other potential participants, which was useful to overcome general distrust of researchers and unease with talking about the Homeland War, despite the limitations this puts on representativeness. This was particularly helpful with war veterans' groups, where many had overt connections to political parties. In one instance, a group even admitted to having had to first gain permission from the local leader of a political party to participate in the focus group. Often a gatekeeper was used in such a situation in order to gain access to participants. This usually involved meeting a member of the group for coffee in order to provide more information on the research, to answer any questions, and most importantly to build rapport. In some instances several such meetings took place before gaining the trust of the gatekeeper or gatekeepers, who were then willing to help organize a focus group and sometimes even introduce the researcher to similar groups in other cities.

In particularly suspicious groups (most notably non-urban pensioners) a so-called silent ally was employed. This person, usually also the gatekeeper, was an individual trusted by the assembled group who would take part in the focus group (regardless if he was also a member of the target segment). The person would be prepared by the moderator as to

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what the group was about and instead of actively participating in the group, they would sit there in silence, providing prompts and reassurances as and when was necessary. Most often this took the form of looks and nods, as unsure participants would look to the silent ally for affirmation that they could speak openly. The gatekeeper and silent ally also have a responsibility to the participants, must understand the research, and be sensitive to the needs of the participants while researchers, on the other hand, must be aware of the complexities of the gatekeeper's and silent ally's role (Homan 2004).

Examples of suspicions were present in many situations. Interviewed teachers who were asked to recruit colleagues in several instances stated that they could not recruit older colleagues because they were too scared to talk about the Homeland War. In another instance, with a non-urban war veterans' group, the researcher was asked at the outset if he held a Croatian passport, as this was crucial to holding the discussion. These suspicions were often exacerbated by the presence of the recording device and the consent form. War veterans, for example, were worried that the researcher would not report truthfully on the discussion, so the transcripts were sent to a number of groups for approval. This offer, more than actual act, often assuaged any fears.

The required consent forms proved to be even more problematic. Several gatekeepers and silent allies suggested handing them out at the very end, which was not possible due to ethical concerns and in a number of groups a significant amount of time had to be spent explaining and stressing anonymity and data protection. This further stresses the need for gatekeepers and silent allies who strongly trust the researcher and can serve as a powerful helper in such a situation, as long as they are aware of the requirement for voluntary consent. The ability to convince participants of a researcher's good intentions constitutes a significant practical problem, but if dealt with in a sensitive fashion, it should not compromise the ethical integrity of the study (Roberts 2012).

*"On Je Naš" (*He is one of us*) – insider/outsider status*

It is important to be aware that, while the researcher and participants may share many aspects of their identities, thereby facilitating a harmonious relationship, it is equally possible that parts of their identities can lead to a significant social distance between the two parties. In order to avoid such a scenario and to encourage a more harmonious relationship with participants it is wise for a researcher to focus on commonalities (Kempny 2012, 47). Overall, techniques from ethnography and anthropology proved invaluable in the research and can be used extensively in qualitative data collection in political science.

The researcher (as a Croatian citizen living abroad) was able to gain access to certain situations due to an understanding of Croatian cultural specificities that an outsider would not be able to easily, or at least quickly, attain. The advantage of a certain cultural intimacy and understanding of society's values and feelings of empathy is that it makes it easier to establish trust in particular (Van Ginkel 1998, 256). This very insider status and intimacy can also be a curse, especially when discussing norms that have a certain taken-for-granted status, which the researcher can also take for granted (Kempny 2012, 43). While an outsider will struggle to "get into" the field, an insider struggles to "get out" in order to have a more objective view of a familiar environment (Van Ginkel 1998, 258). Moreover, it necessitates the researcher take on a position of naïveté in front of participants, who may otherwise assume a researcher is familiar with (taken-for-granted) concepts or norms and may, therefore, not feel the need to elaborate on them at all. Nevertheless, the insider status helped immensely in this study, sometimes explicitly (such as with the citizenship question) while at others times tacitly through an

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understanding of implicit rules or "socio-cultural grammar" that helps guide behavior and interpretations (Fleisher 1995, 12; Wolcott 2005). This intuitive insider knowledge helps better understand social situations, which in turn helps maintain good relationships with participants (Kempny 2012).

The outsider status was also present; as a researcher coming from "the West" it was often a hindrance in the form of distrust. In such situations it often helped to refer to shared backgrounds in order to build rapport, which helped overcome the social distance between London and the group location, but also the social distance between the researcher's place of birth (the largest city and capital, Zagreb) and rural locations, in particular. Such connections immediately made participants feel that they could, at least on some basic level, relate to an outsider (both in terms of location but also, often, in terms of education). These methods are commonly used by anthropologists doing fieldwork but, as Kempny (2012, 46) warns, they must nevertheless be used carefully so as not to tread into the realm of manipulation.

Sensitive topics – the minefield of PTSD

The most concerning issue throughout the fieldwork, and one that at times caught the researcher by surprise, was the prevalence of PTSD among participants. This manifested itself exclusively in the focus groups and, therefore, clearly highlighted the powerful and potentially harmful effects of the group dynamic. A large proportion of the participants in the war veterans' group discussions had suffered extreme trauma and loss during the war (in fact some groups had a dual role as victim support groups). Many were diagnosed with severe PTSD; in extreme cases this had led to suicide attempts (which the group openly acknowledged during sessions) and recurring health problems. This, however, only showed itself in focus group discussions rather than prior to them, further exemplifying the unpredictable but also truthful nature of the group dynamic. Precautions were taken so that at the outset of every focus group conducted in the study, the researcher stressed that the issues to be discussed were potentially of a sensitive nature, that it was wise for participants not to take part if they were concerned that the issues could cause distress and that they could remove themselves from the group at any time. Additionally, extra care was taken to follow through all of the phases of the group discussion in particular sensitive groups.

Regardless of the precautions taken, PTSD did present a serious problem in fieldwork and a significant peril to participants' health. In one group of veterans, with pronounced problems with PTSD, a participant admitted to suffering from the condition before the recorded discussion started. Despite the researcher insisting the participant not take part, the individual thought it was important to put their views across, especially because they suffered from it and thought the research could highlight the problem (a recurring theme across groups). During the group, certain topics were consciously avoided if it seemed as if the participant was becoming agitated and the group finished relatively uneventfully. Two weeks after the focus group, however, the gatekeeper from the group made the researcher aware that the participant in question had to re-enter rehabilitation for PTSD as a consequence of participation.

PTSD was also present in the other groups, since many of the pensioners, in particular, also took part in the war. One such group highlighted, quite starkly, that many individuals might not be aware that they are suffering from some kind of mental trauma. In said group of pensioners, a respondent broke down into tears while speaking about what, at the time, seemed like a relatively non-sensitive topic. This was not in response to a question but came

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out during a short narrative by the participant. The participant removed himself from the group for a brief period, before returning once again. There is, therefore, a constant need for the researcher in the field to be cautious and aware of how such sensitive topics can affect individuals.

The above description paints a highly fraught picture of fieldwork, but certain practical measures can help alleviate such problems. For one, as in many other disciplines that deal with sensitive issues, general care must be taken to not cause feelings of distress or emotional harm (Kempny 2012). Respondents must be reassured that the group is a safe environment to speak about the problem, that they can stop at any time, and help, in whatever form is practicable, should be provided after the session. It is also always wise to attempt to find out if enough time has passed since the event occurred, although in this case at least the time period was clear (Kempny 2012).

Small steps can also be taken during the actual interview. Other than following the phases of focus groups quite strictly, an attempt can be made to increase eye contact during particularly sensitive moments in order to show interest and attentiveness, albeit at the cost of note taking (Roberts 2012). Finally, in this particular study, a sign that a participant was uncomfortable with the topic was a general unwillingness to participate or organize a follow-up interview. In such instances it was important to find a balance between being pushy enough to be effective (which is sometimes necessary), but not so pushy to make a participant uncomfortable or to risk causing (potentially further) harm. Usually gatekeepers or silent allies were effective at providing advice on this matter.

Participants often responded to the researcher's warnings about the potential harm caused by the discussion by insisting that they saw the benefits in such a study. It can be argued that the greatest benefit of such research is the creation of knowledge, but this has to be placed in context with the potential burden placed on participants (Traianou and Hammersley 2012). It can often also be therapeutic to discuss such issues in the group setting, but the researcher must carefully manage the group to achieve this effect. In other words, although benefits do exist (and on balance the researcher would not be exposing the participants to such risk if the benefits did not outweigh potential risks), it is important to keep in mind that the concept of benefits is not only highly complex, but also specific to a time and location. Ultimately, however, no study justifies the hospitalization of a participant.

Discussing war crimes and related trials risks putting the researcher in yet another rarely discussed ethical dilemma. During the fieldwork, a participant from a group of pensioners, in relatively vague language, made it known to the group that they knew someone who had killed a family of civilians in an act of revenge. Such situations put the researcher, and group as a whole, in a moral dilemma that is hard to deal with. In these instances it may be acceptable to break with the promise of confidentiality in order to discuss the issue with a trusted third party (for example an academic). Moreover, it is the duty of the researcher to inform authorities of any criminal offenses that may have been confessed to in interviews. In practice, however, such admissions or stories are not always particularly clear. Much of the above hints at a certain lack of preparation in the current academic ethics preparation and approval process.

It is common practice in anthropological and ethnographic research to take great care to understand the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the researcher and participants, and to therefore aim to give something back to the informants for their help and services (Kempny 2012). As such, the researcher often offered help to all participants, gatekeepers, and silent allies after meetings. Examples of this include offering help and advice on university applications for a participant's daughter, offering translation services, providing

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further literature to groups interested in reading about certain related topics, providing supplies (snacks, beverages, etc.) for the next group meeting, and so on. Ultimately no ethical code is perfect and its use in real-life situations will never be simple; because of this disjoint between the abstract and the practical, it is important for the researcher to think about what he or she should do and what is ethical or not in doing research (Traianou and Hammersley 2012, 36).

The war narrative versus fact finding

The component parts of the predominant war narrative are the notions of Croatian defense, struggle, victimhood, and survival in opposition to Serbian aggression and a broken Yugoslav state (Banjeglav 2012; Pavlaković 2014). In this instance, focus groups effectively explored the "social" nature of the closely related notions of Croatian defense and struggle in the face of Serbian aggression in a way that other methods may have struggled to. The methodology achieves this by looking for consensus among groups (and analyzing what facets it is built on), by letting discourses occur spontaneously and naturally, and by investigating moments of silence, awkwardness, or laughter. All of these are hard to reproduce in other, especially artificial, settings.

In Croatia there is a pervasive notion, nearly universal among ethnic Croats, that Croatia was a victim of Serbian aggression. According to this narrative, Croatia led a war of self-defense, with the aim not only of saving the Croatian state, but preventing the destruction of the Croatian nation (Pavlaković 2014, 19). The universality of this belief is reflected in survey data, which indicated that 75% of the Croatian public feels Serbia committed aggression (and has to admit it) versus only 4% who do not (University of Oslo 2011). The focus groups and interviews reflected this, since not a single participant in any group or setting expressed a differing opinion. Even groups that did not agree on many topics agreed wholly on this one. For example, pensioners in the Zagreb group, which ended in an argument and walkout, all agreed when respondent ZG.P.2 said that "all kinds of things happened, so you cannot look at things in black and white. But it is a fact that cannot be negated – that Croatia was attacked" (focus group with Zagreb pensioners). The prevalence of this normative dynamic in discussions about transitional justice became obvious as groups often brought it up even when questions were not specifically directed at it:

> ZG.T.2 – It is to in any case cherish [the dignity of the Homeland War] and in no way question it, to not disparage it.
>
> ZG.T.1 – Absolutely, not to question that it was a defensive war (dyad with Zagreb teachers).

Similar statements were common throughout and, much like in the above dyad, were met with consensus from groups. For example:

> NU.V.5 – It was not [a civil war], it was a war, an aggression against Croatia and Croatia defended itself. No one from Croatia went to Serbia (focus group with non-urban war veterans Banovina). NU.P.1 – The known facts are, for example, that the former army, the Yugoslav National Army, attacked the state of Croatia and that we defended ourselves (focus group with non-urban pensioners).

The spontaneity of responses and the consensus that is built among, as well as across, groups showcase the usefulness of focus group methodology when studying such discourses. These passages also highlight the complex discourses interwoven in the theme of self-defense, such as Serbian aggression, Croatia never attacking Serbia, and no one wanting the war, all of which form the building blocks of the war narrative. Even teachers,

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who disagreed with other target segments on certain topics, were equally vociferous in their agreement that Croatia was attacked.

As already discussed above, war narratives draw on emotional reactions based on symbols of struggle (Pavlaković 2014). In Croatia, this struggle is framed as the fledgling state being unprepared and unarmed for the coming conflict, which caught it by surprise, but which Serbs were prepared for. Firstly there was a notion that the well-armed attackers (referred to as Serbs, the Yugoslav National Army, Serbia, and Chetniks, among others) attacked unarmed Croatia:

> ZA.V.1 – We had nothing to defend ourselves with at the beginning.
>
> ZA.V.2 – We had to buy our own weapons. I bought myself a pistol and a rifle, all by myself.
>
> ZA.V.1 – That is because the Yugo-army took all of the munitions, weapons, down to the smallest bullet and to airplanes, with them (focus group with Zadar war veterans).

Again, even in the Zagreb group that vehemently disagreed on many points, consensus was found on the issue of a "Greater Serbian plan:"

> ZG.P.1 – Virovitica, Karlobag, this is where the border went. That part of Croatia they wanted to conquer. Today people still know about this.
>
> All shake heads in agreement
>
> ZG.P.3 – This was the imperialist politics of Slobodan Milošević!
>
> All agree vocally
>
> ZG.P.3 – This we know nearly everything about (focus group with Zagreb pensioners).

Moreover, there was a pervasive belief across groups that Serb civilians were also armed and presented a part of the Serbian war effort:

> NU.P.3 – In this war they did not all have uniforms on. You could not find a person with a military cap all the way to Dvor, but they all had rifles. They all had guns.
>
> All agree
>
> NU.P.1 – Civilian defense, they had guns.
>
> NU.P.3 – They were just standing in their gardens. And what do you do then? You cannot kill him, but he can kill you (focus group with non-urban pensioners).

The above passage employs a particularly common and powerful image of armed Serb civilians, often used to justify alleged war crimes during Operation Storm, the *baka* (grandmother) with a rifle:

> ZG.T.2 – Of course we know what a war crime is, but as you can imagine yourself, maybe you heard some stories, of what actually happened in the field, what kind of unbelievable situations.
>
> ZG.T.1 – Yes. You have certainly had the opportunity to hear these.
>
> ZG.T.2 – Yes. On some battlefields you had the case – a *baka* shoots at you and kills your friend, your fellow fighter.
>
> ZG.T.1 – Yes. These are the most common examples.
>
> ZG.T.2 – And now, of course someone shot the *baka*. Now people come and see – the dead *baka*. This is just a trivial example.
>
> ZG.T.1 – But one of many (dyad with Zagreb teachers).

Given the general belief that Serb civilians bore arms against the Croatian army, it is not surprising to see certain war crimes (defined as such based on legal verdicts) being questioned by the general public. Group discussions with all war veterans and some pensioners led to a questioning of well-known cases such as those of Zec, Norac, Glavaš, Gotovina, and Merčep. Much of the Croatian public also, therefore, see military operations such as Operation Storm as a legitimate retaking of Croatian land and that collateral damage (civilian or otherwise) was expected, given the nature of the aggressor. The

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juxtaposition between an organized attack by the Serbian side and the unorganized defense by the Croatian side was then used to justify potential war crimes by Croatian forces. Survey research supports the representativeness of results, in this instance indicative of this is that 63% of the Croatian public did not think there was an organized effort to expel Serbs from Croatia, as opposed to 26% who think there was (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights 2011).

Focus groups help provide a more detailed picture of the discourse since they can elicit a discussion of the logic the public uses to justify why certain verdicts are not accepted as valid while others are. In this instance, the image of the *baka* with a weapon is used to justify why certain would-be crimes in the eyes of international or domestic publics are considered to be acts of self-defense, if not directly then through the atmosphere of fear they were committed in. Overall the methodology shows how acceptable this notion of killing a potential armed civilian is and it highlights a facet of the war narrative as a societal norm.

The social nature of insights gained using focus groups can also become apparent through less direct interactions, such as pauses and laughter. Pauses were often indicative of a lack of knowledge among participants. Groups, for example, often struggled to define that a war crime is:

> Moderator – How would you define a war crime?
> (Long pause)
> ZG.T.1 – Interesting.
> (Long pause)
> ZG.T.1 – How to explain that?
> ZG.T.2 – I suppose what is done in war but does not follow the Geneva Conventions.
> ZG.T.1 – The breaking of human rights.
> ZG.T.2 – What is outside those rules. As far as I listened to The Hague tribunal, roughly speaking (dyad with Zagreb teachers).

The pauses also highlighted awkwardness or an unwillingness to answer questions. This was quite stark in the case of the Sisak war veterans who refused to discuss Croatian involvement in the Bosnian conflict:

> Moderator – What is your opinion of the trial of Dario Kordić?[12]
> (Long pause)
> SI.V.1 – I would rather not talk about that.
> SI.V.2 agrees
> Moderator – Could I maybe then ask you about Tihomir Blaškić?
> SI.V.1 – I would rather not talk about individuals at all.
> SI.V.2 – You asked us about a defensive war, not about individuals.
> Moderator – Not a problem, we can skip this (focus group with Sisak war veterans).

Croatian military involvement in Bosnia–Herzegovina was not of a defensive nature and it, therefore, has the potential to undermine the official defensive war narrative. This is particularly the case with groups that strongly believe in the war narrative, such as war veterans' groups. The above response illustrates how the group struggled to deal with a question relating to ICTY trials concerning Croatian involvement in Bosnia–Herzegovina, first by struggling to provide an answer and then by asking to move on from the question. SI.V.2 finishes the exchange by hinting at the potential that individuals' actions (or what can be interpreted as court cases) have to undermine established narratives.

Laughter provided another social insight into particular topics. At the most basic level, it showed the poor opinion individuals or whole groups had of certain institutions, such as the

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ICTY, domestic tribunals, the United Nations, the Croatian government, the media, and so on. These types of responses were common across all groups:

> Moderator – What is your opinion of the outcomes of trials at domestic war crimes trials?
>
> All laugh
>
> ZA.V1 – We have so many stories.
>
> ZA.V.3 (pointing at a picture on the wall) – Do you see that picture, the one in yellow, read what it says.
>
> ZA.V.4 – Yes, that is just one of the Croatian soldiers who has been sentenced for war crimes.
>
> ZA.V.1 – In a Croatian court.
>
> ZA.V.4 – In a Croatian court. I do not even think we can call the Croatian judiciary the Croatian judiciary (focus group with Zadar war veterans).

Much like pauses, however, laughter at times indicated unwillingness to answer or a lack of knowledge about a topic. This was striking across a number of groups when discussing the role of the church (with no specific mention of which church) as a source of information on the war or its role in the war.

> Moderator – What about the church as a source of information?
>
> ZA.T.2 – Oh no (laughs). I think all three religions present in these parts are quite biased in the portrayal of anything. The Islamic community, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the Catholic Church all strongly adhere to …
>
> ZA.T.1 (interrupts) – Their church.
>
> ZA.T.2 – Their flock (laughs). And the infallibility of their own ethnicity. I really think …
>
> (Long pause and moderator moves on to the next question)
>
> (Focus group with Zadar teachers)

There were few uniform answers on this topic and, as the above passage showed, the exchanges were always brief and awkward among the group. At other times respondents claimed to lack the knowledge to be able to answer. Overall these answers hint at the taboo nature of the topic of church involvement in the conflicts, which became apparent through these social interactions, rather than direct discussion of it.

Conclusion

Transitional justice authorities in Croatia had expressivist aims in their work that focused, in part, on creating a "judicial" narrative that often competed with the official and dominant war narrative. These two narratives, together with others that did not form part of the dominant narrative, interacted with each other, at times coming into conflict but at other times agreeing with each other. Norms provide a potential analytical tool to study such complex social formations. This is particularly so in the case of Croatia since the Homeland War is considered "a fundamental value that forms the basis of Croatian statehood and should be unambiguously accepted by the entire Croatian people and all Croatian citizens" (Narodne Novine 2000). Norms require an interactive method of inquiry since they only become apparent in interactions between individuals. Focus groups can provide this by effectively exploring the construction of norms, contestation over some, and agreement over others.

Other methodological approaches exist but often cannot reach the necessary depth of inquiry over the same period of time or suffer from issues of representativeness as much as, or more than, focus groups. Focus groups do not provide a solution to all of these problems, but they can provide a useful alternative in specific situations, such as when investigating social norms in a post-conflict society. In such circumstances focus groups

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effectively reflect the independence of opinions by allowing for free flowing discussion, they lead to more truthful answers through spontaneity, they probe taken-for-granted concepts, and they help in gaining trust with cautious individuals, such as ex-combatants. The approach also investigates opinions through its interactive nature, for example by analyzing the occurrence of pauses and laughter in discussions.

Focus groups suffer from issues of representativeness and the group context can undo their usefulness as much as it can be the cause of it. In the post-conflict context, however, there are additional issues that can affect research, even when the topics to be discussed are not directly sensitive. First, general suspicions made recruitment and the signing of consent forms difficult, which resulted in the extensive use of gatekeepers and silent allies who also had to be briefed on necessary ethical considerations. Second, the interplay between being an outsider as well as an insider provided opportunities for further exploration of taken-for-granted concepts, but it also threatened to limit research by creating too wide a gulf between the researcher and participants or by participants believing the researcher was too familiar with concepts. Finally, PTSD and various ethical concerns threatened the health of participants and put whole groups in difficult moral dilemmas. Entering the field without preparation for such eventualities can have serious consequences for both participants and the researcher. This hints at a certain lack of preparation in the transitional justice field for undergoing this type of fieldwork, since topics are sometimes not expected to be sensitive but frequently are.

The set of problems that occurs in the group setting also shows how the methodology has a unique potential to reach discourses that are otherwise hard to research. In this case focus groups and dyads, in conjunction with survey evidence, shed further light on how widely accepted the predominant war narrative of defense is and how important the public believes it is not to question it. The methodology shows the discourse behind why some war crimes, especially those committed during organized actions commanded by the military, are not considered to be war crimes and the images, such of the *baka* with a rifle, that help form this. These have implications on the transitional justice process since the dominant war narrative can undermine the "judicial" narrative that forms one of the expressivist aims of the process. This evidence points at the usefulness of focus group research within certain parameters, such as when research would benefit from an observation of group interaction in a limited time frame and on a specific topic. Given the unpredictable and powerful nature of the group dynamic, however, ethical concerns should be borne in mind when investigating potentially sensitive topics since they have the capability to cause significant upset, which may surprise the researcher.

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Notes

1. In 2003 Mirko Norac became the first former Croatian army general to be found guilty by a domestic court. When the initial arrest warrant against Norac was issued in 2001, between 120,000 and 150,000 people publicly protested on the streets of Split. Tomislav Merčep was a senior politician before and during the war who ultimately came to command a large number of paramilitaries. He was implicated in war crimes (including murder, torture, and the blowing up of Serb homes) in Vukovar, Zagreb (the Zec family murders and the Zagreb Fair), Pakračka Poljana, and a number of locations around Gospić. At the time of writing his trial was ongoing. Branimir

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Glavaš is most well known as the wartime leader of Osijek and later as a member of the Croatian parliament, a role he was still in during his war crimes trial. Following the 2005 indictment for the torture and murder of Serb civilians in Osijek during the war, legal proceedings against Glavaš were met with frequent setbacks, but in 2009 the Zagreb County Court found him guilty and he fled to Bosnia-Herzegovina, where he remained at large until his arrest in 2010. In 2015 he was released from prison as the sentence was rescinded.

2. This was the trial before the ICTY in the Hague of three former Croatian generals accused of ethnic cleansing in the Republic of Serbia Krajina (2008–2012). They were eventually acquitted on appeal.
3. Dario Kordić was indicted in 1995 together with a number of other individuals for the events that occurred in the Lašva Valley part of Bosnia. In 2001 Kordić was sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment.
4. Ante Gotovina was the Croatian general in charge of the controversial Operation Storm. After a 2001 indictment by the ICTY, he spent four years in hiding, before being captured. In 2011 he was convicted of committing crimes against humanity and was sentenced to 24 years of imprisonment, but in 2012 he was acquitted by an appeals panel of the ICTY and immediately released.
5. Subotić (2009) provides such a contribution relating to the former Yugoslavia in her critique of the spiral model of norm diffusion developed by Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink (1999).
6. Other useful studies with varied methodologies that are not covered in this paper are those by Blanuša (2005), Clark (2012), and Jeffrey (2011) among others.
7. It is questionable how "recent" the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia are, as nearly 20 years have passed since they ended. Obradović-Wochnik (2013) has, however, shown that the public in Serbia continues to speak as if the past is still continuing, as if the wars are not over.
8. For an overview of the shortcomings, see Fontana and Frey (1994), Morgan (1996), and Stewart, Shamdasani, and Rook (2007).
9. Ideally all groups would have had a minimum of three participants. Even with two, however, a small group dynamic is formed, as consensus and disagreement are still present. Moreover, the benefits of spontaneity and added trust remain, although not to the same degree. Focus groups with history teachers proved to be by far the most difficult to arrange. Putting suspicions aside, the nature of teacher work rotations (schools have morning and afternoon sessions; usually one teacher takes one and another the other, meaning both are never free at the same time) and personal commitments meant that even in Zagreb only two turned up to the agreed upon session, the others were interviewed individually. Focus groups and interviews with teachers, therefore, were more akin to elite interviews in terms of organization.
10. If a dyad was held with, for example, two additional individual interviews then this is denoted as "2; 1; 1."
11. Indicative of this are the 2003, 2007, and 2011 parliamentary election results where right wing parties have consistently fared better than in other parts of Croatia. See http://www.izbori.hr/2003Sabor/index.htm; http://www.izbori.hr/izbori/izbori07.nsf/fi?openform; http://www.izbori.hr/2011Sabor/rezultati/rezultati.html.
12. Dario Kordić and Tihomir Blaškić were initially indicted in 1995 together with a number of other individuals for the events that occurred in the Lašva Valley part of Bosnia, but their cases were later separated. Blaškić was sentenced to 45 years' imprisonment in 2000 after being found guilty of committing, ordering, planning, or otherwise aiding in crimes against the Bosnian Muslim population in the region. In 2001 Kordić was sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment for many of the same or similar crimes, committed in the same localities, as Blaškić. In 2004 Blaškić had his sentence reduced on appeal after his legal team successfully showed that, due to the Kordić judgment, it was clear that Blaškić did not have effective control of troops in the area. What was a good outcome for Blaškić was a bad outcome for the Croatian state. See http://www.icty.org/case/blaskic/4; http://www.icty.org/case/kordic_cerkez/4.

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