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Self-perceived Victimhood and Forgiveness in Different Generations of the Right and Left Political Group in Slovenia

Abstract: Oftentimes after violent events, opposing groups persevere in the state of victimhood and transfer the emotional burden of the conflict to younger generation. The current study explores the extent to which members of the right and left political group in Slovenia, which have a long history of conflict dating back to the Second World War, still see themselves as victims of the outgroup. Results of the study show that the right group still experiences consequences of the war and post-war traumatization, manifested in the more negative self-image than the left group, as well as higher degrees of hurtfulness and prejudice. With age, the degree of hurtfulness in the right group increases, while the level of forgiveness decreases. We observed no such trends in the left group. Our findings point to the need for more studies on intergroup anger and growing generational gaps in long-standing intergroup conflicts.

Key words: victimization, collective victimhood, intergroup conflict, generations, forgiveness, anger

Povzetek: **Samodojemanje položaja žrtve in odpuščanje pri različnih generacijah desne in leve politične skupine v Sloveniji**

Po koncu nasilnih dogodkov nasprotujoče si skupine pogosto vztrajajo v položaju žrtve in tako čustveno breme konflikta prenašajo na mlajše generacije. Ta študija preučuje vprašanje, v kolikšni meri pripadniki desne in leve politične skupine v Sloveniji, ki imata dolgo zgodovino konfliktov od druge svetovne vojne naprej, sebe še vedno dojemajo kot žrtve krivic, ki jim jih je povzročila nasprotna skupina. Rezultati študije kažejo, da desna skupina kot celota še vedno doživlja posledice vojnih in povojnih travm. To se odraža v negativnejši samopodobi v primerjavi z levo skupino, pa tudi v večji stopnji prizadetosti in predsodkov do druge skupine. Z naraščanjem starosti v desni skupini narašča tudi prizadetost, medtem ko se stopnja odpuščanja zmanjšuje. V levi skupini tovrstnih vzorcev nismo opazili. Naše ugotovitve kažejo na potrebo po nadaljnjih raziskavah o vlogi jeze in naraščajočih medgeneracijskih razlikah v dolgotrajnih konfliktih med skupinami.

Ključne besede: viktimizacija, kolektivna žrtev, konflikt med skupinami, generacije, odpuščanje, jeza

1. Introduction

In the last two decades, considerable research in social psychology has been devoted to the issues of forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration of trust in societies torn apart by the violent past. The need to overcome past conflicts is especially poignant in groups that suffered traumatic losses and were later forced to keep silent (Bar-On 1996). As time goes by, wounds caused by past injustice do not disappear, but became deeper, dragging younger generations into the abyss of hatred and distrust (Bar-Tal 2000, 353).

In Slovenia, violent events committed by the nascent communist regime during and after the Second World War strongly marked the development of political and social situation in the twentieth century. Twenty-seven years after the fall of the regime in 1990, scholars studying possibilities of reconciliation between the right and the left political group have not yet found an answer as to how this longstanding polarization could be thawed to some extent (Žalec 2012, 130–135). Two lines of research in the current literature offer interesting venues to understand this complex situation. First, it is useful to explore how past intergroup conflicts play out in the current relationship between the groups and how different generations within one group position themselves regarding their common past. By focusing on often divergent generational needs, we can hope to find ways to promote intergroup reconciliation and forgiveness. (Dovidio, Saguy, and Shnabel 2009, 440; Rimé et al. 2015, 516–517) Second, it is important to identify emotional factors that push groups towards or away from the role of perpetual victims and competitive victimhood. Recent studies showed that unexpressed anger poses a major threat to the maintenance of ongoing relationships between opposing groups. (Fisher and Roseman 2007, 104; De Vos et al. 2013; 2016, 3)

Our approach to these issues was to examine how the right and the left political group in Slovenia currently perceive themselves in terms of victimhood and whether they still experience injustice because of the other group. We also examined how age of respondents affects levels of anger, fear, hurt, and prejudice in each group separately.

2. Historical background of the divide between the left and the right political group in Slovenia

In May 1945, partisan troops under Tito's leadership executed without trial more than 15.000 unarmed Slovenian militiamen who joined the occupying German forces in their fight against communist-led resistance in the last two years of the war (Deželak Barič 2016, 163–166). In the following years under the communist dictatorship, families of the deceased and those who were deemed the »enemies of the new socialist order« became the target of brutal official repercussions, disqualifications and discrimination. As the political regime in socialist Yugoslavia softened in late sixties and again in late eighties, Communist leadership in Slove-

nia made everything possible to keep the truth of the killings out of public awareness. (Dežman 2017, 85) After the dismantling of the communist regime in 1990, the gradual uncovering of the historical truth began, opening the way to a more comprehensive understanding of the conflict which brought the Slovenian people to the brink of civil war almost fifty years ago. It took another decade before the first sites of the massacres were identified and remains of the bodies dug out and transported to a new location. As images of heaps of skeletons with fractured skulls and wrists tied with telephone wire began to enter the public awareness, it became clear that the process of uncovering the truth presents a serious threat to the political circles on the left, which are linked to the former regime (Juhant 2014, 185).

The consequences of this process for the victimized group that mostly positions itself on the right side of the Slovenian political spectrum were twofold. On the one hand, the fact that the tragic truth was finally revealed, and the suffering of victims and their relatives publicly recognized opened the way for the members of the group to start the process of mourning and move on from an inferior position toward a more self-affirming one. On the other hand, the attempts to deny the historical truth and the return to the old communist rhetoric blocked the constructive debate between group leaders and intellectuals, hampering initiatives of the right group to move past the role of helpless, angry victims.

3. Self-perception of the groups

Although victimization stems from certain objective circumstances in which a group of people was denied their human rights and made to suffer, it is also a subjective and collective state of mind, which is encoded into memory of the group and transmitted through generations (Bar-Tal et al. 2009, 234). When the sense of collective victimhood starts to dominate one group's identity, the suffering of one part of the group becomes the suffering of all members of the group, even if the suffering took place long ago or affected a small minority of the group (Veldhuis et al. 2014, 2). Past suffering thus becomes a lens through which members of the group think about themselves, as well as interpret and experience new events, which sometimes makes it impossible for them to distinguish between past victimization and current injustice (Jacoby 2015, 517–526). In our study, we assumed that the political group which had been more victimized than the outgroup in the past will also report experiencing more intergroup injustice in the present than the other group.

Since groups self-categorize themselves through a process of social comparison, they are at risk of engaging in competitive victimhood, as soon as an intergroup conflict arises (Noor et al. 2012, 352). We addressed this question by examining which of the groups today perceives itself to be a bigger victim than the outgroup. We assumed that the more victimized group would experience more hurt, prejudice and anger than the other group. It should also have more negative self-image than the other group, due to its lower societal position.

4. Grounds and obstacles to forgiveness

The need-based theory of reconciliation contends that the group which perceives itself as victim of the other group faces different challenges from the group burdened by guilt and past crimes (Shnabel and Nadler 2008). The victimized group thrives to regain its status in the society as an equal, the task that requires a profound reworking of traumatic experiences and related emotions. In this process the crucial role is played by the decision to abandon the stance of victimhood and forgive the outgroup, which should take place on cognitive as well as affective level. (Lichtenfeld et al. 2015)

On the other side, the less-victimized or non-victimized group strives for re-inclusion of their group into society and out of moral isolation (Zachmeister and Romero 2002). This step requires that the group expresses awareness of the injustice committed against the outgroup and takes responsibility for past wrongs. The group should also aim to develop an empathic attitude toward the outgroup and show readiness to redress injustice, thereby inspiring trust in their intentions.

Since none of the groups in Slovenia behaves in a way to meet its needs and move toward reconciliation, there is little doubt that the conflict will continue to shape the future of next generations, unless the groups actively work on forgiving. In the study, we examined the degree of forgiveness as expressed by both groups, assuming that, due to the past traumatization, the more victimized group would be less forgiving than the less victimized group.

5. Age and forgiveness

Research shows that age is an important correlate of interpersonal forgiveness. When people grow old, they seem to be less opposed to the idea of forgiving past injustice (Steiner, Allemand and McCullough 2011, 671). One would thus expect that age will equally affect intergroup forgiveness, especially in situations where age reflects time distance from conflictual events (Rimé et al. 2015, 517). However, this may not hold true when a group perceives itself as a constant victim of the dominant group, or when older generations suffered more injustice than younger ones. We thus hypothesized that the positive association between age and forgiveness will be present only in the less victimized group. It would reflect the general tendency of mature adults to avoid venting anger and cultivate indiscriminate empathy. On the contrary, we expected to find a negative relation between age and forgiveness in the more victimized group.

Our hypotheses were thus the following:

H1. The group perceiving to have been more victimized than the other group in the past experiences more intergroup injustice in the present than the other group.

H2. The more victimized group experiences more fear, anger and prejudice toward the outgroup, and has more negative self-image than the less victimized group.

H3. a) Older generations in the more victimized group experience more hurt than younger generations of the same group, and more than their outgroup peers; and b) they are less forgiving than younger generations of the same group, and less than their peers in the outgroup.

6. Method

The study was conducted through Slovenian online research software *1ka* and the link was sent to a wide list of professors, students and acquaintances at the University of Ljubljana with the request to forward the link to their relatives and friends (convenience and snowball sampling).

6.1 Participants

In four months, 448 adult individuals, citizens of Slovenia, who identified themselves as members of the left or the right group, completed the survey. The survey opened with the following introduction:

> »In our country, there has been a long history of using the left/right political division for classifying social groups and political parties. No matter how we define them, the left and the right group often oppose each other when it comes to issues like legal definition of the family, attitude toward the Catholic Church, transitional justice, identification of mass graves and killing sites, the question of social intolerance. Both groups have most probably had many bad experiences with each other and suffered injustice. We ask you to think of this opposition between the two groups and your experiences when you fill out the questions. »

In accordance with the EFI manual, 66 respondents who scored at a certain level on the Pseudo-forgiveness scale were eliminated from the analyses, which led to 382 respondents' data being used for the current study. In the shrunken sample were 179 males and 203 females, grouped into five age classes, the majority (47.1 %) in the class span from 35 to 45 years. A little more than half of them (55.5 %) were married. Out of 382 respondents, 275 declared themselves to belong to the right group, and 107 to the left group. The left and the right group differed by sex, age, marital status and work status. The percentage of women in the left group was 63.6 %, compared to 49.1 % in the right group. The left group was also younger than the right group: 42.1 % of the left group members were younger than 35 years, compared to 23.4 % in the right group.

6.2 Measures

Forgiveness. We measured intergroup forgiveness with the Group Enright Forgiveness Inventory (GEFI) (Subkoviak et al. 1995), slightly adapted to the Slovenian intergroup situation. The instrument makes no mention of the word »forgive« and »forgiveness«,

which enables researchers to measure the wholesome attitude of group members toward the outgroup and avoid the pitfalls of socially desirable and insincere responding. We translated the GEFI instrument in Slovenian language and tested its reliability and validity. Added to the GEFI subscales are five items measuring the respondents' evaluation of the severity of the conflict or pseudo-forgiveness (for example, »There really was no problem now that I think about it«). According to the authors of the instrument, the total score 20 or higher indicates that a respondent does not consider the relationship between the groups conflictual, which implies denial or condonation. Hence, they suggest omitting the respondent's data from further analysis. Responses to all 65 items are Likert scaled on a range from 1 to 6. In our study, Cronbach's alphas were .97 for the whole instrument, and .80 for pseudo-forgiveness.

Self-perceived collective victimhood. To measure the respondents' state of mind regarding the victimization of their group by the other group, we used items of the Pseudo-forgiveness scale. In addition, we used one-item measure of ongoing injustice (»Is the injustice against your group ongoing? ») and 5-point evaluation thermometer, comprising five stylized faces in which the shape of the mouth varies gradually from a big smile to a big frown. Respondents were asked to encircle one of the faces which best shows how they perceive their own group. Similar thermometer measures have been successfully used in past research in the domain of intergroup attitudes (Haddock et al. 1993; Esses et al. 1993; Stangor et al. 1991).

Outgroup anger. Anger with the other group was measured with four items derived from Mackie et al. (2000). The four Likert type items (»I feel angry/irritated/furious/displeased with the other group«) were averaged to obtain a scale with Cronbach's α .91.

Outgroup fear. We measured outgroup fear with four items (»To what extent does the other group make you worried/anxious/afraid/fearful«) derived from Mackie et al. (2000). We obtained a reliable scale with Cronbach's α .89.

Hurt. The degree of hurt caused by the other group was measured with a single-item 5-point Likert-type scale (»How deeply are you hurt by these experiences?«).

Blatant and subtle prejudice. We used a shortened version of the Meertens and Pettigrew (1995) Scale of Blatant and Subtle Prejudice adapted to Slovenian context. We calculated Cronbach's alphas for two general dimensions of the scales, obtaining α= .81, and α= .79.

7. Results

7.1 7.1 Self-perceived Victimhood (H2)

We measured the self-perceived victimhood of one group in relation to the other group by using answers of the total sample (N=448) to the items on Pseudo-forgiveness scale, as indicators of the severity of perceived intergroup injustice. Only

28 (9.2 %) out of 303 respondents in the right group reached the result 20 or above 20, compared to 38 (26.2 %) respondents out of 145 in the left group. The relation between group membership and severity of perceived injustice was significant, χ^2 (1, N=448) = 22.472, p =.001). Members of the right group were more likely to evaluate the intergroup conflict as severe, unjust, and harmful than were the members of the left group.

In the next step, we excluded 66 respondents with the scores above 20 and shrank the sample to 382 persons. Significant differences between the groups remained. Nonparametric tests for independent samples showed that scores of the right group were significantly higher than those of the left group for the degree of hurt and prejudice (U_{hurt}= 18135.5, p<.001; U_{ident}=20847.5, p<.001; U_{pre}=20899, p<.001), but not for fear and anger. The groups also differed in their view of themselves. The right group's result on the feeling thermometer was significantly higher than the left group's result, χ^2 (4, N=382) = 14.827, p =.005, meaning that the right group perceives own group as less happy or satisfied. (Hypothesis 2 confirmed, except for anger and fear)

7.2 Ongoing Injustice (H1)

In the sample of 382 persons, one third or 133 persons (34.8 %) still experience intergroup injustice, while 171 persons (44.7 %) experience no such injustice, and 78 persons (20.4 %) remain undecided on this issue. We found no age difference between those who still experience injustice and those who do not. The percentage of males who still experience injustice was 58.6 %, compared to 41.35 % in females.

The percentage of respondents in the right group who still experience intergroup injustice (38.9 % of all right group respondents) was significantly higher than that in the left group (24.3 % of all left group respondents), χ^2 (1, N= 382) = 7.716, p =.005, thus confirming our Hypothesis 1. We also found that those who still experience injustice in the right group are significantly older than their counterparts in the left group.

7.3 The Role of Age (H3)

We compared the effects of age class on hurt in each group separately. The result in the right group confirmed a significant effect at the p =.05 level for the age classes [F (4, 269) = 4.502, p=.002]. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for hurt in the youngest age class (18-25 years) was significantly different from the mean scores in the age classes 3, 4, and 5. In accord with our hypothesis 3a, no such effect was found in the left group.

In order to answer our hypothesis 3b, we compared the means for forgiveness across age classes in each group. We found no significant differences. In the oldest age class (above 55 years), the mean scores in the left group were higher than scores in the right group (M=225.25, SD= 44.56 vs. 201. 82, SD= 50.73), but the difference did not reach the statistical significance. (Hypothesis 3b not confirmed)

8. Discussion

The results of our study show that members of the right political group in Slovenia harbor more feelings of hurt than do the members of the left group, as represented in our convenience sample. More than the left group, they still perceive themselves as victims of current intergroup injustices. Such an outcome was expected given the violent brutalities directed against the right group in the aftermath of the Second World War in Slovenia and the ensuing government oppression in socialist Yugoslavia. The self-perceived victimhood of the right group manifested itself through higher responsiveness to the survey, higher percentage of those who scored below the cut-off point on Pseudo-forgiveness scale, higher scores in the degree of hurt, higher level of prejudice against the outgroup, higher percentage of those who still experience injustice, and less optimistic view of the ingroup. It did not, however, manifest itself in the higher degree of fear and anger. In our view, these results indicate the long-term impact of the past traumatization on the way members of the right group see themselves and the other group in the present. This overall portrait of the right group, however, should not obscure some important differences between the younger and the older generations regarding the level of hurt and forgiveness. (Bahovec 2014, 44) The older generations of the right group experience more hurt than the younger generations and are less forgiving.

Since the groups in our sample differed in sex (63.6 % of women in the left group vs. 49.1 % in the right) and since the percentage of men in the left group who still experience injustice was higher than the percentage of women (38.5 % vs 16.2 %), we estimated that the percentage of people in the left group who still experience injustice because of the other group would be a little higher, if there were more men in the left sample. Under the assumption that the percentages would remain the same if the groups were equal in size and sex, we calculated that the percentage of those in the left group who still experience injustice would raise from 24.3 % to 27.6 %, which is still below 38.9 % in the right group. The difference in age between the groups had no such effect.

Regarding the question of the possible growth in forgiveness with age, the results showed no significant association between age and forgiveness in the left group, but a small significant association in the right group, which was expectedly negative. This finding does not allow us to make any conclusions regarding the role of age on forgiving. The relationship between age and forgiveness thus plays on at least two levels. On a general level, the sense of having forgiven and being ready to forgive increases with age, as evidenced by other research in interpersonal setting (Bono and McCullough 2004). On an affective level, however, age has no such effect on forgiveness, as negative feelings outweigh the general stance to forgive. The attitude toward forgiving the outgroup, as evidenced in the older generations of the right group, perfectly reflects these two levels.

8.1 Limitations of the study

We note some limitations of the study. First, the sample was neither balanced nor representative. The groups differed in age and sex and did not reflect the current

distribution of people along the left-right spectrum in Slovenia. We asked the participants to choose one side of the polarization or abstain from the survey if they could not identify with any of both options. Thus, we may assume that only those who considered the divide between the left and the right group as important and valid completed the survey. Second, we did not ask participants to report on the type of injustice they personally endured. If generational needs are to be used as promotor of forgiveness and reconciliation in a society, we should be able to address specific concerns of every generation. It is very probable that, given time distance, most of our respondents were secondary victims. It would be interesting to explore why and how the injustice suffered by their parents and relatives became part of their lives. Third, religious affiliation of the respondents should be considered. It is probable that the discrepancy between general sense of forgiveness and affective forgiveness is more pronounced in those who follow Christian religious norms commanding forgiveness of enemies. Relatedly, ways of distinguishing the general stance of intergroup forgiveness from the affect-based forgiveness should be explored and implemented in future research.

Researchers should also try to explore how anger is transmitted from private sphere to public sphere and back, and what type of public events have the capacity to transform anger, in the form of competitive victimhood, into more vulnerable emotions. Carefully designed artistic events show promising results in bringing the uncontrolled venting of anger to a more constructive end, such as grief and compassion. (Kompan Erzar 2017)

9. Conclusion

Past wrongs, committed against the older generations of the right group by the former nondemocratic regime in Slovenia, are still felt in the self-perception of the group and reflected in the higher degree of hurt and prejudice against the left group. The change in the intergroup attitude introduced by the younger generation starts to be noticeable, although it remains to be seen what the impact of this change will be on the capacity of the right group to express anger and fear and start a constructive dialogue with the left group.

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