The We Amongst Ourselves Group in Preventing Extremism – in Cultures Interactive's European Fair Skills Project

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Cultures Interactive had begun with employing a module of self-awareness group work already in its Federal Model Project 'Fair Skills' (2011-13). At this time, the decision to do so was due to insights gained from own work experience – and from good practice research through interviewing numerous first-line practitioners from different European work areas of preventing violent extremism/ group hatred and/or of facilitating disengagement, exit and rehabilitation processes with individuals recruited by violent extremist/ terrorist organisations.[1] This research on the methods, procedures and approaches which are currently employed in the field had made it abundantly clear that so-called radicalisation towards violent extremism and group hatred as well as the more modest forms of resentment and anti-human rights attitudes are of a much less ideological nature than was generally assumed – throughout decades of interventions which mostly banked on preventive civic/ historic education and ideological discussion approaches (possibly also on cognitive behavioural training).

Much rather, from the point of view of first-line practitioners who were actually facing the young people from difficult to access target groups on a day to day basis, it became evident that violent extremism or group hatred first of all are issue of emotions, affects, and of 'personality'/ 'identity' – or of 'psychology', for want of a better word. First-line practitioners, rather than academic researchers, had drawn this conclusion early on from the abundance of their daily experience; since this experience had showed them that educational or cognitive training methods often had only little sustainable impact if at all any, especially with the more susceptible and difficult to engage young people.

[1] Cf. "RAN Derad Declaration of Good Practice –Principles of Sustainable Interventions in Disengagement and Rehabilitation (Deradicalisation) from Involvement in Violent Extremism and Group Hatred." On: http://cultures-interactive.de/de/fachartikel.html. Furthermore on this website: SB&HW 2012 ("Hate Crime Prevention and Deradicalisation…"), HW 2013 ("The Narrative Principle:…"), HW 2016 ("Good Practice in Preventing Violent Extremism/ Hate Crime,…")

Conversely, practitioners also realized that they were most effective in their work if they managed to address their young clients' issues of emotion/ affect, personality, identity – also issues of gender identity, since all personality and identity issues are highly gendered, i.e. thy are intertwined with deeply felt ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman and also because these gender issues always have a high emotional charge (cf. CI's womex.org).

As a result, this practice research – which was conducted before and more intensely during the build-up of the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) – came to formulate more broadly the principles and guidelines of good practice. To summarize the main conclusions which were drawn and laid down in a first edition of this ongoing work-in-progress, good practice in prevention, distancing and disengagement …

... has an overall focus on *emotional and social intelligence* (which are intrinsically interlaced) and on interactive *skills* – while those emotional intelligence capacities are most needed which pertain to experiences of conflict, anger, sadness, shame, and anxiety,

... depends, first of all, on personal *trust building* between clients and facilitators and among clients (in a group), as well as on the trust which the facilitators have in their methodical approach,

... banks on the individual motivation and *commitment* of each participant,

... is *voluntary* and rests on personal commitment, as it always aims at facilitating and deepening the participants "incremental buy-in" to the intervention during the course of the process – while clients may also be approached beforehand and encouraged by motivational interviews,

... requires that a *safe space* of *confidentiality* is provided which secures a maximum of trust building – and the opportunity of emotional and social experiences

... is *open-process* in its intervention logic, i.e. it does not follow a fixed curriculum or session plan,

... is therefore always *participatory*, *exploratory, self-directed,* i.e. maximally *peer-facilitated,* hence it works first and foremost with the issues and needs which the participants themselves bring up and articulate,

... includes creative self-expression, e.g. *youth-cultural* activities, since creative activities facilitate the sometimes demanding process of getting in touch with each other and expressing personal issues,

... follows a *narrative mode* of interaction, i.e. facilitates personal story-telling and co-narrative sharing between those who tell and those who actively and

empathetically listen and follow up on the story; hence, it focuses less on debate, discussion and (counter-) arguments,

... generally leads up to accounts from the clients' *actual life-world context, biography, family*, and personal *grievances*,

... is most attentive to *identity issues* and to issues of *gender identity*, power and violence/ victimization,

... does deal with *political and religious issues* and with social and political grievances, both real and perceived, while the main focus of the exchange remains on the personal and biographical implications of these issues,

... is essentially based on *face-to-face relationships* while media input (internet, videos) play a secondary role which may be of additional help,

... combines both *accepting/ supportive* and *challenging/ confrontational* elements of interaction, combining unconditional respect of the person with the readiness to confront opinions and behaviors in a clear way and conducive dosage of critique

The We Amongst Ourselves Group (WAOG) in the German Federal Model Project 'Fair Skills' (2011-13)

In light of these conclusions it is not surprising that a few practitioners in the field of preventing group hatred and violent extremism would increasingly turn toward less educational/ instructional and more open process and narrative approaches and thus experiment with including self-awareness oriented group settings into the prevention of violent extremism. For, given the particular dynamic of group processes, such methods naturally have a maximum effect on *emotional* and *social learning, require and develop* personal *identity, commitment and trust*, rely on a *safe space* of *confidentiality*, *are by nature participatory*, *exploratory, self-directed*, and mostly acts in the *narrative mode* of interaction. Open process self-awareness oriented group settings also tend to focus on clients' *actual life-world context, biography, family issues,* as they are also emphasizing *identity issues* and issues of *gender identity*, power and violence/ victimization. Moreover, in such group setting *political and religious issues* as well as *social and political grievances*, naturally come to the fore in their immediate personal contexts.

When including self-awareness group work in the Cultures Interactive approach of youth-cultural and human rights oriented prevention of violent extremism – and group

oriented enmity/ hatred – it also became evident how well the methods of creative and artistic work (Rap, Graffiti, Music production, Youtubing, Comics/ Anime etc.) go together with self-awareness group work and how much cross-fertilization occurs between creative and interactional group processes since both are basically activities of personal self-expression and self-confidence building.

Interestingly, Cultures Interactive had arrived at the decision of including open-process group work also from its direct work experience in what it had put up intuitively as so-called time-out areas. These time-out areas were set up at CI's large-scale two-day school interventions and they comprised and try to contain in small ad-hoc groups those young people who dropped out of – or had to be temporarily excluded from – the discussion, workshops and civic education modules or from the large-group school conferencing events. These young people were referred because they could not stand and cooperate with these modules and events, proceeded to disturb them, launched provocations, hate speech and/or outright neo-Nazi or right-wing extremist propaganda – and/or were just too impatient and instable personally to be and work in these settings. Evidently, in these small groups of mostly two or three persons one would not engage in any further civic education intervention or discussion. Rather, the exchange between the designated time-out practitioner and the young individuals would need to be more personal, narrative and problem focused – if at all any meaningful exchange could be realized in this ad-hoc setting; and of course, this exchange would need to be totally open-process and non-directional, since it had become evident that these young persons are not able or willing to follow an any more structured and thematically focused intervention.

Moreover, even with the smaller kinds of disturbance, frictions and less troublesome forms social tensions as they occur in any such social work settings, it had become ever more obvious in CI's field work, that such frictions/ tensions are not only a disturbance of the planned process – but always also a most rewarding subject matter for any civic/political education event and for any prevention of violent extremism. Because any such social frictions/ tensions or act of disturbance is by nature a civic and political issue which can and should be dealt with as such in an open and transparent fashion during the intervention. This became particularly obvious in the one-week training courses, which CI gave in the context of its Fair Skills model project, since in such

more-day settings the immediate dynamic of interactions and relationships between individuals in a group is even more intense and possibly enriching – and the tensions therein are, of course, even more disturbing and destructive for the process if they are not picked up on and worked with in a timely manner. Yet, in order to be able to fruitfully work with such issues of group dynamics a suitable settings need to be put in place – as for instance the setting of open-process self-awareness group work.

This is why, together with experts from the field of group-psychotherapy, CI developed a self-awareness group module which it calls the We Amongst Ourselves Group (WAOG) in order to give it a name which is not fraught by any unwelcome associations of mental health care and would also be immediately understandable by young people of different backgrounds. Yet, the WAOG essentially follows the principles of group self-awareness work – albeit in a carefully calibrated manner. Its methodology is thus based on practices which are more common in youth welfare services, mental health, counselling, and socio-therapeutic prison interventions – and was adapted specifically to the preventive civic education context of Cultures Interactive and its Fair Skills youth training courses.

To summarise the module's main objectives in a few statements, the WAOG intends to:

- sustainably stimulate the participants' social and emotional intelligence,
- build personality, resilience and identity – also gender identity
- support their capabilities to enter into personally meaningful relationships,
- empower the young people and strengthen their self-esteem/ awareness in view of enhancing their motivation and skills for engaging in constructive political participation and civic involvement
- and thus enhance resilience against affinities with affects and ideologies of anti-social group hatred.

Condensed into one core objective, the WAOG focuses on helping participants to become more able to trustfully share personal experiences and views with others – hence speak and narrate about themselves and their life-history and actual life-world environment in a personally committed fashion and listen to others respectfully and attentively. This main objective appeals to one of the most essential human capacities

and practices – which is the capacity to narrate, i.e. tell as a comprehensible story what has happened to oneself and how one has acted in these situations and occurrences.[2]

The key impact factors of the WAOG – the narrative mode and social group dynamic

It has been stated above that good practice in preventing violent extremism follows, inter alia, the principle of narrative interaction – which may be additionally enhanced by working in group settings. This statement (which has been concluded from extensive practitioner interviews and was laid down, inter alia, in the RAN Derad Declaration of Good Practice (cf. footnote 1) is based on the assumption that narrative (group) interaction have a maximum effect on emotional and social learning and spur identity and resilience development, personal commitment and trust – and therefore are most valuable for any pedagogical and preventive setting.

Why is this? What is the special effect of employing narrative interaction in open process settings of preventing violent extremism? And what is a narrative to begin with? Contrary to other uses of the term, 'narrative' in this context means the sharing of personal experiences about past incidence and (inter)actions which have been lived-through and/or committed firsthand by the narrating person.

(i) On the content level such narratives depict a string of human actions/ interactions and occurrences; they encompass characters who act and interact (within the depicted situations); these characters are understood to have individual intentions which are based on prior experiences; the told actions of the characters and the narrator her/himself entail concrete results (within the scope of the narrated story), and these results than trigger consecutive follow-up (inter)actions.

(ii) On the communication level, pertaining to the interaction between narrator and listener(s), a narrative presupposes a personal motivation and intention on the part of the

[2] Cf. "Good Practice in Preventing Violent Extremism/ Hate Crime, within the Radicalization Awareness Network – and media and gender approaches." On: http://cultures-interactive.de/de/fachartikel.html.

narrator and vis-à-vis the listener(s)/ interlocutor(s). These motivations are built and/or influenced by what the narrator has actually felt in the past moment when the original experience unfolded which s/he is now telling about in the present moment. The motivations of the narrative thus carry a certain emotional charge and are often inspired by a personal conflict. Without such emotional charge and/or conflict there is no motivation for telling anything – and there will thus be no narration. Hence, the emotional charge and/or personal conflict inspires the narrative vis-à-vis the listeners – and defines what is "the point" (punch line) of the narrative.[3]

Therefore, 'narratives' in this precise narratological understanding, given the implicit motivations and intentions, are in principle interactive processes.[4] This means that 'narratives' rely on being further developed and deepened through the listeners' reactions, comments and questions – be these perceived/ imagined or real reactions. These listeners' reactions/ questions may pertain to details of the told (inter)action(s) or to the intentions of involved characters, or they may touch upon the emotional charge which the narrative has for the narrator. In any event, these reactions/ questions contribute to forming the narrative in a co-narrative manner – which will, in turn, have an impact on the entire narrative process as such and on how the narrator proceeds further with this narrative.

Hence, the key impact factor of narration is that it draws from and works with personally lived-through experiences and (inter)actions of the narrator; and that narration functions as an interactive process between narrator and her/his co-narrative listeners. (In fact, this process is interactive both socially in view of the listeners/ interlocutors and mentally in view of the various different memories and associations in which the original experience is laid down in the narrators psyche – and which are often organized in quite disconnected, incoherent and detached ways before the process of narration puts some order to it.)

It therefore is a quite unfortunate circumstance within the field of preventing and/or countering violent extremism that the term 'narrative' is often used in ways which are

[3] Cf. David Herman, et al. (2007). Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory. London: Routledge.
[4] Lynne E. Angus & John McLeod (Hg.)(2004): "The Handbook of Narrative and Psychotherapy. Practice, Theory and Research." SAGE-Publications, International Educational and Professional Publisher, Thousand Oaks, London, New Dehli.

lacking precision. Mostly the term refers to 'world view', 'ideology', 'grand history tale' etc., which is entirely different from the narratological concept of 'narrative', meaning the verbal account and co-narrative sharing of a first-hand lived-through experience. This linguistic circumstance may at times be quite misleading for our methodological and conceptual clarifications as well as for our actual field work.[5]

But why is this distinction so important? Why should narrative interaction have such a positive impact to begin with, in view of emotional/social learning, enhancement of personal development – and of prompting significant personal change?

To answer this question we need to look at the key psychological mechanism which is at work in human narration: While we actively recount the experiences and interactions which we have gone through at some definite time and place in the past, we actually remember and, even more, mentally revisit and emotionally re-live these past experiences/ interactions to a certain extent in the actual presence, almost as if we were going through them again in the very moment of narrating about them. We do so because without revisiting and re-living these experiences in our imagination we would not be able to give a vivid narrative account of them to those who listen to us. We would thus not be able to attract listeners/ interlocutors and pursue our narrative motivation/ intention vis-à-vis these listeners. In turn, providing a vivid narrative is also a necessary precondition for the listeners, on their part, to be able to personally imagine what we tell as our experience and be able to relate to it personally. (Complementarily, the listeners generally comprehend our told experience by associating those of their own lived-through experiences which resemble the ones we tell).

Now, while we thus revisit and re-live an experience through narrating it to others, we effectively 'come to terms' with it – with the help of these others. This we do by retroactively modifying, further developing and effectively changing our subjective experience/ memory of what has been the factual occurrence/ interaction in the past.

[5] Associated with this misleading usage of the term 'narrative' are some further conceptual intricacies. For instance, so-called "extremist narratives" usually lack genuine narrative quality; that is, they rarely convey much first-hand experience. In fact, violent extremists instinctively avoid narratives proper, preferring to engage in argument and debate – or else sidestepping personal narrative by anecdotes, parables/ fables, strategically designed tales (cf. HW, 2015: "Confronting the counter-narrative ideology. Embedded face-to-face prevention – and youth (media) work". On: http://cultures-interactive.de/de/fachartikel.html).

For, in each instance in which we revisit an experience by telling it to others in a narrative fashion, we do so at a different time, in a different contextual and personal situation and most likely with different listeners/ interlocutors. As said above, these interlocutors will co-narratively shape and mold our account of the original experience in that they give reactions and/or ask questions – be this non-verbally, silently or more loudly, cognitively and/or emotionally. Hence, each moment of narrating an experience leaves its specific traces with the narrative; and the string of incidents in which we tell this experience results in a process of ongoing modification and change. This is why we never really tell an experience in exactly the same way as we did earlier. Rather our narration changes and develops over time.

Moreover, and most importantly: Not only does the narrative as such change over time, but the very meaning and significance may change which the original experience has for us personally. Such changes may be miniscule or grand, depending on the actual path which the narrative exchange went, but they always occur – and they have a bearing on how the experience is mentally represented in his/her psyche.
Hence, narrating an experience may change the impact which an experience has on our identity, self-awareness, and everyday life conduct. This may also entail that certain experiences which hold a "spell" on us – and/or have a psycho-traumatic impact – may lose this spell. In fact, making possible such changes and modifications in the realm of our key biographical experiences is – knowingly or not – our basic motivation for sharing them and for creating narratives about them to begin with. The wish to modify, form/ change, come to terms with and personally own our past experiences (hence, mentally integrating them) – both the unsettling experiences and the delightful ones – is a very basic human need and motivation.

In view of those young people for whom such key experiences are also the root causes for being in a violent extremist group, this means that a narrative process may render them more able to leave these groups and free themselves form any such (self)destructive affiliation. This is why psychotherapists call this process a "working through" of the experiences and emphasize that this is done in a (co-)narrative way, embedded in a stable setting of interpersonal (therapeutic) interaction.

Here it is worthwhile to mention that these general observations about human narration are empirically proven by the interdisciplinary field of scientific narratology in areas as developmental psychology, psychotherapy, biography studies and social research, inter alia. These academic areas have collected much evidence indicating that human development and narration are closely interlaced – and that there is a healing effect of narration which makes narration a prime impact factor of mental health care and personal counselling (cf. footnote 4). In fact, narratology convincingly claims that the very essence of being human (and becoming human in early infant development) goes back to the processes of narrating what has been experiences – and that human beings are best understood as *homo narrans*, rather than as *homo sapiens*.[6]

Narrative – the opposite of debates and arguments

All the more important it is in view of our efforts of preventing violent extremism and facilitating exit processes to put the methodology of our preventive intervention practices onto a narratological basis. For the above strongly suggests that the success of our work – attempting to facilitate profound personal change – depends on whether we are able to set off a (co-)narrative process in our interaction with this client group – and whether we are able to gage our facilitating interventions in ways which effectively enhances social/ emotional learning, self-awareness, personal resilience and identity development. In particular our specific techniques of facilitation seem to be of paramount importance here. As was stated earlier, the impact which a narrative/ co-narrative process has on a client is highly dependent on how we as listeners/ interlocutors react, comment, and ask questions about the personal account given to us and how we thus shape the further unfolding of a – life-long – narrative process.

Here it needs to be mentioned upfront what the main practical (and sometimes also political) challenge will be when looking into the actual field of practices and interventions designed to prevent violent extremism (PVE) – and of civic education in particular, which is often intuitively employed in settings of PVE (since extremism at

[6] Cf. "Psychotrauma, Narration in the Media, and the Literary Public – and the Difficulties of Becoming Interdisciplinary. In: Narratology Beyond Literary Criticism. (Narratologia 6) Hg. von Jan-Christoph Meister. Berlin: De Gruyter (2005a), S. 239-264. On: http://www.weilnboeck.entredeux.de/downloads/hw_2005a.pdf.

first glance seems to be calling for education about citizenship, democracy and human rights). Now, civic and/or historic education tends to employ cognitive and argumentative methods. It makes an effort to create debates and discussions – and these debates usually focus on ideological, political and/or religious or historical issues in the service of which (counter-)arguments are levelled. Plus, the educational staff which is usually called upon to deliver civic education tends to come from areas of teaching and instruction rather than youth work and counselling (or else they come from areas of political activism which may create challenges of a similar and even more sever kind).

However, these rather cognitive traditions of teaching, civic education and debating/ discussing/ arguing may well put the effectiveness of the intervention at risk, since these approaches are, in many respects, the very opposite of narrative interaction and co-narrative processes, which are less cognitive but rather are of an emotional, personal, and biographical nature. For instance, debates, discussions and the leveling of arguments generally aim at a struggle between (political) opponents. In contrast, (co-)narrative exchange relies on trust and relationship building. Moreover, on the level of debating and arguments it is generally assumed that there is a right and wrong or at least that there are more or less valid arguments. In contrast, in narrative exchange nobody can ever be wronged – since one cannot and should not argue with a (personal) narrative; nor can one counter a narrative as one usually does with arguments. Since the process of co-narrative exchange does not aim for establishing the superior validity of a particular argument – but rather works on achieving a maximum of personal authenticity in sharing experiences.

The particular challenge in this is: While both debating arguments and sharing/ exchanging narratives are valuable and necessary factors for building resilient societies, one aught not confuse these two quite different modes of interaction – and always employ them in their appropriate settings and under suitable circumstance. For instance, in situations of high polarization and emotional escalation – and with persons who are in states of being highly polarized – any further debating of arguments is fruitless and counterproductive; since debating in such circumstances doesn't result in constructive reasoning about any specific action to take in view of any concrete societal challenge/ conflict. Quite on the contrary, in such situations debating only seems to enhance polarization (and violent radicalization). Most certainly, (young) people who are

personally involved in milieus of violent extremism and/or group hatred tend to be widely resistant to arguments – and their resistance is all the stronger the more they are personally entangled in these milieus. Here debates and discussions are not the most suitable intervention – which is why it has been experienced countless times that arguing with polarized and/or extremist individuals doesn't lead anywhere.

On the other hand, civic education as a widely established practice field of educational interventions on behalf of safeguarding democratic principles has found it difficult to let go of arguments, discussions and debates and give way to alternative methods as open-process narrative exchange. These alternative approaches are more common practice in fields of youth work, mentoring, counselling and mental health care – which brings us to yet another challenge.

Frictions between mental health care and social work

It is important to note in respects to the practical employment of the method in the field: As helpful and effective it has proven, and as much sense as it makes from the very outset, to import (co-)narrative practices from youth work, counselling and mental health care and integrate them into settings of preventing violent extremism, in institutional respects one needs to reckon with some level of resistance sometimes even animosities. Such resistance/ animosities has often been found to divide the professional fields of social work and mental health care – and even more the fields of education/ civic education/ political activism and mental health care. Although all these fields are dedicated to advancing human rights awareness and civil society, safeguarding young vulnerable people and in particular to reducing risks of violent extremism and group hatred, there seems to be a history of misunderstandings and animosities which effectively hinders these professional fields to more fruitfully work together.

Hence, when this kind of group work was first introduced in the field of countering/ preventing violent extremism and disengagement from extremist groups – and still to this day – those colleagues who work in the field of civic education (or behavioural training) were surprised and tended to doubt if something like this would be feasible in working with this target group – which is generally understood to consist of difficult to

reach/ engage young people. (Some colleagues even suggested that there is a problematic lack of mandate to employ such methods.) But the actual experience quickly showed: The young people intuitively make full use of this open group situation and they engage in intensive and sometimes rather unreserved manner – in particular those among them deemed "difficult to reach".

This hesitance and the resistance/ animosities between the two different fields may or may not stem from the fact that during the high times of the student revolution and extra-parliamentary opposition in Western countries in the 1970s – which were times of quite intense radicalization indeed as well as of leftwing and rightwing terrorism in Germany and Europe[7] – mental health care was perceived by social activists as an actor of "the establishment" and "the system" trying to cure symptoms where some claimed a more fundamental revolutionary change should be brought forward instead. Or else this may have to do with the fact that today, as always, social work receives much less societal recognition and offers less remuneration than mental health practice (or higher education) which enjoys a reputation comparable with medical practitioners – while there is some evidence that social work is as demanding and skillful and in some respect might even be more difficult to practice than mental health care or higher education.

Another factor of resistance sometimes seems to play a role when psychology and/or psychotherapy are brought up as a potential resource, namely people's quite understandable fears of being psychologized or even pathologized – rather than cooperated with. Colleagues often simply feared to be disempowered by an actor or field of expertise which requests or is assumed to have a position of exclusionary knowledge and authority on issues of the human psyche. Plus, some more dogmatic, sometimes even arrogant approaches to psychoanalysis which were launched in the past may have additionally fueled these anxieties – which are easily triggered anyhow since as psychological beings we all depend on our defense and denial mechanisms in order to be able to cope with daily life.

[7] While we are generally aware of the Red Army Fraction (RAF) terrorism the right-wing terrorism of that time (as in the 1980 Munich October-Fest bombing) has been subdued and dissimulated by authorities up to this very day, so that hardly any press coverage and public awareness could develop at the time (cf. HW (2012) "The German invention of leftwing extremism – the importance of party-political narratives for radicalisation awareness. In: The Challenge Hate Crime project, Belfast/ Northern Ireland." On: http://www.weilnboeck.entredeux.de/downloads/HW_Left-Extr_engl.pdf)

So whenever these issues come up in the institutional reality of national prevent programs and whenever they undermine organizations in establishing inter-agency work teams, the underlying sensitivities need to be addressed and it needs to be made clear

- that integrating elements from mental health care, like for instance psychotherapeutic self-awareness group work or psycho-trauma interventions, is not and should never be about pathologizing or even only diagnosing individuals (and potentially labeling and stigmatizing them); rather integrating elements from mental health care practices into targeted prevention settings means to benefit methodologically from the skills and expertise which are abundant in this field – and thus render the intervention more effective,
- that measures of preventing violent extremism cannot and don't intend to claim being interventions of psychotherapy just because they use some methodological elements from this area,
- that for these reasons the intervention should not be publically referred to with terms which associate psychotherapy – which is why CI refers to its open process self-awareness group work using the unassuming term 'We Amongst Ourselves Group'.

The procedures and basic rules of the We Amongst Ourselves Group (WAOG)

Given that the WAOG is situated methodologically and institutionally between the field of prevention of violent extremism/ group hatred on the one hand and the field of counselling, youth mentorship and mental health care (forensic psychotherapy), what are its basic procedures and ground rules of operation?

In practice, the eight to ten participants of a several day Fair Skills (FS) youth cultural peer training event (three times one week in the course of half year) come together once a day for an hour (or an hour and a half) in addition to the youth cultural workshops and civic education modules which form the FS approach. There the young people sit in a circle which is provided by one or two facilitators and – without any predefined topics – may freely talk about diverse issues, experiences and occurrences from their individual lifeworld environment and/or about observations which concern the actual training week which they are currently participating in as a group. Hence, the group's get-

together is entirely open-process and widely self-directed – as it is in a self-awareness group.

The facilitator of the WAOG – or ideally a co-facilitating team of two facilitators – may be trained in psychotherapeutic group work or have otherwise experience in and motivation for practice group work. In any event, in the Fair Skills setting, which, as has already been emphasized above, is not designed nor labelled as mental health care intervention in the first place, the facilitator(s) main role is to assure that the group process gets under way – as an interpersonal and predominantly narrative exchange (lesser so as discussion of opinions) – and that it is both dynamic and stable and, most importantly, also inclusive with regard both to the participants and to the topics/ issues which may emerge and be dealt with during the interaction. This means that the facilitator(s) strive to assure (1) that the exchange does not get stuck in opinionated, theoretical/ abstract or ideological debates but works on making emerge and facilitating the sharing of the participants' personal experiences and observations (beyond and behind of opinions/ theories/ debates), (2) that no topic which comes up is neglected, underestimated or subdued, (3) and that all participants are respected and equally included into the exchange. This responsibility for facilitating and containing the narrative process requires constant attention and may be quite challenging at times. It thus makes all the more sense that the facilitator(s) of this open-process intervention do not have session plans or pre-defined topics to be pursued – and are mainly in charge of taking care of the process as such.

Hence, only if needed, may the facilitator(s) assist in getting started, possibly identifying (latent) topics for exchange (usually going back to issue that emerged during the ongoing training workshops), or, if needed, organising the turn taking and the listening of the group members who want to share/ hear experiences and views. Sometimes the facilitator(s) may also give short summaries of what has been expressed in the group (rather than comments or interpretations) so that predominant themes of the group exchange become more clearly graspable and may trigger even more narrative input from other participants. They thus may also support the organic built-up of a group memory, containing the significant topics which are co-owned by the members due to what came up in the group. Or else the facilitator(s) simply ask (narrative) questions in order to help clarify what has been told and render the accounts of shared

experiences more detailed and rich. The group facilitator(s) thus takes care that the process is in flow and that the basic rules of the We Amongst Ourselves Group are followed (which have been worked out, agreed upon, and laid down in the intake procedure with the participants and in the first or second session of the group). Apart from this, the space of the group belongs solely to the participants – and to what they want to share with the others from their personal observations or subjective views in reference both to experiences during the actual training and to their specific life-world context and biography.

In certain situations this may also entail that the facilitator(s) work on perceiving, identifying and mitigating group dynamic hindrances which may block the process of free exchange. These are usually caused by latent conflicts or unarticulated trust issues between the participants, sometimes by impulses of taking control and wielding power, or else such hindrances pertain to yet unnoticed risks and flaws of the actual work setting (or its immediate institutional context) which need to be addressed and resolved. Otherwise the facilitator(s) may have to recognize and take care of special sensitivities and needs of individual participants which may require additional support through other interventions, delivered by other colleagues to whom they then may be referred (as for instance psycho-trauma therapy or family assistance).

Aside of such specific circumstances, the most important basic rules of this kind of group work usually encompass the following – and these rules, as was said above, are not imposed by facilitators but worked out, agreed upon, and laid down in the intake procedure for the participants and in the first or second session of the group. These basic rules of WAOG group work are:

In a word, the group facilitator(s) take care that the basic rules of the We Amongst Ourselves Group are observed: Everyone is an equally entitled part of the group and has equal rights. Everything may be said/ shared, nothing must be shared. Preferably only one person talks at a time. Assurance of mutual respect and protection of every participant are an obligatory task of the group as a whole. Also keeping up the dynamic flow of the group and securing a sense of spending a worthwhile time together is a common responsibility of each and every member. During group process everyone may take a break anytime if necessary. The facilitators may be called upon for individual

talks and assistance outside of the group if this is felt needed; the content of which is then fed back to the group as much as is deemed adequate by the individual (also in case of referral into other interventions). The exchange in the group is handled confidentially. However, since any such group is and should not be a secret society, participants may share the general themes, procedures and occurrences with those outside the group in adequate ways (also to prevent anxieties and estrangement in the group's outer context). As a matter of course, nothing is shared which could possibly be attributed to individual participants.

Interestingly, whenever one asks a group of young people in such setting as the Fair Skills peer training how they want to deal with each other and which ground rules they would want to be in place during the commonly spent time, approximately this set of rules (respect, equal rights, self-determination, protection/ confidentiality) emerges from the process – regardless of whether or how much some of the group are affiliated with or vulnerable to violent extremist contexts.

How to start and facilitate narrative group work?

Being used to lesson plans and curricula and usually being faced with an instructor who leads participants through the plan, the members of a Wo-Amongst-Ourselves Group first need to be informed in a clear way how this kind of group works. It needs to be made understood that the WAOG does not have a session plan or curriculum – and that it rather is an open space that belongs solely to the participants who may negotiate how the time is spent and is exchanged there. The next step may then be to work on commonly defining what basic rules should apply in the group and how these rules will be secured in the process – unless this has already been done by the wider Fair Skills training setting.

Hence the opening of such group could for instance be phrased as follows: "Here in this group, one hour a day, you can say and share everything you like. This may be about issues which were touched upon and/or discussed earlier in the other Fair Skills modules, or it may be about your own life outside of this training or any other topic that may come to mind with you right then in the moment. I/we as facilitator(s) and/or the

other group participants will gladly listen to anything which is brought in." One may then add: "Also you can ask any questions to me/us (facilitators) – and/or the other group participants. I/we or the others will do the same." However, one may then also explicitly add: "Yet, you don't have to share anything which you don't want to share. And you don't have to answer to questions which you don't want to answer. That's okay – you just let us know". For, here in this group "everything is voluntary. And you are responsible to decide what you want or don't want to say or ask." In this instance it has proven helpful to also add: "Moreover, you are, of course, responsible for yourself also in all other respects – for instance, you should do everything so that you feel well in the group. I/We facilitators (and the group) will help you doing this"; and also give the following hint: "If you feel bored, then this is most often because you sort of 'forgot to ask a question' (which keeps you busy internally), and if you feel scared it is because you forgot to ask for help. But we will help each other in learning all this better in the course of the process". So while we help as much as possible you should not forget that "you should also take care of yourself actively, i.e. make this experience interesting and beneficial for you."

What goes on in the WAOG groups?

As to the issues and topics which are typically exchanged in the We Amongst Ourselves Groups, such group processes frequently start around themes from everyday life and current peer contexts of the participants, e.g. as talk about experiences with friends and/or in school – also about the participant's leisure and youth culture activities. This exchange may, on the one hand, deal with conflicts, also experiences of disappointment by friends, sometimes even betrayal. This may include experiences of polarisation and violence between groups of young people. On the other hand, instances of loyalty, memories of helping each other out and of organizing something together will often become the topic of the conversation – also activities that "bring fun into life" and are experienced as precious and worthwhile to engage in. Such lines of self-empowering talk often complements the thematic lines that focus on problematic issues and personal challenges.

Usually at a later stage, but sometimes without any further ado, the group talk moves away from the participants' everyday life and peer contexts and goes into the area of family life and biographical background. Here conflicts within the families, tensions with parents and siblings, sometimes also issues of abuse/ violence, reference to time spent in children's homes, paediatric/ youth psychiatry, issues with delinquency and correctional measures, juvenile detention etc. may play a role – depending the composition of the group. Under less entangled circumstances family may appear as a resource and participants may share how such family resources come to bear.
For instance, in a session involving participants from more disintegrated milieus (of a group that incidentally turned out to be all male), experiences were exchanged about how quickly one can get entangled with the Los Banditos or the Hells Angels, how the drug mafia from East Europe operates around them and tries to get them hooked and in which places and situations one has to watch out for right-wing bullies. In other sessions someone may directly recount how he or she used to be right-wing extremist at one point and how that had come about; or instances and experiences may be shared that raise an exchange about what it means to "be a Muslim", to "have honour" and to have to act by it. But even if none of these more pronounced issues come up which directly pertain to the prevention of violent extremism.

In other groups and sessions participants just want to "chill out" together and chat. Here, the talk frequently involves films and songs that the participants watch or listen to and what they like about them; the group might then also talk about what one should watch together in the evening of the training day. However, this talk about songs and films may at times delve into challenging personal issues and dramatic experiences, given the songs'/films' topics. Or else the group talk rests with and may intensely engage in issues around the actual training event and the social life around the modules.

Hence, in the We Amongst Ourselves Group the immediate lifeworld of the participants is dealt with. Occurrences and experiences get addressed here which usually remain unexpressed in the civic education modules and which often also don't surface in the youth cultural workshops. Furthermore, it becomes palpable, how futile it often is to teach modules on certain civic education issues, while not at the same time also working with the actual life-experiences of the involved young people in a narrative and open process setting.

Moreover, general experience shows that the classic issues of civic education usually surface by themselves anyway at some point of the narrative group work – and then come with a maximum of personal involvement and commitment. That is, personal topics around dealing with one's family, friends and school mates, handling the conflicts and power-struggles in these social contexts, connecting to the opposite sex, facing general homophobia/ sexism – all such life world issues are immensely relevant for civic education and for preventing violent extremism. But these personal issues need to be on the table first; and they need to emerge in a voluntary and intrinsically motivated process – upon which on may then build personal commitment to engaging in reflections about citizenship and civic responsibility.

From there the transfer to the civic/ political education modules of Fair Skills may be pretty seamless. Plus, these modules' impact will then be stronger and more sustainable since civic education in the context of the We-group really is *personal-civic education* or as *identity/ citizenship building* along the capacity repertoire of personal soft skills. The first of Fair Skills' three main elements – the youth-cultural workshops (rap, graffiti, singer songwriter, cartoon) – contributes to and enhances both other elements. For youth-cultural self-expression always contains personal lifeworld-narratives - as it also almost always seeks to lay out a political and/or civic perspective of the personal experiences.

The WAOG in the context of the European Fair Skills Project in Central and Eastern Europe

In the initial phases of the project the EFS team was very cautious with introducing the We Amongst Ourselves Group too fast and too early, because already the other elements – the youth cultural workshops, the Train-the-Trainer and the LocalDerad seminars – seemed quite complex and challenging for the local coordinators and their regional stakeholders and more assistance than expected was needed to get them implement in a high quality manner. Also the original We Amongst Ourselves Group in the German model project area was held by a person trained in (psychotherapeutic) group-work. As a consequence the feeling in the project team (erroneously or not) was

that it could be difficult to find local practitioners trained in group-work and readily available to engage in such project.

The EFS team has therefore chosen a more careful approach – postponing the input on how to do the WAOG. Rather, and as preparation for any actual WAOG group work it was decided to develop and deliver targeted workshop modules on “narrative dialogue” in general, focusing on the question of how to spur and maintain a narrative level of interpersonal exchange with participants and interlocutors – also in other and less controlled settings/ situations than is the case in a clearly delineated group work setting. These workshop modules on narrative and group intervention methodology were delivered in the LocalDerad trainings and in the “Exit to Enter” disengagement methodology workshops (in cooperation with project partner Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Federal Association of Exit Practitioners).

Issues of narratology – and some practical How-to recommendations on facilitating narrative dialogue

The “narrative interaction” workshop within LocalDerad focuses both on some fundamental aspects of scientific narratology (depicted as simple as possible) and on practical recommendations as to how to facilitate narrative dialogue:

For instance, one of the fundamental issues to be conveyed – in addition to the above mentioned basic linguistic and psychological difference between argumentation/ reasoning and narrating personal experience – was the “the healing effect of narration” which always also entails a preventive effect, as any such “healing” would naturally also have a positive impact on person’s resilience building. Hence, the workshop emphasized on creating an understanding about the fact that if a person narrates about a past personal experience she or he will always mentally re-live/ re-experience the original (inter-)actional scene and in so doing activate similar emotional charges and identity investments. Also it was made understood that if narration is done in a group

setting with more than one listerner – so-called co-narrators – the process will be intensified in terms of narrative detail and emotional charge.

Furthermore, it was explained how this kind of narrative re-living of a past experience through giving a personal account about it may provide an opportunity to individually "work though" (together with the listeners) this very experience. This means that any experience of a threatening, conflictive or even traumatic nature may, in the very process of recounting it, be moderated and alleviated emotionally. In so doing such threatening/ conflictive experience will also be prevented from turning into fear and aggression – and eventually fuel chronic attitudes of resentment, hatred and possibly extremism – which regularly happens when opportunities for narrative work-through are not available. This is why narrative (group) interaction is a key principle of good practice in preventing group hatred and violent extremism – and is sometimes more important than ideological debate and political/ historic education. Ideally such narrative process occurs in several instances of narrating, over a continuum of time, and possibly with different interlocutors/ co-narrators.

Hence, a process of (co-)narration may dissolve any psychological/ emotional "spell" which is mentally attached to the experience at hand. It may be particularly effective and important with any experiences and (inter-)actions which had already escalated into hatred and violence, both suffered and perpetrated, since such experiences and (inter-)actions have a certain background in the person's biographically built mental structure; and if this background remains widely unconscious (inter-)actions of hatred and violence are likely to be acted out even more and eventually perpetuated. All the more important it is to facilitate a process in which such experiences may be articulated and mentally developed by way of personal narrative within a safe enough space of an agreed on intervention setting.

This social and mental mechanism of narratively working-through individual experiences is the reason why narrative interaction supports personal development, builds identity and creates resilience also against group hatred and other social challenges – as it may also facilitate personal change which is important in view of exit/ disengagement interventions.

With regard to its practical recommendations and exercises the workshop provides assistance as to how a "narrative dialogue technique" strategy can be set in motion and which ways of addressing and engaging participants may be used. For instance, youth workers are trained to follow a line of 'how' and 'what'-questions as opposed to 'why'-questions. From this not so easy to practice base line of "Rather not ask why – better ask how and what!" the workshop proceeds to provide help in how to ask for accounts of significant situations, occurrences/ (inter-)actions (rather than thoughts or opinions) which may then spur a narrative dialogue in a one-on-one interaction or in a group of attendants. Here appropriate trigger questions may for example be: How was the situation? What happened first? Where did this go then? Where were you in this? How did it feel like when … ? What did you think when … ? What other, similar, life situation does this remind you of (or any other participant of the group) which you had experienced in another context? And again: Can you tell me exactly how this situation occurred? In so doing it also is made understood how and why questions about details, times, locations, reasons, if they come in too early or are too many may reduce the quality of the intervention. Hence, practical strategies and solutions are suggested about how to ask questions which support a narrative process and avoid premature discussions or abstract debate which often also serve the defensive function of holding back pertinent personal experience from being shared (while such experience can then be the proper basis for an argument which may be levelled in a debate – and will then be all the more valid and well-founded as an experience-based argument).

The EFS team was initially quite surprised about how effective and well received these workshop modules on "narrative dialogue" and "narrative questioning technique" were among participants – and how much they seemed to be welcomed as veritable solutions to existing challenges of communication and intervention with young people in youth work. The feedback reports from the Slovakian group, for instance, noted: "The second important topic … that also gained an exceptionally positive feedback among Slovak participants, was the Narrative Approach, presented by colleagues of Cultures Interactive". … "Session on Narrative Approach turned out to be one of the most helpful methods for youth workers interacting with young people." Also in reference to the Banská Bystrica training: "Similarly, as during the previous event, the Narrative Approach had the strongest response among participants, being the systematically elaborated method that they intuitively used but had not had a chance to analyze and

discuss before." Summarizing the feedback which Slovak trainers gave, the report say: "Apart from the element of youth cultures and different ways of using youth cultures in order to deliver civic education do young people, the Narrative Approach (presenting the principles in which also the CI We Amongst Ourselves Group work is done, H.W.), was many times mentioned as one of the biggest benefits of the EFS training methodology." … Similarly, the feedback from another, broader group of Slovak youth and social workers held: "… as in case of the previously mentioned group of trainers, also within the broader group of youth and social workers the biggest success and interest had the lecture about the Narrative Approach, being the most helpful and important tool in their every-day work."

In retrospect the EFS team realized that an unforeseen advantage had emerged from postponing the actual WOAG group work – and first developing and delivering targeted workshop modules on "narrative dialogue" for various settings and situations. For, by stating that the Narrative Approach was "the most helpful and important tool in their every-day work" the local trainers and youth workers also indicated that the narrative dialogue techniques, aside of being an important element of the Fair Skills youth work methodology, are also helpful in many "every-day" situations of interaction in issues of group hatred and violent extremism. Hence, the impact of the workshop modules on "narrative dialogue" was much wider than just pertaining to implementing an WAOG. Also the principle function and importance of "narrative interaction" became evident not only for preventive youth work but also for situations of debate or for stakeholder communication more broadly.

From there, the CI team also realized another unforeseen positive circumstance: The local EFS partners were much more predisposed to practicing narrative group work along the lines of the WAOG format than CI had originally expected. In fact, in two EFS countries the cooperating youth workers were already practicing some forms of feedback rounds or mediation circles with young people (the methods of which came from general youth work or restorative justice practices). In fact, the colleagues of one partner's roundtable had intuitively decided to facilitated the part of the roundtable interaction accordingly as a "group circle" following a principle of "open interactive group-work" which they had adopted from mediation and restorative justice practice. Hence, the conditions were set to look at the WAOG method and adapt it to the already

existing practices by closely looking at whether and how strategies of narrative dialogue building are already in place or could be included and enhanced in their group work.