ARTICLES

Conflict narratives and conflict handling strategies in intercultural contexts

Reflections from an action research project based on restorative praxis*

Brunilda Pali

Introduction

A rapidly growing field of research and practice, *restorative justice* has been viewed as a new social movement, an alternative approach to solving conflicts and responding to crime, a set of values and principles, a lifestyle or philosophy, a normative social theory of justice, a ground-breaking paradigm of justice, or a variety of programmes complementary to the criminal justice system (see Braithwaite, 2002; Daly & Immarigeon, 1998; Richards 2009b; Sullivan & Tifft 2001; Walgrave, 2008; Zehr 1990). While some of these conceptions have led to its applications in different areas of everyday life – such as schools and workplaces –, restorative justice has primarily found its gravitational centre within the criminal justice system, as an alternative way of dealing with the aftermath of crime. Less explored remains the potential of restorative justice in complex, urban, or intercultural contexts that could be characterized by issues of social exclusion and intercultural tensions. Applying restorative justice principles and methods to such contexts requires an exploration of the field far beyond criminal justice and raises a whole set of conceptual and practical challenges.

In 2012, together with an international team of about thirty researchers, Leuven Institute of Criminology initiated a four-year action research project called ALTERNATIVE.¹ The project aimed to both research narratives of justice and security in intercultural contexts and transform them through restorative praxis. The project was conceived as an alternative to discourses of (in)security which attributed inevitable social conflicts to intercultural contexts. Increasingly in

* I wish to thank Christa Pelikan and Katrin Kremmel for their work and engagement in the FP7 Alternative project and their unwavering support and encouragement for my PhD, on which this article is based.

1 ALTERNATIVE was an action research project conducted in the period 2012-2016 and funded through the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) of the European Commission. The project was coordinated by the Leuven Institute of Criminology (LINC) in Belgium. The partners in the project were the Norwegian Social Research Institute (NOVA) in Norway, the European Forum for Restorative Justice (EFRJ) in Belgium, the Institute for the Sociology of Law and Criminology (IRKS) in Austria, the Foresee Research Group (Foresee) in Hungary, the Victimology Society of Serbia (VDS) in Serbia, and the University of Ulster (UU) in Northern Ireland.

social conflicts, tensions and perceptions of insecurity, culture has become a refracting lens through which conflict perceptions are formed (Stolcke, 1995). Inspired by the Zwelethemba model of the peacemaking committees in South Africa (see Roche, 2002; Shearing, 2001), the project set up restorative interventions in four European countries: Northern Ireland, Austria, Serbia, and Hungary. At its core, the project mobilized and encouraged local participation, encounters, and dialogic processes for conflict handling in local communities, aiming mainly to create a sense of security and a sense of justice that is rooted in the *lifeworld* of communities participating in such processes. That implied at the same time exposing and addressing underlying structural inequalities and differential social conditions which may generate disputes and conflicts (Crawford & Hutchinson, 2016; Roche, 2002). Given that the double aim of the project was conducting research while engendering social change through restorative praxis, action research was deemed to be the most appropriate methodology.

Mostly used in educational, organizational, and health care settings, action research remains an underused but a highly interesting methodology for criminology and criminal justice research (Aertsen, 2018). Its alternative epistemology makes it particularly apt for scientific projects that aim both at investigating crime and justice related issues and at engendering change, either at the level of criminal justice or communities. In the criminological context, action research has been conducted in prisons (Crabtree et al., 2016; Hodiaumont et al., 2005; Sherwood & Kendall, 2013), police (Noga et al., 2016; Walsh et al., 2014), crime policies (Saija & Gravagno, 2009; Wastell et al., 2004), youth justice (Vanfraechem & Walgrave, 2001), and victim policies and restorative justice (Aertsen & Peters, 1995).

Action research refers to a 'whole family of approaches to inquiry which are participative, grounded in experience, and action-oriented' (Reason & Bradbury, 2001: xxiv). In action research epistemology, knowledge is possible and legitimate only through engendering change (Cherry & Borshuk, 1998; McTaggart, 2001; Tandon, 1996). Its purpose therefore is not primarily or solely to understand social arrangements, but also to enact change as a path to generating knowledge, while reflecting on the limitations that arise (Walsham, 2006). The focus on the development of practical knowledge is a central concern of scholars or activists who have developed action research (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Among them, Kemmis (2001) in particular has criticized the overemphasis of action research on practical knowledge and problem-solving, advocating instead a more *critical* focus for action research. When conceived in a critical manner, action research should aim not only at improving the work of practitioners, but also at assisting them to arrive at a critique of their social or work settings. Likewise, it should assist them to reach 'an understanding of the way both particular people and particular settings are shaped and re-shaped discursively, culturally, socially and historically' (Kemmis, 2001: 92). This difference between a problem-solving or a technical approach to practice and a problematizing or a critical approach to practice, suggests that practice cannot just be about problem-solving or selecting methods to achieve improved outcomes, but concerns problem setting or problem framing at the same time, processes during which we name prob-

lems and frame the context in which we address them (see also Brown & Tandon, 1983; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Carson, 1990; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Schutter & Yopo, 1981).

The action research conducted in the ALTERNATIVE project was close to the critical strand of action research described by Kemmis (2001). In this article I will focus specifically on the tensions and dilemmas created by our efforts to engage in a problematizing approach to the context and to practice, whereby together with other social actors we framed problems (in our case social conflicts) and the context in which we addressed them. I argue that participatory forms of inquiry, such as action research, should actively reframe rather than merely describe contexts and problems they work with. In doing that, they differ from some phenomenological or ethnographic methods which aim largely to be faithful to the *lifeworld*. The notion *lifeworld* mainly refers to the everyday world of lived experience. An integral part of Habermas' theory of 'communicative action', the sphere of the *lifeworld* is the intuitively present, the familiar and transparent, and at the same time vast and incalculable web of presuppositions, the background consensus of our everyday lives, the vast stock of taken-for-granted definitions and understandings of the world that give coherence and direction to our lives (Habermas, 1987: 131-133). Important in his arguments is the theorizing of the *lifeworld* vis-à-vis 'the system', which Habermas views as a colonizer of the *lifeworld*. Using the term 'juridification' to denounce specifically the ways in which law invades more and more areas of social life, Habermas articulates ways in which the *lifeworld* could be used to resist colonization through juridification. Restorative justice too is strongly anchored in the principle of *lifeworld*. It defends a *lifeworld* orientation as the opposite to the system orientation, and in line with early abolitionist thinking, proposes to go back to the events themselves, back to the world of the directly lived experience. In other words, it puts people's lived experiences above assumed categories of interpretation that colonize the *lifeworld*.

Categories of interpretation (or frames) on the other hand, regulate the ways in which different phenomena are constituted. In particular, framing regulates what is problematized, in what manner, who gets recognized as a subject and as what kind of subject, and the way in which certain problematizations lead to certain actions (Butler, 2004, 2009). It is in particular this tension between *lifeworld* and framing that will be the focus of this article, as I believe this would be of interest to action researchers or other researchers interested in action research. I approach the tension largely by analyzing and comparing the main conflict narratives and the conflict handling strategies used by the different social agents in the *Gemeindebau*, the social housing estates in Vienna (see also Kremmel & Pelikan, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b, 2018; Pali, 2019).

Social housing in Vienna constitutes a substantial rather than an exceptional way of the housing market in Vienna, as about one-third of the population in Vienna lives in flats built, owned and subsidized by the city (see Kremmel and Pelikan, 2014a). Besides wage labour and social assistance, housing constitutes a third column of institutionalized social entitlements. As a consequence of increased

migration and the pressure coming from the EU,² there was a major change in the access policies of the *Gemeindebau*, which opened its doors to foreigners with long-term residence. This change became a target of political fights, manifesting in the creation, negotiation and increase of rules for conduct and access criteria. The opening of the *Gemeindebau* to migrants constitute an important *before-and-after* narrative for its older residents, highlighting the change from a welfare centred social protection mainly for the working class to a new model that aims to counteract the exclusion of new disadvantaged strata of the population. The new constellation of the *Gemeindebau* has led to many conflicts between residents of different cultural background. Besides conflicts, there is also uncertainty regarding language, social norms, and expectations. Given this context, the main aims of the intervention in this particular site were to reach a better understanding of existing conflicts, narratives and practices of conflict handling, while engendering at the same time a series of restorative interventions. The restorative interventions were designed in collaboration with inhabitants and existing organizations in the research site. These actors came together during the project in order to draw on each other's knowledge, frame and address common problems and generate mutual learning (Peters & Robinson, 1984).

Contextualizing the ALTERNATIVE project

The project had at its core four case studies supported by and mutually feeding into three theoretically oriented work packages and a comparative work package. The overall work was divided between seven partners (research institutes).³ The four case studies were selected due to their perceived different levels of 'intercultural conflicts' (micro, meso, macro). More specifically, at the micro-level we selected the social housing estates in Vienna and focused on everyday conflicts between local residents (mainly between long-term residents and residents with a migrant background). At the meso-level, we selected an interethnic town in Hungary, focusing on the power relations and micropolitics in general, and on the position of the Roma minority in particular. At the meso-/macro-level, we selected three multi-ethnic towns in Serbia, focusing on interethnic conflicts between Serbs, Albanians, Muslims and Croats. At the meso-/macro-level, we selected three intercultural sites in Northern Ireland, focusing on conflicts between a local community and gangs of youths, between long-term residents and recent immigrants, and on intercommunity sectarian conflicts.

2 More specifically the Council Directive 2003/109/EC of 25 November 2003 concerning the status of third-country nationals who are long-term residents, which came into effect in 2006.

3 KU Leuven – where I worked – was the coordinator of the project. The Leuven team was mainly responsible for Work Package (WP) 8 and WP1. WP2 and WP3 were covered respectively by the Norwegian Social Research Institute and the European Forum for Restorative Justice. The remaining four partners (Institute for the Sociology of Law and Criminology, the Foresee Research Group, the Victimology Society of Serbia, and the University of Ulster) were engaged in carrying out the local action research in their respective countries (Austria, Hungary, Serbia and Northern Ireland).

The selection of the sites was based on research and on consultation with local organizations who pointed either at the existence of 'intercultural conflicts' or at the 'culturalization of conflicts' (intercultural framing of conflicts) in their sites. Our project had to walk the fine line between both researching and intervening into 'intercultural conflicts' while at the same time challenging the intercultural framing of conflicts. Early on in the project, we decided to use the notion of 'conflicts in intercultural settings' as an alternative to a frame of 'intercultural conflicts', hoping we could question the assumed link between culture and conflict while still being able to explore it.

The theoretical work packages (WP) focused on the central concepts in the project. WP1 (Alternative epistemologies of justice and security) analyzed the concepts of justice and security. WP2 (Conflict transformation) analyzed the concepts of conflict and conflict transformation. WP3 (Restorative justice models) analyzed the concept of restorative justice and its models. WP8 compared the four case studies and aligned the local action research with the theoretical work. The project started in the first year with a discourse analysis on some of the main concepts that oriented the research, such as security and justice, restorative justice, conflict transformation, and active participation. By setting the concepts in a socio-historical framework, we aimed to understand under which conditions the concepts had emerged, how they have been used within a critical agenda but also how they have been recovered by a neoliberal agenda. The discursive approach enabled a more critical approach towards our work on restorative praxis.

After constructing these discursive blocks of the theoretical framework, further steps were taken to prepare the ground for the action research in the four sites. During the first step an in-depth mapping – through the methods of participant observation, document analysis, and interviews – was undertaken in each of the local contexts. The aim was to understand a) the 'societal ecology', such as history and demography, of each site, b) the types of conflicts or conflict narratives existing, and c) the types of conflict handling mechanisms (if any) or patterns of conflict handling. This step went hand in hand with ongoing activities of trust-building on behalf of the local researchers in the sites, which eventually laid the foundation for the sustained cooperation with the local inhabitants, the practitioners and other institutions' representatives.

After the in-depth mapping and preparing of the ground, researchers engaged in multiple tasks, like sharing their research results with local participants, and making plans of actions for possible activities on the sites together with the local partners and participants. The actions have been tailored according to the context and consisted mainly of a) offering workshops and trainings on restorative justice, b) intervening whenever possible in concrete conflicts taking place in the communities, and c) conducting participatory filmmaking. Finally, the researchers have evaluated the actions both in terms of possible contribution of restorative justice to the social conflicts and dynamics present in the sites, and in terms of challenges that the sites and the actions brought to the discourse of restorative justice.

By research design, my main task as a researcher, based in the Institute of Criminology at KU Leuven, was to generate propositional knowledge that could support the local research partners to interpret the findings and to design the actions in the research sites. My own role as part of the larger team was mainly focused on the reflection phases on the project. Participating in the action research as an *outsider* doctoral researcher meant that my interest on the action research and the practices and actions developed thereby, concerned mostly their contribution to knowledge, more specifically to knowledge on restorative justice. For my PhD I focused in-depth on only two of the action sites (Hungary and Austria), leaving out of the analysis Serbia and Northern Ireland. The reason for this was mainly due to the fact that the accounts from the Hungarian and Austrian sites were *thickly* ethnographical accounts which enable me to (partly) close the gap of not having been part of the local research team in these sites. Serbia and Northern Ireland produced research material of a different register, having relied extensively on quantitative research methods. Furthermore, being 'post-conflict' societies with deep ethnic frontiers, they invited different interpretations of certain concepts like interculturality, justice and security that went beyond the analysis I was able to conduct.

My main objective towards the two case studies was instrumental (see Stake, 2005), thus analyzing them in order to develop further insights about the discourse of restorative justice. But despite the instrumental objective, every case has been approached as intrinsically as possible, in line with the contextualist orientation of action research. Kingry-Westergaard and Kelly (1986) have introduced the notion of *contextualist epistemology*, to highlight the fact that knowledge exists within a specific empirical and theoretical frame of reference. How action researchers decide which ways of knowing to use is fully dependent on the aim and the context of the project. Owing to that context-specificity, there is neither a fixed formula for designing, practicing, and implementing action research projects, nor an overarching theoretical framework underpinning them. Because of its contextualized nature, knowledge generated from action research is cautious in its claims, sensitive to variations and open to reinterpretation in new contexts. In this article, I focus in-depth on only one of the four action research sites: the *Gemeindebau*, the social housing in Vienna, hoping that by providing details, others may learn from it, and new theory can be generated to explain similar problems or issues in other contexts.

Contextualizing the action research in the *Gemeindebau*

Why was the social housing estate (*Gemeindebau*) in particular selected to conduct the action research in Vienna? As mentioned above, given our interest in the topic of interculturality in relation to justice and security, the first reason for choosing this site was its significant intercultural composition. The intercultural composition led to conflicts and to uncertainty regarding social norms. The conflicts within the *Gemeindebau* were mainly problems related to noise, pets, the behaviour of children and adolescents (the way they use public space, graffiti,

vandalism, hanging around), alcohol and drugs, dirt and garbage, smells, and parking. From our perspective, both the existence of conflicts but also a relatively stable political dynamics and social environment that would allow for the development of a four-year action research were important. Likewise, crucial was also the existence of partner organizations that could facilitate and support the research process.

The action research in Vienna was conducted by the Institute of Law and Criminology (IRKS),⁴ in partnership with two local organizations, *wohnpartner* and *Bas-sena* (see Kremmel and Pelikan, 2014a). *Wohnpartner* is responsible for conflict management, community outreach and networking projects within Vienna's *Gemeindebau*. It was established in 2010 by Wiener Wohnen, the landlord and administrative body of social housing estates. Wiener Wohnen is responsible for different issues concerning the estates, such as the disposal of garbage, the maintenance of infrastructure, security matters, cost calculations of rent and overheads, and rule enforcement. Bassena is a grassroots community organization with a legacy of more than thirty years of community work. Given that at the time of the project many activities were taking place and a large experience had been gathered in the *Gemeindebau*, restorative praxis had to find a place that appeared adequate, convincing and complementary to the existing social actors that were present and active there.

In contrast to traditional research where the researcher is solely (or mostly) responsible for determining the research design, action research invites practitioners and other local participants into the research process and is therefore conjointly conducted by a collaborative partnership of local participants, practitioners and researchers (Adelman, 1997; Greenwood & Levin, 1998). This creates what has been called a *practitioner-research engagement* (Brown et al., 2003) or more ambitiously a *community of inquiry* (Friedman, 2001), in which the different social actors come together through various degree of involvement – ranging from consultation to close collaboration – during all or most of the stages of the project in order to draw on each other's knowledge, frame and address common problems and generate mutual learning (Peters & Robinson, 1984). This process entails building and maintaining collective commitments and alliances between researchers and participants in the planning, investigation, implementation, and dissemination of the research process.

Within this collaborative framework, researchers act as committed facilitators, participants or partners in the dialogue, or as *resource-persons* rather than distanced, neutral observers or analysts. Nevertheless, reflection, as an interactive process carried out by the teams of researchers together with practitioners and local inhabitants, is also meant to lead to a *distancing effect* from the pressure exerted by action (see Kremmel & Pelikan, 2018: 61-62). The interpretations of reality guided by theoretical concepts are confronted with the everyday understanding and the common-sense interpretations. The researcher *extends* the practitioner his or her interpretation using theoretically based concepts, but to be productive the concepts introduced have to make sense to the practitioners and

4 More specifically by researchers Katrin Kremmel and Christa Pelikan.

to the people affected, they should produce a surplus value of understanding, and be able to impact practice. This methodological approach implies acquiring knowledge through a process of continuous interaction and dialogue between researchers and those researched and a process of on-going reflection on those interactions. The knowledge thus produced is hoped to be more valid, that is close to people's *lifeworld*.

The main aims of the action research in this site were to research conflicts, conflict narratives and practices of partner organizations in the research sites, while engendering a series of interventions and conducting reflexive evaluation. These activities were cyclical and iterative. The cyclical approach is so constitutive to action research that often action research is defined in terms of its cyclicity (Waterman et al., 2001). As a period of inquiry, it describes, interprets and explains social situations while executing an action aimed at improvement (or some other form of change) and involvement (participation of research subjects). The emphasis is on working with real problems in social systems, using iterative cycles of research process that includes problem identification, planning, acting and evaluating the action, privileging the participant perspective, while retaining the importance of the relationship of theory to practice (see Coghlan & Brannick, 2005; Dick et al., 2009; Herr & Anderson, 2004; Kemmis, 1982; Stringer, 1999; Waterman et al., 2001).

In action research, the activities, methods, participants, objectives, and data collection techniques are particular to the context in which the project takes place (Mikkelsen, 2001). The main methods used during the action research in the *Gemeindebau* were interviews conducted with inhabitants and other local actors, extensive participatory observation, workshops, focus groups, community circles and participatory filmmaking. Most of the primary data were in the local languages and therefore accessible to me only via the partially translated and often pre-interpreted accounts accessible through internal project documents called deliverables and the films prepared during the project.⁵ In my analysis, I provide second-order interpretations on the research sites which are based on first-order interpretations. These first-order interpretations were already co-produced mainly by the local researchers in cooperation with the other researchers in the project during the course of the project. The second-order interpretations have been further validated through additional communication with the local researchers to increase dialogic validity (Herr & Anderson, 2004). In what follows, I will first give an account of the multiple conflict narratives gathered and second of the strategies of conflict handling and 'problem' framing of different social actors on the site. This account reveals very clearly the most important dilemmas that can be encountered in action research between the two different epistemic positions of *lifeworld* and framing.

5 The films can be found on the website: <http://alternativefilms.euforumrj.org>.

Analyzing and comparing conflict narratives and conflict handling strategies

Conflict narratives

ALTERNATIVE started with the intention to challenge the intercultural framing of conflicts. Based on this objective, quite early on in the project, it was decided to use the notion of 'conflicts in intercultural contexts' as an alternative to a frame of 'intercultural conflicts'. Through this less 'directive' and more 'open' framing we could question the necessarily assumed link between culture and conflict while still being able to investigate this link. Instead of looking at the action research site simply as a site of conflicts between old residents and immigrants – which our initial 'problem framing' suggested – the local researchers collected multiple narratives. A large number of people was given the chance to either present a narrative or contest one. This cacophony of voices included both local inhabitants and professionals. The richness of the multiple narratives and points of view of the people in the action research site made it difficult for the researchers to categorize people and events. This was a clear indication of how a *lifeworld* orientation in itself can counteract tendencies of totalizing views, identities, and positions. There was, in other words, no attempt at reconstructing the 'one and real story'. What happened instead was an effort to record a 'struggle of discourses', while interpreting constantly. This constant interpretation on behalf of the researchers pointed to the impossibility of using the notion of *lifeworld* as a revealing scene, the unmediated *lifeworld* that unfolds itself to the researcher and speaks for itself. It showed how the *lifeworld* has to be, in one way or another, framed by researchers, local inhabitants and professionals alike. As social scientists in general, and as action researchers in particular, what we do in fact is all the time 'framing', 'reframing', and 'counter-framing' social issues.

Four main co-existing conflict narratives were discerned during the field work (see Kremmel & Pelikan, 2014a). The first was the 'no conflict' narrative, which was mostly structured around the storyline that the social housing sites are not ridden by conflict and even less so by conflicts along the lines of cultural difference. This narrative was not a very dominant narrative, since reality testified otherwise. Existing conflicts in the social housing mainly revolved around the behaviour of children, the way the women use public space, vandalism, just 'hanging around', problems around alcohol and drugs, and problems around noise, garbage and smells. Likewise, research showed that the existing conflicts also had to do with fears, identity, belonging, welfare related concerns and insecurities. The main barrier in expressing and negotiating claims regarding different viewpoints remains language. But often difficulties did not arise simply from not having a common language, but from uncertainty of a general sharing of norms and expectations, and insecurity about the subtext words carry, in other words differences in *lifeworld*. These insecurities can relate to harmless assumptions ('are Muslim neighbours going to be offended by the Austrian greeting "Grüß Gott"?') and expectations ('must a plate with sweets from the Egyptian neighbour be returned empty or full?'), but also to larger differences which can be used to build one's identity ('Austrians do not spit on the ground, and do not leave remains of their food on the ground in the parks').

The second narrative – the ‘intercultural conflicts’ narrative – told exactly the opposite story: conflicts are pervasive, and they are mainly related to cultural differences. This narrative is favoured largely by the so-called ‘native’ population of the social housing estates, and by the media and politicians. The opening of the *Gemeindebau* in 2006 to the migrant population has become an issue of resentment in these sites. Austria had to comply with EU regulations regarding non-discrimination, according to which migrants had to be treated as citizens with all due rights including the rights to access to (social) housing. This has been interpreted by conservative segments of the population and the right-wing political forces as unjustly favouring persons and families with a migration background. Entitlements and the conditions and prerequisites of citizenship are a growing debate in Austria, but not only in Austria. The main line of reasoning of these debates is that only those who contributed to building the post-war welfare regimes must partake in it, and that entitlements have to be earned. Immigrants are framed as taking the benefits of a generous welfare regime unduly and as being treacherous and extremely skilful in using them. It is for this reason that the ‘intrusion’ of migrants to Viennese social housing estates is considered a more serious problem by the ‘native’ Austrian residents than the higher proportion of migrant population in other urban areas with a long tradition of migration (see Sessar, 2004). Although the city of Vienna has made large efforts to change its diversity policy from one where diversity is framed as deficit into one where diversity is framed as richness, the prevailing narrative within the housing estates is one of irreversible change, one of nostalgia for a ‘lost world’ and ‘bygone times’, when the *Gemeindebau* belonged only to the old ‘native’ Austrian residents. Belonging to the Austrian nation is not only justified through the possession of formal citizenship. The term Neo-Austrian (Neo-Österreicher) emblematically stands for the need to maintain the boundary between those who are legally the same as ‘the Austrians’ but different in other ways, ‘new’ therefore, who arrived after. The difference is politically instrumentalized in order to exclude some citizens from access to the resources of the welfare system and socially to justify the call for unconditional adaptation to ‘the Austrian way’ of living. Socially, this boundary maintenance is done both through strategies of temporal othering and cultural othering. Differences can also be perceived as supreme signs of superiority of one’s culture (‘kissing the hands of grandparents, or following husbands’ orders, are perceived as terrible gestures of submission’). Identities are constructed through practices and discourses of both temporal and cultural ‘othering’ that generate difference:

I am not interested at all in these traditions that might have been prevalent here in Europe, in Vienna, maybe 500 years ago! It is just backward! (local inhabitant, Kremmel & Pelikan, 2014a, p. 73)

In the social housing estate, the perceived superiority of one’s way of living has been shattered by the arrival of migrants. Living in the social housing estates has always been a source of pride and stability, where living in a world that is familiar remained an important bulwark against social descent. Feelings of irritation ema-

nate therefore from the sheer presence of the immigrants and their congregation in semi-public space, and the threat of their 'alien' ways of life taking over the old-Viennese style of living is often articulated as illustrated in the quote above. The usage of public spaces by migrants for purposes other than those established in Austria is experienced as the 'occupation of territory' and 'expulsion' of natives from these spaces (Hanak, 1996: 68).

Often it is women and children who become the visible markers of a certain culture. They are blamed for lack of proper conduct, or almost everything – for their physical appearance if they carry the veil, for the smell of the food they cook, for the garbage they do not collect, for their unruly and noisy children, and for their congregation with other women, for chitchatting in their incomprehensible languages and for their perceived idleness. The call for unconditional adaptation is very prominent ('why do they not learn first of all what's the mentality here and what are the rules?') and migrants have to abide by the rules and customs of the receiving country. There are grades of perceived differences among the migrants nevertheless, some migrants (i.e. the 'Jugoslaven') are thought to be more easily integrated as compared to, for example, the Turkish. This selective acceptance depends on how many different markers people carry and how these markers intersect with each other (language, religion, age, social status, lifestyle).

The third narrative was the 'culturalization of conflicts' narrative. This narrative argued that conflicts are framed along intercultural lines but when looked at more closely, they turn out to be a result of other markers (intergenerational, socioeconomic, etc.). This narrative is the one most favoured by professionals such as social and conflict workers. Conflicts due to noise, for example, although framed as intercultural, are not directly related to ethnic differences among residents, since they have been reported long before the opening of the *Gemeindebau* to the immigrants (see Hanak, 1996; Reppé & Reiter, 1997). Rather, issues related to civil engineering and urban planning, like the poor acoustic isolation of flats and the high population density within living quarters are known to be the main cause of such disturbances. But the current framing of the causes is often attributed to the culture-specific circumstances: too many people congregating in apartments, too many visitors, especially at the time of Ramadan or insufficient control and disciplining of children by migrant mothers.

The last narrative –the 'covert racism' narrative – argued that conflicts are framed around other markers (such as conduct in public spaces, noises, garbage and smells), but are actually due to subtle forms of racism. Articulated mainly by migrants themselves, this narrative insists that complaints about conflicts are ultimately fostered by racist sentiments and will therefore never be amenable to any kind of dialogue or a rational dispute mechanism. This last narrative is the one to which the professionals showed high resistance, because it left little space for them to act. Professionals in fact tended to call it a 'dead-lock argument'. Nevertheless, the narrative has legitimacy because, when it came to conflicts, migrants were often the ones complained about and almost never the ones complaining. Expression of unhappiness or complaints are thought to be more legitimate for the 'natives', who believe they are entitled to full membership, while migrants have to unconditionally accept the rules and adapt their conduct:

After all nobody invited them, so if they are unhappy they can leave! (local inhabitant, Kremmel & Pelikan, 2014a: 75-76).

Co-existing and different as these four narratives were, it is important to emphasize that they were neither frozen nor solid, but constantly constructed and deconstructed by inhabitants, researchers and professionals alike. The point of expanding on the different conflict narratives therefore is not to select one or the other, but to show first of all the complexity that action research and restorative praxis have to face in such contexts. Secondly, I find it illustrative of the tension between the *lifeworld* orientation and framing. In the following section, I focus on different conflict handling strategies applied by different professional actors in the research site. My intention is especially to show further how important these strategies are in relation to 'problem' framing.

Strategies of conflict handling

Both partner organizations in the action research in Vienna, *wohnpartner* and Bassena, followed a 'strategy of empowerment' for those in a disadvantaged position. The aim is to enable them to participate as fully as possible in the handling of conflicts or, more generally, to partake in the social life of the neighbourhood. In doing this, they both pay a lot of attention to migrants, their representation in various activities and the defence of their rights. There are nevertheless important differences between these organizations, which are worth paying attention to.

Before going into their detailed strategies (see Kremmel and Pelikan, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a), it is important to highlight that the way *wohnpartner* 'manages' the diversity in the *Gemeindebau* is through a focus on *rules of conduct* for living together as neighbours, and through avoidance of open talk regarding cultural differences or similarities. Creating open norm-clarification encounters is thus not a priority for the organization. Nothing substantial is assumed to bring people together, but common rules of conduct and procedures, do's and don'ts. Despite its seemingly minimalist attempt at providing a substantial definition of what *conviviality* means in a neighbourhood, this rule-focused and conduct-based procedural type of framing of what *conviviality* means in a city, is in my opinion a crucial one.

But let us delve more in-depth into the concrete strategies of conflict handling and see how *wohnpartner* does go about this task. The person who approaches *wohnpartner* with a conflict is usually referred to as a 'complainant'. This way of framing subjectivity conditions inevitably what takes place next. Being perceived as an institution with an authority expected to enforce the house rules and by framing conflicts as 'complaints', *wohnpartner* calls for a certain type of dialogue. On a basic level this dialogue gives the complaining party the possibility to launch a complaint and the other party to resist it, negotiate it, but always in a position of defence. Whenever a person calls on *wohnpartner* with a complaint about a neighbour, the person is asked to show up for a personal face-to-face interview. During the interview, the conflict workers 'take the person seriously' by listening carefully to his or her complaints. For the conflict workers taking the person seri-

ously means seeing what is behind the complaints expressed and bringing to the surface people's 'real needs and interests'. Parties are therefore asked to formulate concrete disturbances and irritations that affect their life and their well-being, instead of articulating abstract, general or ideological complaints:

We try to explain to the people that together we can tackle those concrete problems, while we cannot change other resident's nationality, or his place of birth or his religious or ethnic affiliation. (conflict worker, see Kremmel & Pelikan, 2014a: 50)

Especially, in complaints directed at migrants and their way of living as an expression of their 'particular nature' like 'it is these Turks and their habits that are unbearable!' (Kremmel & Pelikan, 2014a: 50), *wohnpartner's* strategy is that of *breaking down* the general accusations to arrive at naming the concrete disturbance and irritation. Parties are therefore asked to (re)formulate concrete disturbances and irritations that affect their life and their well-being. The conflict workers always make sure to give the message to the inhabitants that concrete problems can be tackled, while other resident's nationality, place of birth, or his religious and ethnic affiliations cannot be changed. And whenever the residents insist that their problem is the religion or nationality of the party they are complaining about, *wohnpartner* withdraws its support. As mentioned in the section above, at the same time the professionals resist what they call the 'dead-lock' arguments made especially by migrants who claim that conflicts are due to sheer (covert) racism.

Therefore, when stories are described to *wohnpartner*, certain (re)framing is urged and some articulations are refused (i.e., racist, anti-migrant, terrorist). The professionals therefore resist an unmediated account of the *lifeworld* by using instead strategies of (re)framing and putting boundaries to what can be articulated. Having understood this strategy, residents have in turn adapted to the rules of the game by 'learning the code' and most of them refrain from explicitly uttering insults against residents of non-Austrian origin. While aware of such 'politically correct' attitudes, the conflict workers still find this non-utterance of racist sentiments preferable, regardless of what the underlying feelings are. As mentioned above, *wohnpartner's* strategies focus more on respecting rules of civility and rules of conduct rather than on deep transformative changes in their residents.

Residents with a migration background figure very rarely as complainants but are almost always the party that is complained about. Often the migrants who are the target of a complaint by an 'old'-Austrian too readily declare that they understand what is expected of them, that they will change their conduct, and behave according to the demands of the other party (i.e., stop cooking the smelly food that disturbs the neighbour or stop celebrating their religious holidays). The conflict workers of *wohnpartner* feel urged to 'dig deeply' into the matter, first by checking how realistic such promises are and, second, by trying to understand what kind of fears might lie behind the readiness to comply. Both the 'corrective empowering' strategy with the migrants, and the 'educational emancipatory' strategy with the rest does not pass unnoticed and bothers some of the inhabitants. They perceived

these strategies as dedicated to and overwhelmingly protecting the migrants. The policy of paying attention to diversity and promoting diversity therefore potentially becomes a source of breeding more discontent: 'It has become too 'türkenlastig' – lopsided towards the Turkish people' (local inhabitant, Kremmel & Pelikan, 2014a: 75).

An altogether different approach of framing and viewing conflict is used by the community organization Bassena. Starting by challenging the position of impartiality, the social workers with Bassena claim an upfront engagement with differences in society which are due to structural conditions and openly interfere to balance social inequality. Instead of working on individual cases, they focus on the site as a collective. Once the residents are clear on a problem that bothers them, the community workers guide the residents *away from complaining*, or sharing their frustration and anger, towards an assessment of the resources which they all have at hand in order to change the situation, focusing on the potential of common and collective actions to bear effect on their lives and the spaces they inhabit. They pose concrete questions and ideas to openly influence the discussion, and when participants lack knowledge necessary for the implementation of concrete ideas, Bassena considers and actualizes the possibility to revert to external professional expertise, depending on the issue of concern.

The strategies of the Bassena go beyond a mediating role that tries to maintain 'social peace' or contain conflict. They are instead oriented towards a provocation of conflict to activate all residents, and do not focus particularly on migrants. Depending on the objective of the issue involved, they aim to create a face-to-face level of encounter between residents to expose their contradictions and eventually lead to collective actions. To illustrate this through an example we can refer to the 'carpet washing' activity. An activity that was highly important to the women of Turkish origin, 'carpet washing' was forbidden in the laundry rooms, due to complaints by the 'native' residents. As the women were struggling to put forward their argument and be heard in the discussions around this issue, Bassena supported them through various actions in the search for a solution, namely the installation of a separate laundry room where exclusively carpets should be washed. The difference between an individualized mediation approach to such a conflict as a one-to-one conflict between two different neighbours and a collective face-to-face action between all residents becomes interesting to ponder over. This constitutes a transformative type of action, where things such as distribution, recognition and participation are not simply affirmative or corrective, but attempt at transforming all the dynamics on the site.

After having mapped the site for conflicts and conflict transformation dynamics, for signs of active participation, for multiple narratives on identity and belonging, and for the partner organization's objectives and activities, the local researchers together with the partner organizations tried to understand what types of interventions and actions would be useful, complementary and feasible. In cooperation with Bassena the action researchers organized *capacity building workshops* in conflict transformation and *restorative circles workshops*. The other interventions in cooperation with *wohnpartner* have been mainly in the Women's Café, an ini-

tiative where a group of about fifty women of diverse cultural backgrounds regularly met for breakfast and other activities. More concretely, the researchers organized several *communication (and conflict awareness) workshops* where they attempted to unmake the boundaries between the different women and applied *restorative circles* that attempted to tackle conflicts that had taken place in this cafe. It is interesting to look at some of these collaborations more in-depth, as they illustrate further the importance of the framing and reframing strategies of the local actors.

For example, the importance of (re)framing strategies for *wohnpartner* became especially visible during a *restorative circle* held with some of the women at the Women's Café. The circle was a joined cooperation between *wohnpartner* and the action researchers (see Kremmel & Pelikan, 2014b, 2015a). The circle facilitator had experience with restorative circles and was external both to *wohnpartner* and to the research team. The approach of the circle facilitator was constructed as that of the 'professional ignorant', a stance articulated as follows:

I don't always need to understand people's decisions and opinions. Sometimes, they are based on facts that I am not aware of but that they know, because of their own lifeworld experiences. At the end of the day, they are the ones who have to follow things through and live with them, so what really matters, is that they make sense to themselves, and not to me. (circle facilitator, Kremmel & Pelikan, 2015a: 27)

This 'professional ignorance' attitude articulated by the restorative circle facilitator implied a non-interfering mode in content-related matters and a certain procedural tightness on the communication rules, and both are quite common stances in restorative meetings. *Providing context* (as opposed to content) means providing the means or tools that will induce others to speak for themselves, and the context in which they may be heard, whereas the conflict is said to belong to the parties. This approach, which is based on a self-regulating power of the circle and on the radical ownership and 'expertise' of the residents themselves, was largely at odds with *wohnpartner's* perceptions of the scope of intervention. It was contested by *wohnpartner* as failing to offer clear guidance and safety to the participants. In their eyes 'giving vent to xenophobic attitudes and feelings' (Kremmel & Pelikan, 2015a: 54) is against their policy guidelines, because of the conviction that 'once you open this valve, a torrent of xenophobia and racism' might overthrow the work done so far.

They were also against an unpredictable and, according to them, 'unsafe' process during which conflict 'unfolds' or is helped to unfold. But what *wohnpartner* perceives as unsafe might paradoxically even be safety valves. Simmel (1955) argued that without 'safety valves' that allow participants to 'blow off steam', social relations cannot endure. The same argument has also been made by Chantal Mouffe as promoting agonistic forms of engagement (see Miessen, 2011). Similar arguments have also been made repeatedly by Richard Sennett (see for example *The uses of disorder*, 2008). The perception of *wohnpartner* of the scope of participation in a circle comes closer to notions of emancipation, but also to 'conflict con-

tainment' (see Obholzer, 1997). It contains conflict by excluding certain themes, questions and affects (like xenophobia) from being openly articulated. The restorative circle focused instead on making participants acquainted with tools for dealing with these feelings (however xenophobic), giving them space by training their listening capacities, putting full trust in the capacity of all individuals to speak for themselves and to engage in non-violent relationships. Such an approach requires a lot of preparation time and its openness and unpredictability are difficult features for *wohnpartner* to handle. Arguably, for an outsider it is easier to articulate the role of 'professional ignorant', while the more embedded conflict workers might feel the burden of the day-after more heavily.

In the activities when the action researchers have been involved, they have focused on *norm-clarification* processes. The meetings at the Women's Café, for example, were encounters and events that both diminished the distance between different women, but also created a safe space (i.e., through sitting arrangements) that brought to light previously unarticulated conflicts. Boundary-making and unmaking therefore have to be understood as attempts and processes of norm-clarification that never end: the boundaries are not made once and all but are constantly shifting. The main difference with Bassena – and the similarity with *wohnpartner* – is that the action researchers explicitly focused on conflicts. The main difference from *wohnpartner* – and the similarity with Bassena – was their focus on rather collective or common conflicts which took place at the battlefield of cultural representation instead of individual conflicts.

Contrasting the work of *wohnpartner* further with the work done by the action researchers, we can see how the focus moves from rules of conduct to norm-clarification and common constitution of the *lifeworld*. The position of *wohnpartner* as establishing the house-rules, and monitoring the rules of behaviour pertaining to the obligations of a tenant can bring parties to an adversarial position, which will lead to feelings of defence and attack, when people are complainants or complained about. On the other hand, in the restorative intervention that took place on the sites, the lack of a complained about and a complainant and the lack of authority gives an advantage to bridge the adversarial positions. The restorative actions overall had objectives that went beyond 'promoting good neighbourhood', which can also come to stand rather for a 'manageable or pacified neighbourhood'. The activities promoted by the action researchers, on the other hand, opened the floor to more substantial elaborations of what constitutes a good neighbourhood, where people shared their views out of a pre-established or framed position and without a learned code.

Besides these traditional restorative techniques, an alternative tool used to democratize and multiply framing of the *lifeworld*, was the participatory filmmaking process done with the young people of migrant background in the *Gemeindebau*. Originally thought of as a counter-technique that can be used given the difficulty of engaging young people in communication workshops together with other inhabitants, this method showed to be a fruitful way of working with this group, and of expanding the purpose of the restorative process. The teenagers, by making their own film, refused to let the others define and frame them as marginal or disadvantaged. They constituted and defended the pride of place as identity

instead of acknowledging a high level of social conflict. The film has been shown in the *Gemeindebau*, thus making this self-framing visible to other residents, leading to fruitful public debates.

Conclusions

The action research methodology is able to explore complex social issues, while at the same time engendering social change. It was extremely valuable for us to conduct action research around issues of conflict, justice, and security in intercultural settings. In action research, theory is to be conceived as a medium for enabling critical perspectives on the everyday and for formulating alternative perspectives and ideas, and not just a form of producing scientific statements about the world (see Heron & Reason, 2001; Styhre et al., 2002). In our project, different social actors came together through various degree of involvement – ranging from consultation to close collaboration – in order to draw on each other's knowledge, frame and address common problems and generate mutual learning (Peters & Robinson, 1984). Conceived in a critical manner, action research aims not only at describing the *lifeworld* or improving the work of practitioners, but also at actively reframing social problems and assisting professionals to arrive at a critique of their social or work settings.

Because of its contextualized nature, knowledge generated from action research is cautious in its claims, sensitive to variations and open to reinterpretation in new contexts. Nevertheless, if enough details are provided, others may learn from it, and new theory can be generated in order to explain similar problems or issues in other contexts. The most useful insights which action researchers bring to scholarship often have to do with how they accounted for themselves (their positionality), how they inquired into an issue, or how they made sense of the interplay of contexts and interpretations. Zooming in to one of the four action research sites, the social housing estates of Vienna, I have given here a very partial account of how we have dealt with some of the issues we were investigating through an interplay of context and interpretation. I have chosen to articulate this account as an epistemological tension between the principle of *lifeworld* and the necessity and inevitability of framing.

The principle of *lifeworld*, which puts people's lived experiences above top-down or assumed social categories of interpretation which can 'colonize' the *lifeworld* is crucial in restorative justice. But as I argued in this article, it is not possible to think of *lifeworld* as a revealing and unmediated scene that unfolds itself before us, speaking for itself. All phenomena are understood and constituted through some kind of framing. These ways of framing subjectivities and phenomena are crucial because they lead to different actions and practices, with different objectives and results. As such, framing is an important medium for enabling critical perspectives on the everyday and for formulating alternative perspectives and ideas.

Throughout the research we saw how strategies of framing *lifeworld* are used by the different agents with different objectives and different effects. If the framing

is focused on the harm done, one might be steered towards reparation; if the framing is focused on the complaint, one might be steered towards a defensive attitude. At the same time, a focus on rules of conduct also provides a framing of what conviviality means in a city. We also came across several strategies of the social workers to frame or (re)frame conflicts, like 'breaking down' complaints or putting boundaries to what can be articulated, and of residents to follow or contest such framings. Likewise, if the framing focuses on the individual level, individual solutions are sought, whereas if the framing focuses on the collective level, collective solutions are sought. These seem like obvious insights, but the impact that such seemingly small differences have on practice, both in terms of process and in terms of outcome, can be huge.

The two notions nevertheless should nourish each other. In the context of restorative justice, only when we go back to the events themselves, back to the *lifeworld* or the world of the directly lived experience, do we start looking at social situations with different lenses from the legal ones. This enables a better understanding of what constitutes subjectivities, what drives their actions, and what kind of policies would best respond to acts and events. A notion of *lifeworld* that takes into account the social embeddedness of social actors in history, in political economy, or cultural imaginary sheds different light on issues of justice, systemic violence, or exclusion, that go beyond a legal definition of an act. Thus, there is a clear advantage of resisting already fixed and established positions through the notion of *lifeworld*, where one does not enter a dialogue as a 'victim' or 'offender', but through open-ended stories. The focus on the *lifeworld* thus enables both 'knowing more' and 'knowing differently'. A suggestion is made here to move beyond a naïve conception of the *lifeworld* towards a more 'political' conception, where we openly construct and deconstruct strategies of framing the *lifeworld*.

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