

ALTERNATIVE

Restorative justice approaches to conflicts in intercultural settings

Action and research in a nutshell

This **BRIEF FOR ACTION RESEARCHERS** is based on the findings of the FP7 Project **ALTERNATIVE (02/2012-01/2016)**, which looked into the possible use of restorative justice approaches when dealing with conflicts in intercultural settings. The project focused on theoretical research as well as action research with regard to social housing conflicts in **Austria**, a village with minorities in **Hungary**, and ethnic/ societal/ political conflicts in **Serbia and Northern Ireland**.

PROJECT ALTERNATIVE Developing alternative understandings of security and justice through restorative justice approaches in intercultural settings within democratic societies

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CONCEPTS IN THE ALTERNATIVE ACTION RESEARCH

The interaction between theory and practice reveals that often concepts are understood and defined through particular 'lenses', those of assumptions, stereotypes, biases and prejudices.

Conflict
Intercultural settings
Restorative justice
Security
Justice
Community
Identity
Civil society

WHAT CHARACTERISES 'INTERCULTURAL CONFLICTS'?

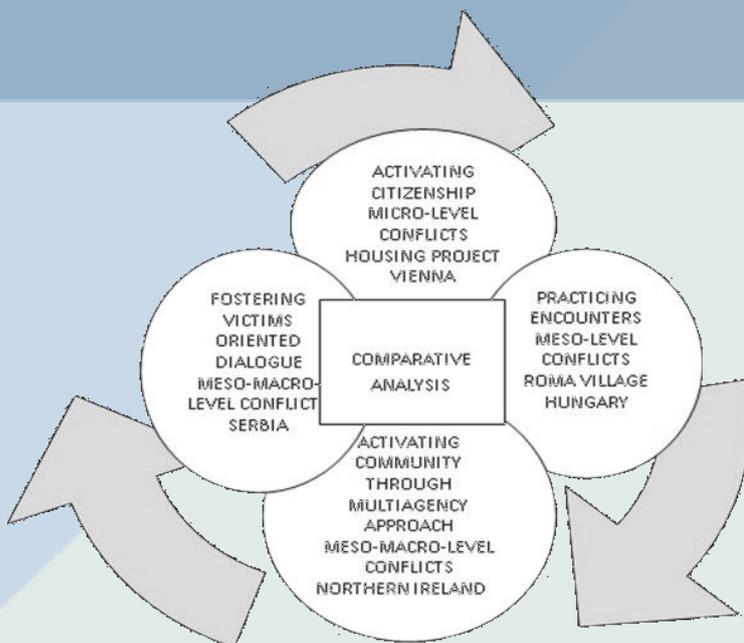
- ◆ They have harmful effects on both individuals and communities
- ◆ Culture is used to frame conflicts, while their root-causes may be different
- ◆ They are a reflection of wider social issues and inequalities
- ◆ They are often petty incidents of discord accompanied by disrespect
- ◆ They may lead to polarisation of communities and exclusion of people
- ◆ These people can become vulnerable to extremism and violence

WHAT IS RESTORATIVE JUSTICE (RJ)?

- ◆ RJ is a communication process actively involving all parties affected by the conflict in finding a solution with the help of a facilitator
- ◆ The aim is to identify, understand and transform conflicts
- ◆ RJ explores the willingness to address conflicts and improves capacity to handle conflicts
- ◆ **COMMUNITY CONFERENCE | MEDIATION | RESTORATIVE CIRCLES**
The ALTERNATIVE action research included these traditional practices as well as RJ elements in other activities

RJ KEY PRINCIPLES

Voluntariness
Respect & Dignity
Inclusion
Active participation
Dialogue
Empowerment
Restoration
Transformation
Facilitator's multipartiality



RESEARCHERS and COMMUNITY MEMBERS collaborated to **identify**, to **understand** and to find ways to **transform** local conflicts. Researchers stimulated the generation of local knowledge about the issues, influenced possible changes and empowered local community members. The **ACTION RESEARCH** was necessary to increase **mutual understanding** and build **trust**, which were both indispensable phases to prepare the actual restorative interventions in the field.

ALTERNATIVE STEPS FOR ACTION RESEARCHERS

The successful implementation, evaluation and sustainability of RJ in intercultural settings is possible thanks to the cooperation between different professional groups, such as RJ practitioners, community workers, policy-makers and researchers. These steps are applicable also to other actors.

1. **BUILD TRUST | BE CLEAR AND TRANSPARENT | PROVIDE INFORMATION**

In order to enter the field, you must build trust with the community members. This can be done by spending enough time in the community, attending events and activities and providing information about the objectives of your research in order to avoid false expectations about your role and to justify your interest in their conflict.

2. **CREATE LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS | GATHER AND KEEP TRACK OF INFORMATION**

It is important to make allies with community members and well-established organisations which help and give credibility to your research project. Establish a local group of support and organise regular meetings to gather information and plan and discuss your research project. Keep a research diary to keep track of this information.

3. **UNDERSTAND AND ASSESS | EXPLORE DIFFERENT RJ INTERVENTIONS**

Together with RJ practitioners and community workers, you have an important role in understanding and assessing the complexity of the local situation and how this causes the conflict. Quantitative and qualitative data is needed to map local conflicts and identify the best RJ intervention to be implemented to manage the conflict, either at the individual or societal levels.

4. **BE INVOLVED IN RJ INTERVENTIONS | BE READY FOR UNEXPECTED CHANGES**

Whenever possible, participate as an observer while RJ processes take place. This is a moment for gathering information about the conflict and the way it is managed using RJ methods, as important data for your research. It is also a moment for encouraging further trust and collaboration. Be flexible and creative in case unexpected situations occur: communities are not static.

5. **KEEP TRACK OF YOUR EXPERIENCES | ORGANISE A CLOSING EVENT**

Write a report include a brief summary of your experiences in the field. If possible, work in a team and make sure you get feedback from your supervisor. Organise a closing event to present your findings to the community and be prepared to support and even engage in future initiatives raising from the community.

6. **REFLECT AND CONTRIBUTE TO FURTHER RESEARCH**

As an action researcher you have an important role in contributing to the development of further theories based on empirical findings. You should continue the cyclical movement between theory and practice.

LESSONS LEARNED IN ALTERNATIVE ACTION RESEARCH

- ◆ **THE INVOLVEMENT IN A RESEARCH PROJECT** may encourage positive responses from local communities involved in a conflict; research helps to enter the field, build trust and create alliances with local partner organisations, without being expected to have answers and solutions to all problems
- ◆ **THE COMBINATION OF ACTION AND RESEARCH** permits the researchers to engage with people's realities and needs, thinking about their conflicts with them
- ◆ **RESEARCHERS** were not only mere observers in the field; the line between being a researcher and being oneself is difficult to be defined; it may be inevitable to create personal relationships in the field
- ◆ **RESISTANCE AND SILENCE** may be experienced by researchers after informing community members about the research purposes
- ◆ **THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ALLIANCES** at the local level may be a challenge for researchers, who may find themselves unwillingly taking a side in the conflict
- ◆ **RESEARCH FINDINGS** may be presented to the community during a closing event: this may be challenging since the people studied in the research are in the audience
- ◆ **FUTURE JOINT PROJECTS** may be initiated by community members to follow-up the lessons learnt during the research
- ◆ **GATHERING AND DISSEMINATING EVIDENCE** about the use of RJ to manage intercultural conflicts is necessary: little attention has been given to this topic in research and practice, especially when it comes to collecting outcomes and satisfaction rates
- ◆ **EVALUATION REPORTS** (including also personal stories) should be widely disseminated to politicians, to funding bodies and to the media

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