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Stories of 'Success':
Narrative, Expertise and Claims to Knowledge

Abstract

This paper explores the possibilities provided by narrative interviewing for critically assessing claims of success regarding reconciliation policies in Brčko District, Bosnia-Herzegovina. More specifically, the paper argues that such claims of success are based on claims to expertise. Certain understandings of the harm, i.e. the inter-ethnic violence committed during the 1992-1995 war, and of the policies designed to address it, i.e. reconciliation policies based on a logic of multi-ethnic living, gain credence based on the supposed expertise of particular actors. However, knowledge of harm and of the impact of policies designed to address it is produced through the subjectivity of different actors' positionalities, and therefore assumptions about the figure of 'the expert' need to be unsettled. This paper explores the possibilities offered by narrative interviewing and analysis for bringing to the fore the complicated ways in which expertise is produced in certain places at certain times.

Introduction

Transitional Justice has come to be seen as an automatic and indeed necessary response to a past of human rights violations in contexts of political transition and protracted social conflict.¹ Such a privileged position as a framework which shapes discourse and practice is, according to some, connected with the "post-cold war ascendancy of particular, culturally laden narratives about history, society, governmentality and justice".² Such narratives have been criticised as Western in their origin, promoted by advocates and transported to non-Western contexts; a process referred to by Kagoro as "knowledge imperialism".³ Whether we consider the norms of transitional justice to be Western in origin or not, and the debate continues, human rights have certainly come to dominate the landscape of international relations. This reflects a normative shift in world politics in which the human rights norm has been firmly established as the primary measure against which individual and state behaviour is judged.⁴ As the combination of varied mechanisms designed explicitly to address human rights violations of the past, transitional justice has thus itself achieved a certain dominant legitimacy in terms of responding to a range of harms in a range of transitional contexts. With such an ascendancy this paper argues that particular forms of knowledge and expertise have been promoted above others.

The choice to focus on epistemologies of transitional justice is clearly positioned within the well documented critical turn in transitional justice scholarship in the last ten years. Each researcher and practitioner's epistemological approach forms their theory of knowing and defines how they can make claims to 'know' a harm,

¹ Pierre Hazan, "Das neue Mantra der Gerechtigkeit. Vom beschränkten Erfolg international verordneter Gerechtigkeit," *Der Überblick* 1 (2007): 10-22; Jelena Subotić, "The Transformation of International Transitional Justice Advocacy," *The International Journal of Transitional Justice* 6 (2012): 106-125.

² Brian Kagoro, "The Paradox of Alien Knowledge, Narrative and Praxis: Transitional Justice and the Politics of Agenda Setting in Africa," in *Where Law Meets Reality: Forging African Transitional Justice*, ed. Moses Chrispus Okello et al. (Cape Town, Dakar, Nairobi and Oxford Pambazuka Press, 2012).

³ Kagoro, "The Paradox of Alien Knowledge," 12.

⁴ Subotić, "Transitional Justice Advocacy," 110.

the mechanisms designed to address such a harm, and whether or these mechanisms can achieve their stated goals.⁵ Blaikie has written that “Data are produced by the activities of social researchers acting on *some version* of social reality”.⁶ These versions of social reality inform interventions, prejudices and assumptions, some of which may be visible and some of which may not. Furthermore, it is possible that some versions of reality gain greater legitimacy, elevating particular voices and marginalising others.⁷ Focusing on epistemologies of transitional justice work can therefore take us from technical questions of *how* to respond to serious human rights violations, towards understanding the constellations of power which inform how such harms and their remedies are described, categorised and understood. Expertise is a relationship between knowledge and power: we can think of expertise as that knowledge which has been accorded greater legitimacy, partly because of its ability to ‘speak the truth’ but also partly because of the relationships of power which determine whose voices *are* heard and whose voices *should* be heard.

This paper speaks to this issue by first outlining the ways in which ‘expert’ knowledge is produced and debated in transitional justice. It then goes on to describe the ways in which the narrative interview method can be usefully applied in order to explore expertise in transition contexts. The paper illustrates these methodological debates by drawing on the empirical case of Bosnia-Herzegovina and narratives of reconciliation ‘success’ in one particular district. Fieldwork was conducted in 2007 and 2008⁸ over a six month period primarily using the narrative interview method. In total 52 interviews were conducted with 77 participants although half of these were not in fact narrative interviews. Despite plans to the contrary, the narrative method was not always possible or easily employed, as explained further below. Interviews were conducted with the purpose of understanding how people living in this place experienced their daily lives vis-à-vis the ‘expert’ assessments and commentaries of the post-war situation. With this in mind interviews were conducted via purposive sampling with a deliberate mix of ethno-national groups, gender, and occupation. As wide a variety as possible was solicited in order to add depth to the accounts of the many daily lives of those interviewed.

Differences between the interviewees in terms of the contours and content of the narratives cannot be explained by ethno-national affiliation, gender or occupation. In fact, the apparent lack of clarity in the relationship between these identities (given so much weight but the ‘expert’ assessments) with the type of daily experiences narrated is useful in reminding us to remain attentive to the nuances and grey zones which cannot easily be captured. Such complex narratives were thus able to identify different perspectives on the success story of transition; perspectives through which the relationship between different claims to expertise emerges. Rendering visible these processes of claiming legitimate knowledge about harm and its redress provides us with the possibility of unsettling ‘the expert’; an individual who may seek to make uncontested claims to know about both the harms experienced and the ways in which such harms should be addressed.

Transitional Justice and the Production of ‘Expert’ Knowledge

⁵ It is these sets of ideas that have prompted the structure and approach of this Special Issue.

⁶ Norman Blaikie, *Designing Social Research: the Logic of Anticipation*. First Edition. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 120 emphasis added.

⁷ The experience of this in Nepal is discussed by [REDACTED] in their contribution to this Special Issue.

⁸ The author would like to thank the United Kingdom Economic and Social Research Council for funding this fieldwork.

Not only has transitional justice, and those who advocate for it, become elevated in terms of a privileged way of understanding and responding to the past, but within transitional justice itself particular ways of knowing have risen to prominence. In the process, certain individuals and groups have come to be treated, and therefore defined, as experts. This is not an unproblematic elevation of knowledge over ignorance however, as the question of expertise is a contested one. In addition, it goes to the core of any transitional justice intervention; interventions which can only fulfil their mandate through producing legitimate knowledge about what has happened in the past in order to make choices about particular kinds of shared social and political futures. In the discussion which follows, key points of debate regarding the production of expert knowledge on transitional justice will be highlighted, in particular the role of legal ways of knowing, the role of 'foreign' expertise and the role of models in promoting transitional justice best practice.

According to Subotić responding to legacies of past violence through a legal setting is “becoming an increasingly internationally accepted practice”⁹ even when they might not have previously been seen as coming under a legal purview. McEvoy¹⁰ has been critical of the legalism which dominates transitional justice thinking and practice, prioritising top-down and state-centric solutions at the expense of a more complex and contextual understanding of the societies undergoing transition. Going further, Thomson and Nagy argue that “while law can be an impartial source of justice, legal systems inescapably embody prevailing constellations of power”.¹¹ This can be interpreted as meaning both that actors such as the state or a particular individual can exercise, strengthen and even challenge power by means of a particular conceptualisation and practice of the law, and also that any legal system itself is an expression of already existing power relationships. If the law, legal systems and power are connected in this way then it becomes important to understand how the conceptualisation and practice of the law in transition contexts is the result of, and negotiation between, different understandings of a particular harm. Moreover, we need to ask how these different understandings achieve more or less legitimacy when mediated through the practice of the law.¹²

Addressing what this means in the day to day practice of transitional justice, Kelsall analyses the Special Court for Sierra Leone and the way in which “the Special Court’s prosecution team applies linguistic techniques to excavate a particular version of the truth from a contested history”.¹³ Kelsall goes on to argue that this has the effect of firstly redefining history by “carving a set of criminal acts from the continuous flow of political events” and secondly of setting “boundaries to the types of statement that are permissible or sayable in the courtroom”.¹⁴ In analysis of the International Criminal Court, Wilson examines the presentation of evidence by two expert witnesses, and their cross-examination, during the trial of Thomas Lubanga Dyilo. Wilson finds that “the Court was compelled to apprehend the crimes through a legal framework based upon documented and verifiable facts. First-hand experience of Africa and more ethnographic and empirical understandings were

⁹ Subotić, “Transitional Justice Advocacy,” 109.

¹⁰ Kieran McEvoy, “Beyond Legalism: Towards a Thicker Understanding of Transitional Justice,” *Journal of Law and Society* 34 (2007): 411-440.

¹¹ Susan Thomson and Rosemary Nagy, (2011) “Law, Power and Justice: What Legalism Fails to Address in the Functioning of Rwanda’s *Gacaca* Courts,” *The International Journal of Transitional Justice* 5 (2011): 13.

¹² The question of the legal development of different typologies of harm is addressed by ██████████ in this special issue.

¹³ Tim Kelsall, “Politics, Anti-Politics, International Justice: Language and Power in the Special Court for Sierra Leone,” *Review of International Studies* 32 (2006): 587-588.

¹⁴ Kelsall, “Politics, Anti-Politics,” 593.

generally dismissed by the bench of international judges".¹⁵ Accordingly seeing through the law elevated certain types of expertise which could be read through the legal fact-based approach, and dismissed other less 'rigorous' forms of expertise. Campbell and Turner warn that such a "hegemonic quality of the law" in a transitional justice context "risks being complicit in a renewed disenfranchisement".¹⁶ This is not only the disenfranchisement of the particular witnesses and experts whose knowledge is marginalised by a legal fact-based approach, as we see in Kelsall and Wilson's work, but could be applied more broadly to the dominance of legal ways of knowing which affect how collective memory is shaped over time.

In addition to a debate over legal ways of knowing, there has been an increase in scepticism and problematisation of 'foreign' expertise which comes from outside of the transition society. Debate over the relevance and efficacy of "an emphasis...on foreign experts, foreign models and foreign-conceived solutions"¹⁷ is a debate over the relative importance placed on different forms of knowledge associated with certain places and certain experts. This has set up an international/local dichotomy, the analysis and discussion of which has formed a significant part of the recent literature on transitional justice. Scholarship has started to unpick what the 'local' means in terms of transitional justice and how knowledge emanating from different standpoints can contribute to a greater understanding of the ways in which transitional justice works in practice and how the expertise of international experts can be challenged.¹⁸ However, the value placed on local standpoints and knowledge is still less than that which is assumed for internationalised ways of knowing transitional justice. This has led to concrete negotiations and disagreements over the terms of particular transitional justice interventions. Thomson and Nagy quote a Rwandan official who said to them "It is best for Rwandans if justice is done here [in Rwanda]. We [the government] know what is best for our people. Not those who have never experienced genocide like those outsiders you find in Arusha [the seat of the ICTR]"¹⁹.²⁰ Indeed, there has been an increase in scholarship on 'African' transitional justice, seeking to contest the assumed expertise of non-African transitional justice promoters working in and on African countries. This debate often includes as a central theme the potential role of customary and traditional forms of justice, and a discussion over the utility of retaining a 'modern' versus 'traditional' dichotomy.²¹ Subotić has written that "While it remains to be seen how much impact local forms of TJ will have on the emerging convergence of practices, my preliminary findings indicate that alternative forms of TJ will only be adopted by international TJ advocates if they are compatible with their larger ideas about

¹⁵ Richard A. Wilson, "Through the Lens of International Criminal Law: Comprehending the African Context of Crimes at the International Criminal Court," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 11 (2011): 107.

¹⁶ Colm Campbell and Catherine Turner, "Utopia and the Doubters: Truth, Transition and the Law," *Legal Studies* 28 (2008): 378 and 381.

¹⁷ United Nations, *The Rule of Law and Transitional Justice in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies*, Report of the Secretary General, 23 August 2004, S/2004/616, 6.

¹⁸ See for example Rosalind Shaw and Lars Waldorf, *Localizing Transitional Justice: Interventions and Priorities After Mass Violence*, eds. (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2010); Kieran McEvoy and Lorna McGregor, *Transitional Justice from Below: Grassroots Activism and the Struggle for Change*, eds. (Oxford and Portland: Hart Publishing, 2008).

¹⁹ Thomson and Nagy, "Law, Power and Justice," 16.

²⁰ The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, is an *ad hoc* international court based in Arusha that was established in November 1994 by the UN Security Council with a mandate to try those responsible for the Rwandan genocide.

²¹ See for example Moses Chrispus Okello et al. *Where Law Meets Reality: Forging African Transitional Justice*, eds. (Cape Town, Dakar, Nairobi and Oxford: Pambazuka Press, 2012); Tom Bennett et al, *African Perspectives on Tradition and Justice*, eds. (Cambridge, Antwerp and Portland: Intersentia, 2012).

individual accountability, legal understanding of due process and fairness and a universal interpretation of human rights”²².

The presence of an established transitional justice norm²³ has been in part supported by and developed in conjunction with the professionalization and institutionalisation of transitional justice. Rubli has referred to “justice by bureaucratic means”²⁴ to characterise what she sees as the dominant approach advocating for universally applicable transitional justice models. Indeed, despite the great variety of contexts in which transitional justice is now pursued the range of practice remains surprisingly narrow. Subotić explains this as a result of the power wielded by certain experts in a selection of non-governmental organisations who hold a greater influence over the types of transitional justice processes which are implemented.²⁵ This has led to “an emerging convergence of opinion concerning a broadly shared set of unifying TJ principles among most major international organisations”.²⁶ This stands in stark contrast to the work of some academic experts who claim that transitional justice is, and should be, a contested process of negotiating norms and values.²⁷ What is clear is that transitional justice has risen to prominence as a privileged response to dealing with the past in the context of political transition. Within this establishment of transitional justice certain ways of knowing dominate, including legal perspectives and the expertise of foreign experts and transitional justice advocates. Debates over the relative legitimacy of different epistemologies of transitional justice loom large in current research and practice, and thus it is a worthwhile exercise to ask: who is the expert, why are they the expert and what other ways of knowing does the elevation of such expertise marginalise?

Narrative Interviewing

Experts become identified as such through outside recognition of their expertise as valuable and legitimate. Accordingly, those who are considered to be experts can make claims which will have a higher platform and a louder voice. In transitional justice contexts decisions have been taken and choices have been made concerning the way in which a reckoning with the past will be undertaken and to what type of future this will contribute. Certainly these negotiations are not static and continue over time, meaning that choices change as contexts shift. We might think here of greater or less international intervention over time, of changing priorities regarding resources for seeking different forms of justice, or of increasing frustration of victims as transitional justice processes unfold with mixed or limited positive impacts on their lives. Understanding these dynamics is difficult, but one method that can be used is narrative interviewing. Part of a range of methods known as qualitative, narrative interviews focus on stories which individual people tell about their lives, but through these stories the narrative method connects the individual experience to the broader contexts in which

²² Subotić, “Transitional Justice Advocacy,” 122.

²³ Christine Bell, “Transitional Justice, Interdisciplinarity and the State of the ‘Field’ or ‘Non-Field,” *The International Journal of Transitional Justice* 3 (2009): 5-27.

²⁴ Sandra Rubli, *Transitional Justice? Justice by Bureaucratic Means*. swisspeace working paper 4/2012. Available at <http://www.swisspeace.ch/publications/working-papers.html>.

²⁵ Subotić, “Transitional Justice Advocacy,” 106-125.

²⁶ Subotić, “Transitional Justice Advocacy,” 120.

²⁷ See for example McEvoy and McGregor, “Transitional Justice from Below”; Chandra Sriram, “Transitional Justice and the Liberal Peace,” in *New Perspectives on Liberal Peacebuilding*, ed. R. Newman et al. (Tokyo and New York: United Nations Press, 2009).

that individual is embedded.²⁸ Narrative interviews can be used for a range of different analytical purposes, but the focus here will be on how narrative interviewing provides an entry point for interrogating and unsettling narratives considered to be expert and non-expert.

The key features of a narrative are that it places life events in a sequence so that each part can be seen to have significance in relation to the whole.²⁹ In the context of social science research it is a story usually passed on orally which is recorded and later transcribed, analysed, edited and presented by the researcher/listener. The interview itself usually takes place over time and can be conducted with more or fewer prompting questions, and with the use of additional materials such as photographs. Because remembering takes place in a social context³⁰ narrative interviews produce data which is at once unique and deeply personal but at the same time creates a link between that individual and their context. As we learn from Somers,³¹ and her analysis of the ontological dimension of narrative studies, narrative can be thought of not only as “limited to a method or form of representation”³² but we can “posit that it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities”³³. Narratives also illuminate key aspects of relationships between people in context. In their telling, stories allow access to exploration not only of the content of the stories themselves but of their relationship to “public contexts, cultural practices, and forms of representation that shape the possibilities of their telling and their witnessing”.³⁴ As Daiute and Lightfoot write:

“the social relational systems that lead to war, poverty, and well-being occur in discourses and cannot be separated from them. Narrative discourse, like other discourses, is thus of the world and not about it”.³⁵

This quote illustrates the power of narratives beyond the personal story and what have been referred to as ‘master-narratives’ which shape the possibilities of action and the dynamics of social relations. According to Andrews, master-narratives perform a key function of offering people a way of identifying what is assumed to be a normative experience; in this way they become a blueprint for other more personal stories and also the vehicle through which we comprehend stories of others and ourselves.³⁶ These dominant narratives can be opposed by counter-narratives of individuals who identify and act in ways which challenge the master-narrative.

²⁸ Catherine Marshall and Gretchen Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research. 3rd Edition*, (Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1999), 123.

²⁹ Jane Elliot, *Using Narrative in Social Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: SAGE, 2005), 3.

³⁰ Barbara A. Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering*. (Maidenhead and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2003), 5-6.

³¹ Margaret R. Somers, “The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach,” *Theory and Society* 23 (1994):605-649.

³² Somers, “The Narrative Constitution of Identity,” 607.

³³ Somers, “The Narrative Constitution of Identity,” 606.

³⁴ Selma Leydesdorff et al, “Introduction: Trauma and Life Stories,” in *Trauma and Life Stories: International Perspectives*, ed. Kim Lacy Rogers et al. (London, New York: Routledge, 1999), 13.

³⁵ Colette Daiute and Cynthia Lightfoot, “Editor’s Introduction: Theory and Craft in Narrative Inquiry,” in *Narrative Analysis: Studying the Development of Individuals in Society*, ed. Colette Daiute and Cynthia Lightfoot (Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: SAGE, 2004), xi.

³⁶ Molly Andrews, “Counter-Narratives and the Power to Oppose,” in *Considering Counter-Narratives: Narrating, Resisting, Making Sense*, ed. Michael Bamberg and Molly Andrews. (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004), 1.

Despite their opposition, master and counter-narratives should not be seen as necessarily dichotomous. Both have common meanings despite being told individually and can transform into each other in a relationship of influence and challenge. Bamberg's work on master and counter-narratives suggests that the former provides frames that delineate how narrators position themselves with their story and can present themselves as grand master-narratives from which there seems to be no escape.³⁷ Counter-narratives are produced in interaction with master-narratives and in the interactive situation of interview. In this way, narrative interviews should not be seen as an innocent window into pre-established counter-narratives but analysed as interactive social and cultural practices.³⁸

Narrative interviewing has been described as a form of "strategic communication".³⁹ Like other forms of interview the narrative interview is a space in which both storyteller and listener make choices based on expectations of what that audience may want to hear and what the storytellers themselves think should be heard. The narrative interview is not a neutral space and the interaction between the researcher and respondent influences what is said and what is heard. Other potential problems are the incorporation of ambiguities of memory, fiction and representation. Not only can the storyteller be contradictory or reluctant, unable, or unwilling to put events in a 'realistic' chronological order, but the researcher can find it difficult to generalise findings. In capturing the richness of context and personal experience, narrative interviewing techniques can sacrifice the applicability of research findings to other contexts. This is because such techniques embrace complexities and inconsistencies as an inevitable part of social realities and do not create quantifiable and bounded data. However, the narrative interview has two primary dimensions: the chronological; and the non-chronological.⁴⁰ The first relates to the ordering of events in an individual trajectory by the storyteller themselves. Such a chronology is embedded in context, and whilst events may have been shared with others the placing of these events is a personal and individual act. The second relates to the meaning of these events, that is the relationship of such events to the whole. Narratives often include evaluation by the storyteller, either spontaneously or with prompting questions from the researcher, of what such events may mean in relation to other events, other people and a wider picture. This creates a vital link between the individual (the context) and a larger group, idea or process.

Several aspects of the narrative interview method are thus valuable for research which seeks to understand the construction of expert knowledge in the context of transitional justice. The elevation of certain types of expert knowledge in the broad context of transitional justice scholarship and practice (as described in the previous section) can be thought of as master-narratives: that legal ways of knowing are particularly expert; that foreign expertise is necessary when designing and implementing a transitional justice processes; and that there are models of how transitional justice is best pursued. Trying to understand how in particular contexts at particular times expert knowledge is constructed which may reinforce or challenge such master-narratives, requires a method which can connect individual and context specific experience with the interlocutor's understanding of the relationship between their story and the enabling and constraining conditions of its telling.

³⁷ Bamberg, "Counter-Narratives," 359.

³⁸ Bamberg, "Counter-Narratives," 365-265.

³⁹ Sandra Jovchelovitch and Martin W. Bauer, "Narrative Interviewing," in *Qualitative Researching with Text, Image and Sound* ed. Martin W. Bauer and George Gaskell (Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: SAGE, 2000), 65.

⁴⁰ Jovchelovitch and Bauer, "Narrative Interviewing," 58-59.

The chronological and non-chronological components of the narrative interview method do just this, allowing the researcher to combine specific knowledge of one story with knowledge of how certain voices can be raised above others. This paper now goes on to explore how the narrative interview method was used during fieldwork in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in a district considered to be a model of success of foreign intervention and post-war transition.

Narratives of 'Success'

Brčko District is in the north-east of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and during the 1992-1995 Bosnian war⁴¹ experienced very high levels of violence. The pre-war population of approximately 40% Bosniak, 40% Bosnian-Serb and 20% Bosnian-Croat⁴² became majority Bosnian-Serb during the war due to ethnic cleansing of Bosniaks and Bosnian-Croats, and the relocation of internally displaced Bosnian-Serbs from other parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina who may themselves have been fleeing similar patterns of violence. Due to its strategic geographic position⁴³ a decision over who should control Brčko District, as part of a post-war consociational political arrangement, threatened to derail the peace process. Accordingly, the decision over territorial control was not part of the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords and was instead delayed until 1999 when Brčko was declared a unitary district with its own international supervisor, high levels of international funding⁴⁴ and a program for a series of ambitious transitional reforms. These reforms included an ethno-nationally mixed judiciary, police force, school system and ambitious returns programme to Brčko District for former residents who had been forced to flee as either internally displaced persons or refugees. The implementation of these reforms, which have resulted in a similar balance of numbers between the three main ethno-national groups, has led to this district being known as a 'success' story of reconciliation, celebrated by Bosnian and non-Bosnian observers alike as a model for the rest of the country. The contours of the success story, its supporters and the nuances which are often missed, are the focus of this section.

Narrative Interviewing in Practice

This meta-narrative about Brčko District in foreign policy literature on Bosnia and Herzegovina's transition (summarised in brief above) was a key motivating factor in deciding to conduct empirical fieldwork there from 2007-2008.⁴⁵ Before starting fieldwork I had already decided to use the narrative interview method. This choice was made for a variety of reasons: my guiding epistemological position was constructivist and the research questions I wished to answer sought knowledge about the subjectivities of experience. I wanted to know what it was like to live as a 'reconciled' citizen in a 'reconciled' social and political space. There are many

⁴¹ The 1992-1995 Bosnian war was part of the breakdown of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) and connected to violence taking part elsewhere in the Balkans at this time.

⁴² These are the three main ethno-national groups in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

⁴³ On fertile land, close to international borders, and in between territory controlled by different armed forces which were later to become the Federation of Muslim and Croats and the Serb Republic in a post-war consociational political arrangement.

⁴⁴ Such high levels of funding were not maintained over time.

⁴⁵ Insights presented in this paper are also informed by a short return trip to Brčko District in 2011.

examples in transitional justice literature of the questionable impact of interventions and projects,⁴⁶ but rarely is in-depth empirical work done in places which are considered to be success stories. Building on this first question I also wanted to go further, by asking whether this success story was a complete picture of transition in this place. Given the dominant view of expert observers that the District could act as a model for the rest of Bosnia-Herzegovina, what did residents of Brčko District think about the success they had supposedly achieved? Did their life seem successful to them on their own terms or those of others? Finally, and most importantly for this article, I wanted to know whether potential alternative stories could gain the same visibility and legitimacy. Given these initial questions the narrative interview method was chosen in the hope that, for the reasons outlined in the previous section, it would illuminate subjective experience, personal story, but also link individual stories to the broader contexts in which, and through which, master and counter-narratives of success would be produced. The schema I had chosen to follow for the interviews was broadly: preparatory questions; initiation questions to prompt the start of a narrative; listening to the main narration; using prompting questions where needed; and ensuring a space for concluding talk which would also be an opportunity to ask the interviewee if they had questions of their own.⁴⁷

Turning to the practice of this method during the fieldwork some observations can be made. Whilst on most occasions the narrative interview method worked well, there were times when it did not and it is important to begin by outlining these limitations before moving on to what the narrative method was able to illuminate. Firstly, there was little understanding of this method by my interviewees, or by my interpreter⁴⁸ and research assistant. I was often asked why I thought such a method would yield 'results'. Here the broader context in which the fieldwork was taking place became relevant. Education in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia had followed pedagogical principles akin to rote learning with little legitimate space afforded to creativity and subjectivity as part of the learning experience. Qualitative methods were thus not well-known according to the students and academics I interacted with informally throughout the course of my time in Brčko District. In addition, I found that the narrative interview style chosen sometimes made interviewees feel uncomfortable as they weren't sure what I 'wanted' from them and whether what they were saying was really 'useful' for my 'results'.

To give one concrete example, after five minutes of discussion one interviewee started to relax and began a narrative which described life before the war and how such living is now seen in nationalist discourse. In doing so he spoke for around five minutes, seemingly forgetting the 'purpose' of the interview, which he then 'remembers' and corrects himself: "...there's no secrets about that, but I know that's not the subject of your research and you're probably interested in some things so I'm going to tell you what you're asking [about]".⁴⁹ In

⁴⁶ See for example David Backer, "Watching a Bargain Unravel? A Panel Study of Victims' Attitudes about Transitional Justice in Cape Town, South Africa," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 4 (2010): 443-456; Gearoid Millar, "Assessing Local Experiences of Truth-Telling in Sierra Leone: Getting to 'Why' through a Qualitative Case Study Analysis," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 4 (2010): 477-496; Hugo van der Merwe et al, *Assessing the Impact of Transitional Justice: Challenges for Empirical Research*, ed. (Washington D.C: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009).

⁴⁷ Schema adapted from Jovchelovitch and Bauer, "Narrative Interviewing".

⁴⁸ The presence and role of the interpreter was extremely important and this is often overlooked by researchers working in other languages. Indeed, it certainly often does not feature in presented analyses. The author has written about this elsewhere in [redacted].

⁴⁹ Interview 080508.

fact there had been no specific question which had defined a research subject, instead he had been prompted by the opening question ('could you please tell me about your work and how you came to live and teach in Brčko District?'). From my perspective his narrative fitted perfectly with the kind of stories and experiences I was interested in, but for him it was a tangent into his personal memories which were not relevant for my work. Finally, some gatekeepers inadvertently made it difficult for me to use this method, for example by inviting multiple additional interviewees along to meet me at the same time, believing that this would be most efficient, and then by staying in the interview space as listeners. Such practical challenges required innovation and the use of different interview methods such as focus groups or more structured interview questions, often without warning or time for preparation. Some more structured changes could be made however, for example adjusting the preamble to the interview and the explanation provided of the research project in terms of its aims and the specific role of the interview material. Using both routes it became easier to use the narrative interview method over the course of the fieldwork, but also to understand when it didn't work and when flexibility on the researcher's part was needed.

The Meta-Narrative: Legal Experiments and Bureaucratic Solutions

Turning to the substance of the research itself the dominant narrative of Brčko District in secondary sources on Bosnia-Herzegovina has established a strong meta-narrative of success: "This city which was once well-known as a black hole, is steadily becoming a model for the whole of BiH.⁵⁰ When the rest of the country achieves what has been accomplished here, BiH will be a much more developed country".⁵¹ This quote is indicative of the most visible literature on Brčko District, and particularly that produced by those implicated in designing, lobbying or implementing transitional reforms, such as the Office of the High Representative⁵² in this press statement: "Since its establishment, Brčko District has gone from being a symbol of social and physical devastation to one of progress and interethnic cooperation, as well as an incubator for reforms in the transition from a communist command economy to a democratic market economy. Today, Brčko is a prosperous, multi-ethnic community ... Brčko District has become a post-conflict success story studied by many, envied by some, and copied unfortunately by none. That could be because its success has depended first and foremost on the efforts and willingness of the people of Brčko, who decided to live together, and in peace".⁵³ What is telling in this quote is the emphasis placed on the nature of the society as "an incubator for reforms", a perspective echoed in informal conversations with international legal experts working in the District and excited to experiment with new legal processes.⁵⁴ Indeed, the policy documentation on Brčko District occasionally refers to the role that Brčkonians have played in making this case a success but there is very little detail on this when compared to the statements made about institutional reform, legal experimentation and the bureaucratic solutions developed.

⁵⁰ Bosnia and Herzegovina.

⁵¹ Paddy Ashdown cited in International Crisis Group, *Bosnia's Brčko: Getting In, Getting On and Getting Out*, International Crisis Group, Balkans Report No 144 (Sarajevo, Brussels: ICG, 2003), 1.

⁵² This is the civilian office responsible for overseeing the transition in Bosnia-Herzegovina and ensuring that the reforms laid out in the Dayton Peace Accords of 1995 are implemented.

⁵³ Brčko District Supervisor Raffi Gregorian, 8th March 2009, available at http://www.ohr.int/ohr-dept/preso/presssp/default.asp?content_id=43174.

⁵⁴ Field diary extract 12th July 2007.

In fact, when interviewed, residents of Brčko District articulated narratives which directly challenged the bureaucratic categorisation of ethno-national identities which were not meaningful for the individual involved,⁵⁵ of valuable projects which could not be funded because they did not have participants from each of the three main ethno-national groups in equal number,⁵⁶ and of unsuccessful attempts to convince district and international officials to re-prioritise spending and focus on socio-economic inequalities believed by some to be simmering below the surface of coexistence.⁵⁷ Academic literature on Brčko District is not vast but it also challenges claims made in the meta-narrative of bureaucratic solutions, asking whether this ‘multi-ethnic oasis’ has fully succeeded in replacing the ethno-national project,⁵⁸ by examining continuing political deadlocks over reform which require international intervention to pass laws,⁵⁹ and by suggesting that the success narrative might be in fact silencing alternative voices and “displacing volatile issues to the periphery of popular discourse”.⁶⁰ These critiques tap into a central concern with the success master-narrative: it is primarily produced by those who do not themselves live in the societies who are the object of such claims, and by individuals who speak from the privileged position of either foreign intervener with mandated powers over Bosnian society⁶¹ or as academics with an established audience and authority. Those who live in Brčko District, who have supposedly embraced multi-ethnic living, are absent from almost all secondary sources which produce and re-produce the success meta-narrative.

The Meta-Narrative: Foreign ‘Experts’

The intention behind the choice of the narrative interview method was to learn about existing counter-narratives and to understand how certain expert knowledge on Brčko District (i.e. the master-narrative) had come to be constructed. The narrative interviews with Brčkonians told a more complex story than that found in the master-narrative; a story which illuminated the dynamics determining whose interpretation of the transition in this place is seen as more ‘expert’. During such interviews it quickly became clear that any alternative interpretations of the transition and the associated reforms, i.e. those which differed from that of the dominant success narrative, were dismissed by those in positions of authority for being divisive and deviant. Points of contestation over the terms of transition proved a helpful entry point into exploring the relative weight of different interpretations. Key overarching stories were selected: the multi-ethnic integration of the school system;⁶² the multi-ethnic integration of local community associations⁶³; and perceptions of the nature of the state and the citizen.

⁵⁵ Interview 150308.

⁵⁶ Interview 040607.

⁵⁷ Interviews 290408b, 110707c, 190707a, 160408, 200308.

⁵⁸ Dahlman and Ó Tuathail, “Bosnia’s Third Space?,” 670.

⁵⁹ Bieber, “Post War Bosnia”; International Crisis Group, “Bosnia’s Brčko”.

⁶⁰ Larisa Jašarević, “Everyday Work: Subsistence Economy, Social Belonging and Moralities of Exchange at a Bosnian (Black) Market,” in *The New Bosnian Mosaic: Identities, Memories and Moral Claims in a Post-War Society*, ed. Xavier Bougarel et al (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 284.

⁶¹ The High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina has so-called ‘Bonn Powers’ (named after the location of the agreement signing) which allow him/her (it has always been a man in fact) to pass laws and remove democratically elected officials if such measures are considered necessary for the implementation of the Dayton Peace Accords.

⁶² The author has published elsewhere on this case study in more detail: XXX

⁶³ The author has published elsewhere on this case study in more detail: XXX

Narratives of teachers from day-to-day life in the multi-ethnic classroom spoke of inadequate training, impractical language regulations, and covert flaunting of the rules on ethnic bias concerning which text books are recommended as well as unplanned school trips on days when politically sensitive issues were due to be covered.⁶⁴ One teacher spoke to me of the “big burden for people who are in this process”,⁶⁵ but he declined to discuss it with the education authorities as he felt there was no legitimate public space available to do so. His narrative told the story of pre-war teaching in Sarajevo when “we didn’t even think about those things or care about those things we weren’t really preoccupied about which letter will be under the photographs or the order of the photographs”, to teaching during the war in Brčko District when “there were moments when I wished to leave with my family from here and go abroad”, and finally in the integrated system in which he has to be “discreet” and “careful” when using books which have been banned by the District Government on account of the ethno-national identity of the author. For him, this is not success but rather a step backwards. He ends his narrative with the comment “Bosnia is viewed differently by people who don’t live here and they will try to gain that success themselves”. He clearly felt that the master-narrative of success was promoted in order to serve the purpose of legitimising the presence of foreign experts and officials in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Narratives from members of one particular local community association spoke of repeated efforts to secure political representation only to be turned down due to the belief of district government officials that the motivations were ethno-national.⁶⁶ In the telling of his story, or rather the collective story of the association, the president chose to walk around the village and demonstrate their needs through visual proof, illustrating his words with sights and sounds. Repeat narrative interviews with the president and members went into many details which were simply edited out of the master-narrative. The story of the District Government official was clear: all requests for separate representation are by their nature ethnically segregationist in their logic and cannot be granted.⁶⁷ The power to make decisions resides with the District Assembly “in a manner that ensures that each area of the local community represents a territorial and functional unit where citizens are mutually connected due to their joint needs and interests”.⁶⁸ However, decisions taken on what constitutes a joint need or interest are made by the District Government rather than the residents themselves. This is part of a broader context of reform in which foreign expertise trumps local knowledge. As a District Government official told me during his story of the reform period “When Brčko District was established no-one knew how a self-government unit functions, they had advice from OHR and the management team that existed here...During this process people didn’t know a lot”.⁶⁹ However, this interviewee had started his narrative with a detailed explanation of how local government had functioned before the war and the rich historical legacy of the local community associations. So integral had they been during the SFRY years, that the District Government requested that they were included in the country’s Parliament “but the OHR wasn’t in favour of that idea. Instead when it comes to Brčko they decided to pass a law and government branch responsible for implementing the law”.⁷⁰ In fact, what we see here is the intersection of knowledge and power. The OHR did not necessarily know more about the

⁶⁴ Interviews 110408, 150308, 13032008, 250707.

⁶⁵ Interview 080508.

⁶⁶ Interviews 120707, 290408b, 290408c, 100308, 040607.

⁶⁷ Informal Interview 100308.

⁶⁸ Brčko District Government (2003) *Law on Mjesne Zajednice*, Article 9.

⁶⁹ Interview 100308a.

⁷⁰ Interview 100308a.

historical legacy and functioning of the local community associations than the Bosnian politicians or association members, but their knowledge of the harm (between ethno-national groups) informed their knowledge about the solution (multi-ethnic contact) which was given greater legitimacy due to their powerful position in leading a peace process funded by foreign investment and with high stakes.

The particularly positive appraisal of the impact of high levels of intervention, i.e. the master-narrative of success, had a direct impact on the interpretation which interviewees had of their stories, and their place in the 'reconciled' space of the District. These narrative interviews were not intended to allow a judgement to be made as to the relative 'truth' of the different perspectives on transition in Brčko District. Instead, they allowed the speaker to tell a story which is certainly part of the broader and dominant success narrative, but which may in certain ways contradict, contest or re-define it. Importantly, the nature of the narrative interview in its chronological and non-chronological parts encouraged the speaker to analyse why their own story was not to be found in the reports by international organisations or in the response of district government officials to the same questions. Their stories were not models to be followed in the rest of Bosnia-Herzegovina, but were a window onto the realities of lives during transition and of an ongoing process through which the terms of change are debated and decided.

Unsettling 'The Expert'

This paper began with an assertion that the way in which expert knowledge on a transitional justice process is produced warrants further attention and reflection. Societies undergoing transition are often the object of an intense gaze, even more so as human rights and responses to their violations have become a key measure by which an individual state's legitimacy is judged by its international peers. As one Brčkonian said to me when I proudly announced my research plans: "we're not rabbits in a laboratory...stop doing experiments on us".⁷¹ Brčko District was, and still is, 'run' by non-Bosnians. Some of those international 'experts' had been flown in from other transitions where they had been working, and others had technical skills which they were applying for the first time in such contexts. Informal conversation with individuals from this group highlighted their sense of purpose in their mission and their career hopes; once they had proven their expertise they could go on to write books and give talks on the success story which they helped to create. As stated previously, the intention of such a description is not to belittle a significant amount of work by Bosnians and non-Bosnians which is undertaken with integrity. However, by placing different narratives side by side it was possible to learn that the 'non-expert', i.e. the 'ordinary' resident, who is told by officials that their story does not count, or is even divisive, could contribute a wealth of knowledge on the day to day lives of people living through a transition.

If we return to the statement made earlier in the paper, that expertise is a combination of knowledge and power, then it is vital that researchers working in and on transitional justice contexts use methods which can unpick the processes through which certain individuals and organisations come to be seen as 'experts' and through which certain voices come to be seen as speaking with 'expertise'. In Brčko District, a strong meta-

⁷¹ Field notes 180707.

narrative of success and high levels of international intervention created an environment in which particular perspectives, mostly those from people in official positions, could undermine and dismiss alternative views. In addition, the sensitivity surrounding the reform process which was implemented after high levels of violence, and at a speed pushed through by the District Supervisor, rendered the ethno-national frame of reference as the most valid one. Debates, actions and opinions were viewed through this lens which meant that knowledge of life in Brčko District which used other frames of references became less valid and in conjunction less visible.

The narrative interview method, while not unproblematic or uncomplicated in practice, provided a way of putting into practice an epistemological concern with the dynamics which shape the relative and perceived expertise of different sources of knowledge. This method, at its best, can create an open space for stories to be told across cultural divides and for individual experiences to be explained and understood in relation to the broader contexts in which lives are lived. This is particularly relevant in transitional justice scholarship which is increasingly engaging with the sometimes problematic ways in which transitional justice practice can elevate some ways of knowing over others.