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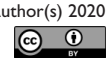

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Storytelling, resilience and transitional justice: Reversing narrative social bulimia

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Abstract
This article is about storytelling and transitional justice. Utilizing the late Jock Young's concept of social bulimia, it uses the author's fieldwork with victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina to demonstrate that storytelling can become a social bulimic process of absorption and expulsion. The article's key aim is to explore ways of addressing this. In so doing, it draws on the neurological concept of plasticity. Emphasizing the importance of 'narrative plasticity' in the sense of giving victims-/survivors more control over their stories, and linking the concept to resilience, it argues that narrative plasticity can help to address the absorption and exclusion dynamics of social bulimia—and thereby contribute to moving transitional justice in a new ecological direction.

Keywords
Conflict-related sexual violence, narrative plasticity, resilience, social bulimia, transitional justice

Introduction

As the process of dealing with a legacy of past human rights violations, transitional justice places a strong accent on the value of storytelling (Hackett and Rolston, 2009: 357; Sander, 2008: 348–349). Storytelling is associated, inter alia, with establishing the truth (Webster, 2007: 581), giving victims a voice (Simpson, 2007: 89), restoring their dignity (Godwin Phelps, 2004: 55), healing (Androff, 2012: 38) and the reconstruction of self

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(Baines and Stewart, 2011: 258–259). Notwithstanding these purported benefits, storytelling can be a psychologically challenging process (King and Meernik, 2017: 128). It can also create 'labyrinths of disappointment' (Fields, 1987: 80) when people who have experienced highly traumatic events, such as displacement, sexual violence or witnessing a massacre, are required to recount their stories multiple times, often without seeing any concrete benefits (Shaw, 2007: 203). In the poignant words of a member of the Khulumani Support Group in South Africa:

> I am sick of telling my story. It makes them [those working in the field of transitional justice] feel good to show that they are helping us. They don't really want to change things and what good does telling our stories over and over do?
>
> (cited in Madlingozi, 2010: 213)

The author has often encountered similar arguments during years of fieldwork in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) (see, for example, Clark, 2014: 17, n19), in particular with victims-/survivors[1] of conflict-related sexual violence (Clark, 2017a: 16, 233, 2017b: 426–427). These field experiences provided the central idea for this interdisciplinary article. Utilizing and adapting the late Jock Young's concept of social bulimia, and focusing specifically on conflict-related sexual violence (although the arguments have a wider application), the article offers an original analysis and critique of storytelling as a social bulimic process of absorption and expulsion. It maintains that the ready 'consumption' of stories of sexual violence by actors involved in transitional justice processes—including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), media, police and prosecutors—can impart to victims-/survivors a sense of being socially included and valued. Ultimately, however, these individuals may be left feeling used and rejected—and, additionally, socially excluded when they live in environments where they face stigma and blame (see, for example, Clark, 2018).

The article seeks, therefore, to explore ways of countering, or at least reducing, what it terms 'narrative social bulimia'—a storytelling extension of Young's construct. Drawing on the neurological concept of plasticity (Huttenlocher, 2002) and transposing this to a social science context, the article calls for 'narrative plasticity' within transitional justice practice in the sense of giving victims-/survivors more control over the stories they tell and what they talk about. This is important for addressing the absorption dynamics of narrative social bulimia. Additionally, by drawing attention to the interactions between individuals and their environments, narrative plasticity is highly pertinent to the exclusion dynamics of narrative social bulimia. Positing a linkage with resilience, as 'the reciprocal interplay of individuals in relationships and environments' (Bottrell, 2009: 323), the article's overall argument is that narrative plasticity can offer vital insights into some of the ecological structural and systemic factors that both facilitate and impede processes of resilience. In this way, it has the potential to contribute to new structural inclusion and absorption dynamics within transitional justice, and, by extension, to play a role in developing the field in a novel ecological direction (Clark, 2020a).

The article's first section provides background information about the underpinning fieldwork and introduces the thematic of storytelling fatigue in BiH. The second section

centres on the core concept of social bulimia. After discussing Young's own work, it examines how authors working in conflict-related fields have utilized the idea of social bulimia; and, building on this, it uses the interview data to empirically demonstrate the relevance of Young's concept to the issue of conflict-related sexual violence and transitional justice. The third section introduces and develops the article's second core concept—narrative plasticity. Underscoring the need for greater narrative plasticity within transitional justice processes, it focuses on the 'absorption' dynamic of social bulimia, arguing that restrictive narrative spaces within transitional justice can significantly affect what information is absorbed. The final section analyses the relationship between narrative plasticity and the structural side of social bulimia, by linking narrative plasticity and resilience.

Fieldwork and storytelling fatigue

While this article is primarily conceptual, it draws on my empirical research in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), and in particular on fieldwork conducted last year (January–July 2019). As part of a comparative project about resilience and conflict-related sexual violence,[2] I interviewed 21 men and women who had suffered various forms of sexual violence during the 1992–1995 Bosnian war—and who were selected from a quantitative dataset of 126 respondents.[3] The study questionnaire included the Adult Resilience Measure (ARM), comprising 28 statements divided into three sub-scales (individual, relational and contextual) (Resilience Research Centre, 2016). Based on their total ARM scores, study participants were divided into four quartiles and five interviewees[4] were subsequently selected from each quartile. I conducted the interviews in the local languages (Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian) and recorded them—with the interviewees' consent—using a fully encrypted digital voice recorder. The average length of an interview was one hour. The interviews were professionally transcribed and translated, and were subsequently coded in NVivo.

Interviewing victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence is necessarily challenging, particularly in a country like BiH that exemplifies the 'phenomenon of "place-based" over-research' (Neal et al., 2016: 492). Boesten and Henry (2018: 582), for example, found that 'survivors and survivor organizations complained that the same questions had been asked but they could not understand why the analysis of the data had not been widely shared (as in the case of publications)'. Yet, this is only one side of the story. What also remains the same is the dominant discourse that is used in BiH to speak about those who suffered conflict-related sexual violence during the Bosnian war. From politicians to civil society organizations and media, women (and primarily Bosniak women) are overwhelmingly portrayed as victims (*žene žrtve rata*) whose lives are full of trauma and ongoing problems (Clark, 2019). The author's ongoing research on resilience—a concept that remains surprisingly neglected and under-explored in scholarship and policy discourse about conflict-related sexual violence—developed in part from a frustration with this stale and restrictive meta narrative which arguably serves political objectives and self-interest more than it benefits victims-/survivors themselves.

Campbell et al. (2009: 61, emphasis in original) note that 'A key concern for trauma researchers has been whether, and to what extent, victims of violence become *upset or*

distressed by participating in survey and interview research.' They add that 'Our findings are consistent with reviews of trauma research metastudies, which concluded that victims generally find participating in research to be helpful, not harmful' (Campbell et al., 2009: 77). My own research supports this; as one of the closing questions, all interviewees were asked how they had found the interview experience and the overwhelming majority (17 out of 21) commented positively. One interviewee, for example, reflected:

> I have never thought of my life story. . . [laughs] What would I call it? [referring to one of the questions in the interview guide]. Today, through this conversation, this was something, I don't want to say forced, but, [short pause] produced. [laughs] [long pause] I have never thought, like that, and this was a sort of a challenge, like, how would I call it, like as if I recognized my life.
>
> (author interview, BiH, 30 January 2019)

Another explained:

> I need to, to talk many times with someone. My doctors have and. . . You have, really, Janine, the voice that, err, simply gives me tranquillity. I mean, you explain {things} to me. The talk was, so, simply [long pause] calming.
>
> (author interview, BiH, 31 January 2019)

One interpretation, of course, is that at least some of these interviewees were simply giving socially desirable answers, but this arguably detracts from participants' significance in the research process. In this regard, it is important to recognize that 'the interviewee might unexpectedly discover that the research interview served other purposes than that foreseen or expected by the researcher' (Hiller and Diluzio, 2004: 7), just as it is essential to acknowledge that individuals have their own reasons for agreeing to participate in research (Campbell and Adams, 2009: 402).

While interviewee feedback was very positive, at the centre of this article is an absorption-ejection dialectic that I have frequently observed during fieldwork with victims-/survivors (see Clark, 2017a) (and with other war-affected groups) in BiH—and which goes beyond just research fatigue (Clark, 2008: 955–956). One interviewee, for example, explained:

> I have kids, and I fear for them, I worry, because we are. . . We {don't have} anything here. . . We have no protection from the State, nothing to. . . I am afraid because I had to speak many times, err. . . As a human, I was made to say what happened there [in the camp where she was raped], and, well, people used it in different ways. Err. . . {They used it} For their causes. We never got anything.
>
> (author interview, BiH, 3 February 2019)

Speaking generally about the various organizations (which she did not name) that had visited her community to ask questions and seek information, another interviewee reflected: 'And everyone wants, you know, in our name, those of us who survived all this

[referring to sexual violence]. . . And when you say something for yourself, nothing happens.' Reiterating this point, she stressed that although she had given numerous statements and told her story many times, she had been left wondering: 'Well, what do I now have from that?' (author interview, BiH, 23 February 2019).

Fundamentally, in a general climate of social apathy and malaise, where anticipated change has given way to a crushing sense of 'sameness' and stagnation,[5] some individuals have grown tired of telling their stories multiple times and giving numerous 'statements' to police, prosecutors, NGOs and journalists, often without seeing any tangible results or positive change in their lives. Theorizing the issue within the framework of Young's social bulimia, this article reflects on ways of addressing the social bulimic dynamics of storytelling (narrative social bulimia). While Young's concept, which is elementally about structural forms of exclusion, does not have an obvious application to the issue of conflict-related sexual violence, it is argued that it offers a new way of thinking about storytelling dynamics in a transitional justice context.

The dialectics, dynamics and cross-contextual uses of social bulimia

The work of the late Jock Young offers a powerful social critique of late modernity and of the injustices and contradictions that he perceived in an increasingly globalized world and culture. 'Part of the globalized cultural thing', he reflected, 'is that it becomes tremendously apparent to people of the injustice of it all, for geographical location is just luck. It is not anything to do with anything other than just absolute luck' (in Sozzo and Fonseca, 2016: 105). A sociologist and criminologist, Young sought to understand and elucidate the underpinning dynamics of this unjust world and the concomitant fallacies of 'inclusion'. On one hand, we live in a world that 'eschews binaries' (Young, 2008: 526); borders have blurred, cultures have become hybridized and strict lines of demarcation have assumed a more fluid form. On the other hand, it is a world in which the notions of inclusion and exclusion are tightly inter-connected through a relational dialectic that is both cultural and structural.

Identifying what he called 'a bulimic process of inclusion and exclusion' in late-modern societies (Young, 1999: 395), a bulimic society is one in which 'massive cultural inclusion is accompanied by systematic structural exclusion' (Young, 2007: 28). It is, therefore, too simplistic to speak simply of social exclusion because this ignores the underlying dynamics of the bulimic society, which are both centrifugal and centripetal (Young, 2007: 28). Hence, institutions that promote and advocate inclusive citizenship—including political and justice systems—are also sites of exclusion because they reinforce the underpinning binary logic of a society that both absorbs and rejects (Young, 2007: 28; see also Young, 2003: 397). All societies, according to Young (1999: 388), have these 'swallowing and ejecting aspects', which have simply become more pronounced as the 'swallowing incorporating world of the postwar period' has transformed into one that is 'more separating, ejecting and excluding' (Young, 1999: 391).

Young invoked the concept of social bulimia to explain, inter alia, high crime rates, riots and social disaffection. The riots that took place in suburbs in Paris and other cities

in France in 2005, for example, reflected and stemmed from the frustrations of second-generation immigrants who were culturally assimilated. Hence, the riots, according to Young (2008: 526), were 'the result of a generation who have learnt the values of the Republic but instead of liberty, equality and fraternity have encountered police harassment, lack of employment and racism'. He explained earlier riots in northern England, in the summer of 2001, in a similar way. The violence, Young (2007: 133) argued, was 'the culmination of the conflicts between immigrant and indigenous populations, an indication of a major failure of policies of social inclusion'. One of the outcomes of these riots was the 2002 White Paper *Secure borders, safe haven: Integration and diversity in Britain*. Although the document acknowledged issues of social exclusion in relation to both immigrants and the alienated white working class, Young (2007: 138) objected that 'To shift individuals from unemployment to the lowest levels of employment structure, with long hours, poor pay and intense job insecurity, is not experienced as inclusion in the ranks of the "contented majority".' Rather, it is simply about being 'reclassified in the ranks of exclusion' (Young, 2007: 138).

As a concept, however, social bulimia has a broader pertinence and utility beyond the specific contexts in which Young himself used it. It is relevant, for example, to conflict situations where 'us'/'them' distinctions (Gomez-Suarez, 2017: 463), 'in-group'/'out-group' binaries (Levy et al., 2017) and 'othering' processes (McManus, 2017) reflect broader inclusion/exclusion dynamics that often precede—and are an integral part of—mass human rights abuses and war crimes (Hudson, 2014: 103). Jamieson (1999), for example, touches on the significance of social bulimia in her work on the genocides committed in Rwanda and BiH in 1994 and 1995 respectively. Exploring how societies deal with strangers and those who carry potential danger, she relies on Bauman's (1995a, 1995b) discussion of two concepts introduced by Levi-Strauss (1955), namely anthropophagic and anthropoemic strategies (Jamieson, 1999: 132–134). The anthropophagic strategy entails 'annihilating the strangers by devouring them and then metabolically transforming them into a tissue indistinguishable from one's own' (Bauman, 1995a: 2). In short, it is an extreme form of assimilation whereby everything that is different is made similar (Bauman, 1995b: 179). In contrast to this 'devouring' dynamic, an anthropoemic strategy works on the basis of expulsion and rejection. It involves 'vomiting the strangers, banishing them from the limits of the orderly world and barring them from all communication with those inside' (Bauman, 1995b: 2).

In outlining these two strategies, which according to Bauman (1989: 180) are always co-present, Jamieson asks us to think about their analytical utility in relation to genocide. Crucially, 'In what sense [. . .] does this conceptualization of the two different modes of the administration of strangers (and the third offered by Jock Young)[6] help the understanding of genocide?' (Jamieson, 1999: 134). While she does not fully answer this question, she emphasizes that genocide 'constitutes a "social exclusion" of a final and irrevocable kind' (Jamieson, 1999: 134). In other words, it is about elimination rather than just exclusion (Jamieson, 1999: 135). What Jamieson does demonstrate—albeit somewhat indirectly—is the conceptual relevance of social bulimia within a broader international context, and the fact that inclusion/exclusion dynamics can ultimately develop into an elimination strategy.

Dixon invokes the concept of social bulimia in relation to post-apartheid South Africa and the country's transition. He stresses that while the 'new' South Africa is a 'rainbow' nation that officially celebrates the ethnic and racial diversity of its people (Dixon, 2001: 218), there are still structural constraints—carried over from the apartheid period—that have strong exclusionary dynamics. In effect, 'the inclusive culture of "a better life for all" is subverted by the structural exclusivity of an increasingly marketised post apartheid society' (Dixon, 2001: 218). As a more general point, the presentation of 'peace' as a culturally inclusive achievement from which all sectors of society will benefit distorts the reality that peace deals and peace dividends can be highly exclusionary processes. These social bulimic dynamics can contribute, in turn, to the fragility of peace agreements. Highly critical of the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended the 10-year 'People's War' in Nepal, for example, Tamang (2011: 308) argues that 'Focusing solely on a narrowly defined peace process that does not include issues of excluded groups and their ownership in such processes risks jeopardising long term, sustainable peace building in Nepal.'

These examples of some of the diverse ways in which the concept of social bulimia has been discussed to explain and analyse complex social phenomena highlight its cross-contextual application and relevance. This article goes a step further, using the basic idea of social bulimia and its underpinning dynamics as a way of analysing and critiquing storytelling processes within transitional justice, with a specific focus on storytelling related to experiences of conflict-related sexual violence. The purpose of doing so is to draw attention to absorb-reject dynamics within storytelling processes, which themselves highlight and reflect broader cultural and structural dynamics of transitional societies.

In BiH, there has been a significant—if selective[7]—appetite for the stories of those who suffered sexual violence during the Bosnian war (Lindsey, 2002: 78, n34). Through the telling of these stories, victims-/survivors are culturally co-opted and integrated into a 'master narrative' (Simpson, 2008: 470)—an ethnic meta war narrative constructed around a 'victim–aggressor tandem' (Gödl, 2007: 47). By extension, they are included in a 'narrative of transition' (Rothberg, 2012: 7); the past is being 'dealt with', the truth will be established and perpetrators will be brought to justice. However, individuals may be required to tell their stories (and often in great detail) numerous times to different actors within their systemic environments, often without seeing any change or improvement in their lives. Their stories serve someone else's needs and interests rather than their own, exemplifying what Robins (2012: 22) has termed 'the fetishization or commodification of victims'.

Interviewees' comments about the justice system were particularly illustrative in this regard. One interviewee told me:

> Well, I would like damages. For example, when it comes to that [sexual violence], I gave statements for the prosecution, for example, and for the crime police and all that. Everyone knows about my experience. I mean, they are satisfied with what I did, but I am not satisfied. I have nothing out of that.
>
> (author interview, BiH, 2 June 2019)

Another interviewee, also underlining the importance of damages/monetary reparations, lamented that the various statements she had given over the years had come to nothing and had not changed anything. In her words, 'You wait. . . 26 years have passed. Could this not have been completed? Like—I am guilty, I should answer for that. I am not guilty, release me. Pay me' (author interview, BiH, 2 June 2019). In other words, storytelling can generate a sense of being 'spat out' and ejected.

The empirical examples used thus far illustrate the pertinence of Young's social bulimia to the issue of conflict-related sexual violence. The article's final two sections focus on the critical question of how transitional justice processes can contribute to addressing narrative social bulimia. Central in this regard is the article's second core concept of narrative plasticity.

Restricted narrative space, narrative plasticity and 'absorption'

To reiterate, many of the interviewees had given statements and told their stories to different actors. Nevertheless, the interview guide included the question: 'Are there parts of your war story that are important to you and that you are never asked about?' The answers were revealing. Some interviewees felt that crucial questions had not been asked, or that significant elements of their stories had been neglected. Speaking both generally and more specifically about her experience of testifying in court, one interviewee underlined:

> Well, no one has ever asked me: 'How did you feel?' 'How did you feel?' How was it on my soul? How did I. . . You know what a rock is. . . Five minutes is like one year of a normal life. Well, that is what it was. That is how I felt. This is a huge fear. You don't know what will. . . what idiot might come along [referring to her time in a camp where she suffered sexual violence]. Will they kill you? Then you agonize about your family. Where is my family? What about my kids? You have not seen them for a long while.
>
> (author interview, BiH, 3 July 2019)

A second interviewee spoke at length about events in 1993 when one army left her town and another—her 'own' army—arrived. She had hoped that the situation would thus begin to improve: 'I somehow thought, perhaps, that they [the new army] were a tiny straw of salvation.' However, this proved not to be the case and she recalled how the incoming army started 'robbing everyone' and stealing from its own people. At this point, she reflected, 'All my illusions, all some [short pause]. . . Everything went down the drain, you know? Then, I became [short pause] a person who no longer trusted anyone and anything [started to cry]' (author interview, BiH, 29 January 2019). This, in turn, was one of the reasons why she found it so difficult to talk about the sexual violence.

A third (male) interviewee did not want to speak about the abuses that he suffered in a camp, but rather about some of the ways that he and his fellow detainees managed to survive and get through each day. He recalled, for example:

> There were situations when we laughed in the camp, despite everything there. In fact, I. . . I cannot explain this. There is probably a medical term for this. I will just give you one example when almost the whole camp—and there were about 1000 people accommodated in this one hangar. And we all talked about recipes for dishes, our experiences. Some were even writing them down, to eat when they got out. I don't know what happened then. But it was the whole camp. I talk about something that I know how to make, like something from camping. Whatever. One talks about this, the other about that. . .
>
> (author interview, BiH, 10 April 2019)

Slaughter (1997: 407) maintains that 'Human rights violations target the voice'. Focusing on torture, he stresses that this is a crime that 'targets the subject's ability to narrate her experience by fracturing integrating linguistic structures through "the question" and confession' (Slaughter, 1997: 417). For Slaughter (1997: 407), therefore, 'the voice should be the focus of international human rights instruments'. This elevation of the voice, however, detracts from the broader question of what the voice is being permitted or encouraged to say, for what purpose and in what circumstances.

In the first of the three above extracts from the interview data, the interviewee had only been asked factual questions; '"What did you see, what did you hear, what did you experience", and so on, and "who did you hear it from", say if you heard something, some murder, some mistreatment, "who did you hear it from?"' (author interview, BiH, 3 July 2019). The absence of questions about her feelings highlights how transitional justice processes, and in particular criminal trials, often neglect the emotional legacies of human rights abuses (Clark, 2020b). As Viebach (2018: 1023) notes, 'Law is a language of abbreviations, of limitation and totalization that rules out what cannot be disclosed in language and words' (see also Dembour and Haslam, 2004; Eades, 2008).

In the second example, the interviewee's desire to talk about wrongs committed by her own army—and how its conduct had personally affected her—illustrates how, outside the particular space of a courtroom, broader political dynamics with which transitional justice processes are inextricably inter-connected can significantly shape and restrict the storytelling process (Simpson, 2008: 470). Within a socio-political environment that remains deeply divided, opportunities to speak out against her own 'side' were limited. In a similar vein, some Serb and Croat interviewees expressed the view that their own suffering counted for little in an ethnically driven system where, as they saw it, some victims-/survivors had received more attention and support than others. In this regard, a Croat interviewee underlined: 'I have given statements everywhere. But this was only to prove that they did it on the other side too, that Muslims did it too, not only Croats and Serbs. This [meaning her statements] was for the balance' (author interview, BiH, 30 January 2019). In other words, the divisive legacies of the Bosnian war have, in some cases, contributed to fuelling narrative social bulimia.

In the third example, the interviewee's desire to speak about a more positive dimension of his experiences, and how he had coped, foregrounds the broader issue of whether we live our stories or whether *they* live us (Kiesinger, 2008: 109). When individuals are given the space to primarily speak only about particular experiences, their stories may start to live them and thus entrench them in a victim role. The more that they tell these

stories, the more their 'victim narratives and indeed "personalities" begin to ossify' (Bryson, 2016: 322). This, in turn, can encourage 'narrative foreclosure'—defined as 'the conviction that no new experiences, interpretations, and commitments are possible that can substantially change one's life-story and the meaning of one's life as it is told now' (Bohlmeijer et al., 2011: 367). Narrative foreclosure is harmful because it can keep people trapped in the past, unable to look/move ahead and to find meaning—or new meaning—in their experiences (Hauser et al., 2006: 209).

In short, what strongly emerged from the interview data is that interviewees' stories were extremely rich and multi-layered. The sexual violence was only one part of their experiences, and for many of them it was also the part that was hardest to speak about. Some of them did not want to talk about it, and some of them struggled to say anything. One particular research participant stood out in this regard. Like several other interviewees, this deeply religious woman associated rape with shame and disgrace (see also Traunmüller at al., 2019). Starting to cry, she said simply: 'It is my obligation to carry it around' (author interview, BiH, 21 May 2019).

Harris et al. (2018: 357) argue that 'Stories are brought into being through their (re) telling and listening; they are co-created by teller and listener.' However, the demand for particular stories—like stories of conflict-related sexual violence (Crosby and Lykes, 2011: 475)—can disrupt these co-creation dynamics and elevate an externally-driven dynamic. As a crucial starting point for dealing with narrative social bulimia and its inherent absorb-eject dynamics, it is therefore essential to address what is actually being 'absorbed' through the storytelling process. This means, first and foremost, giving victims-/survivors more control over the storytelling process, especially in terms of what they narrate; and, in particular, giving them greater space to speak about 'their full experience of conflict' (Killean, 2015: 352).

This article is by no means the first to make this argument in the context of transitional justice (see, for example, Doak, 2011: 290; Gobodo-Madikizela, 2002: 11). It is, however, the first to link it to the concept of social bulimia and, in so doing, the first to invoke the concept of 'narrative plasticity'. Howard (2006: 28) has employed the term narrative plasticity to refer to a discourse that 'displays a surprising ability to immediately assimilate new narrative details into its overall matrix of beliefs'. This article's central argument is that transitional justice processes should encourage narrative plasticity as part of giving victims-/survivors greater control over the storytelling process, in the sense of allowing their stories to organically change shape and develop in new directions. Jonsson et al. (2001: 427) point out that 'When the plot changes, emplotting one's experiences in the same way as before is no longer possible.' Similarly, when the 'narrative environment' (Randall and McKim, 2008: 77) changes and assumes a more plastic and flexible form, stories can be recounted and 'emplotted' in novel ways that challenge what Malabou (2010: 81) has described as 'rigid frameworks whose temporal solidification produces the appearance of unmalleable substance'.

More broadly, narrative plasticity means that narrative spaces should foster richer and more layered forms of storytelling that stretch beyond traumatology and victimhood. Some interviewees, for example, talked about how their experiences had strengthened them, given them a new appreciation for life or given them the opportunity/motivation to help others. Two interviewees were leading their own NGOs. Another was working with

elderly people in her community, preparing meals and cleaning for them. She stressed that this work 'has pulled me up, somehow, from all this sorrow and everything' (author interview, BiH, 29 January 2019). Limited narrative space for such stories means that they are rarely told or heard.

In sum, narrative plasticity has an important role to play in helping to address the 'absorption' dynamic of social bulimia. However, this alone is not enough. Exploring the relationship between narrative plasticity and the structural dimension of social bulimia, the final section posits a key linkage between the concepts of narrative plasticity and resilience.

Narrative plasticity, resilience and ecological transitional justice

Plasticity is primarily a neurological concept that refers to 'the mechanism by which the brain encodes experience and learns new behaviors' (Kleim and Jones, 2008: 225). This mechanism is therefore important for explaining how the brain recovers from an injury or adapts to new situations (Khan et al., 2017; Wieloch and Nikolich, 2006); and, hence, neural plasticity has been linked to resilience (Cicchetti, 2010; Cicchetti and Blender, 2006). This is key to understanding its importance for transitional justice, a field in which the concept of resilience remains strikingly neglected.

Walklate et al. (2014: 422) underline that 'resilience is not an objective condition nor an immutable state that individuals or communities can arrive at through working together. Rather, there are multiple resiliences that manifest themselves along a spectrum of different contexts and conditions'. These 'multiple resiliences' speak to the essence of resilience as a process in a continual state of movement and flux. As Liebenberg and Moore (2018: 4) point out, 'Over the last two decades, studies have affirmed that resilience is not a static state, an outcome or an inherent trait within the individual'. Fundamentally, person-centred definitions have given way to more complex ecological conceptualizations that explore the interactions between individuals and their environments. Ungar (2004: 342), for example, defines resilience as 'the outcome from negotiations between individuals and their environments for the resources to define themselves as healthy amidst conditions collectively viewed as adverse' (see also Berkes and Ross, 2013: 7). That resilience is an ecological process is crucial for elucidating its relationship with narrative plasticity.

In their work on neural plasticity, Khan et al. (2017: 604) maintain that 'Understanding adaptive behaviour in response to nervous system injury requires an understanding of the interaction between the subsystems of the body, the environment, and the continuous feedback between the nervous system, the body and environment.' It is argued that by enlarging the narrative space, narrative plasticity can provide important insights into how victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, through interactions with the systems and structures around them, deal with and adapt to adversity—and the factors that hinder them in this regard. In this way, it can contribute to a new ecological reframing of transitional justice that gives greater attention to broader structural factors that fuel a sense of exclusion.

Interviewees, for example, frequently spoke about stigma. Some of them engaged in self-stigma; they were convinced that other people were speaking about them. Others had directly experienced stigma in the form of verbal abuse or recriminations. While stigma has an obvious socio-cultural component (Boesten and Henry, 2018: 577), it also has a structural dimension linked to gender and patriarchy. It was overwhelmingly female interviewees who spoke about stigma; and, as Ellison (2003: 323) notes, there is 'implicit structural violence' underpinning normative models and rhetoric of 'what it means to be a "good" and worthy woman, mother, and wife'. The cardinal point is that while many interviewees felt structurally rejected by systems that no longer needed them, some of them had experienced an additional sense of ejection and rejection—based on abuse rather than simply misuse—from those around them. One interviewee stressed that 'Rejection by other people made it harder' (author interview, BiH, 3 February 2019). Another recalled how, after she was raped in 1992, her then partner started to ask questions about her war experiences. In her words:

> He heard there were rapes in XXX [the place where she and other women from her village were taken] and when I. . . He asked if I was raped too and I said I was: {I said} I was there, too. After that, he. . . He did not say anything, but he changed and this relationship. . . He got married later on. I stayed {unmarried}. It was hard on me after that, because it was a reason; it was a big reason for it. I don't know why, but, well, he was probably bothered by that. Then, 'what will people say?', because even here, they say: 'Well, she is the one who was raped.'
>
> (author interview, BiH, 20 March 2019)

What also strongly emerged from the interviews is that while there have been various transitional justice initiatives in BiH, 'justice' was a word that often evoked frustration and/or scepticism. Many viewed justice through a highly utilitarian lens, emphasizing the absence of 'justice' within their own lives; and many felt structurally excluded from seemingly abstract processes that, from their perspective, involved the application of different rules and benefits for different people. Highlighting this, one interviewee underlined:

> Justice means justice for everyone. And, you know what, in this war, those who did not experience anything have better privileges and. . . How to say it. . . Look, those of us who survived this [referring to the sexual violence], we still haven't got justice for being in camps, as victims, for surviving everything. We have not experienced justice. It is said that there is justice, justice, justice, but it is nowhere to be found. And when you look at it, they don't give you your justice.
>
> (author interview, BiH, 23 February 2019)

While some interviewees made the point that no amount of money could compensate for, or repair, the harm that they had suffered, the 'justice' that many of them sought was social justice. Economic worries and difficulties arose as a prominent theme and further contributed to structural exclusion in the sense of preventing people from leading 'normal' lives. In the words of a male interviewee:

> Today, my life is relatively difficult. The economic situation is as it is. I have children at school. University. Income—there is none. I am doing some agriculture, fruit growing, and income is not secure and not enough for a normal life, a dignified life.
>
> (author interview, BiH, 4 March 2019)

The article's contention is not that narrative plasticity can address structural factors such as patriarchy and poverty that form part of the exclusionary dynamics underpinning social bulimia. The argument, rather, is that narrative plasticity can significantly broaden transitional justice in a new ecological—and structurally inclusive—direction. As one illustration, the United Nation's (UN) Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Pramila Patten, has underlined the need for a 'survivor-centred' approach, defined as 'giving voice and choice to survivors, restoring their agency, building their resilience and enshrining their experience in the historical record' (United Nations News, 2019). The UN Security Council (2019) has also embraced this concept. The notion of 'survivor-centred', however, keeps the focus on individuals *as* victims-/survivors of sexual violence and on their experiences of sexual violence. In so doing, it neglects wider ecologies and the stressors and resources within them. Giving more attention to these ecologies is imperative for creating new structural absorption dynamics within transitional justice in the sense of building supportive ecologies that foster resilience in individuals and their environments.

It is further argued that victims/-survivors of conflict-related sexual violence (or indeed any form of violence related to war, armed conflict and mass human rights violations) are potential agents of change in that they themselves have a role to play in helping to build these supportive ecologies. Accordingly, narrative plasticity partly addresses calls made by some scholars for more 'bottom–up' and participatory ways of doing transitional justice that counter-balance 'top–down', elite-driven approaches (see, for example, Shefik, 2018; Visoka, 2016). The issue of communities highlights this.

Some interviewees lamented the loss of their communities (as they had known them); the Bosnian war and its aftermath resulted in mass displacement, population movements and economic migration (see, for example, Halilovich, 2013). By extension, the fracturing, weakening or depopulation of communities, leading to what Krasny and Tidball (2015: xiii) have called 'broken places', had affected how some interviewees were dealing with their experiences (Walsh, 2007: 209). Speaking about the place where she lives, for example, one interviewee reflected:

> Well, sometimes, like this, sometimes it impacts. It sometimes impacts, well, simply it gets to me. . . Sometimes, from my soul, my inside, I look {around} and there are no longer the neighbours that I used to have. And so, sometimes, it is hard for me.
>
> (author interview, BiH, 23 February 2019)

As part of a broader ecological approach to dealing with the past, transitional justice processes have an important role to play in regenerating communities. The key point is that expanded forms of storytelling consistent with narrative plasticity can create a space

for victims-/survivors to speak about their communities as 'local environments providing a set of risk and protective factors that have an influence on the well-being of community members' (Chaskin, 2008: 65)—and to flag up gaps in relation to protective factors. In this regard, narrative plasticity has a strong inclusion dynamic as well as an important agentic dynamic. In its landmark Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, for example, the UN Security Council (2000) underlined 'the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building'. Fostering spaces within transitional justice for individuals to talk, inter alia, about their communities and what is needed in these communities to allow people, individually and collectively, to move forward can initiate new possibilities for victims-/survivors—women and men—to contribute, directly or indirectly, to broader peacebuilding processes.

Conclusion

Drawing on research with victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in BiH, and using Jock Young's social bulimia as its conceptual framework, this article has developed the core argument that storytelling in the context of transitional justice—notwithstanding its importance—can easily become a social bulimic process. Fundamentally, while stories of sexual violence are readily consumed and absorbed, there exists a counter purge and reject dynamic when those who tell these stories are ultimately left feeling used and questioning what good came from recounting their stories many times over. The key aim of the article, thus, was to reflect on ways of potentially reversing this narrative social bulimia. Specifically, it has underscored the importance of narrative plasticity within transitional justice, in the sense of giving victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence greater control over their stories, how they tell them and which parts of their experiences they talk about.

At a higher level, it has sought to demonstrate that narrative plasticity does not only fall on the cultural side of the social bulimic dialectic, but is also relevant to the structural exclusionary dynamics of the process. Pivotal in this regard is the linkage that the article has posited between narrative plasticity and resilience. It has argued that narrative plasticity draws attention to ecological factors that have aided (or hindered) individuals in dealing with their experiences, thus providing a basis for the development of new structural absorption dynamics within an ecologically reframed transitional justice. In particular, narrative plasticity creates new participatory possibilities within transitional justice practice in the sense of enabling some victims-/survivors to influence their environments. It is this unexplored transformative potential of storytelling, through narrative plasticity, and the absorption of storytelling into a broader systemic whole, that is pivotal to countering narrative social bulimia.

Within neuroscience literature, the relationship between plasticity and memory has been extensively discussed (see, for example, Maren, 2003; Martin et al., 2000). Indeed, De Pittà et al. (2016: 43) argue that 'synaptic plasticity is the major candidate mechanism for learning and memory'. In contrast, the concept of plasticity, and in particular narrative plasticity, has received little or no attention within transitional justice scholarship. Narrative plasticity, however, is highly relevant to core transitional justice goals, including establishing the truth, giving victims a voice and contributing to peace. All of these

goals, although they are seldom discussed as such, have an obvious linkage with resilience; and, ultimately, the reversal of narrative social bulimia can be understood as a process of maximizing the potential for storytelling to foster positive interactions between individuals and their environments.

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Notes

1. This article uses the terminology of 'victim-/survivor', in recognition of the fact that men and women who have suffered conflict-related sexual violence may identify with one term rather than the other, or indeed with both.
2. The project is focusing on three countries, namely BiH, Colombia and Uganda.
3. Across the three country case sites, a total of 449 men and women participated in the quantitative part of the project.
4. I ultimately undertook one extra interview from quartile three (the largest quartile).
5. One interviewee, for example, commented: '[n]obody works in the family. We don't really live {well}. . . That's it, well, sometimes I become tired of it, if you believe me. This whole situation. Nothing. {It} Does not go {anywhere}. No improvements. Nothing coming up. Sometimes. . . I think {to myself}: for how much longer? You know?' (author interview, BiH, 6 March 2019).
6. Young (2004: 550) maintained that 'the dualism between anthropophagic and anthropoemic societies was too sharp'. His conceptualization of social bulimia arguably transcends this dichotomization through a more synergistic analysis of the relationship between absorption and rejection.
7. While the main focus has been on Bosniak women, victims/-survivors from other ethnic groups, as well as men who suffered sexual violence, have received far less attention (Clark, 2017a: 43–49).

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