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## The political socialization of youth in a post-conflict community



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### ABSTRACT

Political socialization affects the development of young people's attitudes in post-conflict societies. Political socialization may support a movement toward positive intergroup relations, or it may influence the perpetuation of intergroup tensions and divisions. In the context of Vukovar, Croatia, political socialization, for youth growing up in a post-conflict community, involves learning about social relations, including relational power and group status within a multi-ethnic community. The current study examines experiences of political socialization in this context. Qualitative data from ten focus groups, conducted among 11-, 13-, and 15-year-olds, mothers, and fathers of Serb and Croat ethnicity, are analyzed using the constant comparative method. Results indicate a belief in the importance of parents, peers, schools, and the media in the development of youth's political orientations, specifically related to intergroup relations. These attitudes are reflected in the lived realities of youth as political actors through their opinions toward intergroup interactions, their experiences of intergroup contact and conflict, and their beliefs about and recommendations for integrated education. Although some avoided any discussion of war, focus group participants' predominant perspective reflected beliefs that the political socialization of youth operated to preserve intergroup tensions and division in Vukovar. The paper concludes with a number of policy and intervention implications.

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### 1. The political socialization of youth in a post-conflict community

Nearly 100% of today's civil wars are characterized by ethnic conflict (UNICEF, 2009). In this increasingly prevalent context of ethno-political violence, young people are among those most greatly affected (Barber, 2009). Youth are impacted directly and indirectly by political violence, as combatants, as actors caught in the crossfire, or as witnesses to devastating loss and massive destruction (Cairns, 1996). The impact of political conflict on youth, however, extends beyond the cessation of violence and the signing of a peace agreement. Maturing and developing in post-accord contexts, youth are affected by environments of persistent tension and division (Cummings et al., 2011).

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This study explores the interpersonal and societal dynamics that facilitate or inhibit positive intergroup relations for a generation born after mass atrocity. Specifically, it focuses on the lived realities of political socialization, or the ways in which one develops political orientations by learning about socially-relevant community relations. In a setting of intergroup divide, this approach to political socialization may help to understand the development of youth's attitudes toward and behaviors in intergroup interactions (Sapiro, 2004), in particular how political messages transmitted by key actors relate to whether young people disrupt or maintain the status quo. Though studies have focused primarily on the impact of political violence on youth's individual psychological, particularly psychopathological, functioning (Barber, 2009), it is important to examine the broader effects of conflict on youth's intergroup attitudes and behaviors. For example, young people are socialized into politics, and multiple layers of their social ecology are active in the development of their political orientations (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). In this context, youth may shift their identities and social roles to destabilize or build peace (Kosic & Tauber, 2010b; McEvoy-Levy, 2006). In an environment such as Vukovar, Croatia, where ethno-political tensions are salient, and societal reconciliation has yet to take root (Kosic & Tauber, 2010a, 2010b), processes of political socialization among youth may determine the future of intergroup relations and inter-ethnic harmony.

### 1.1. *The city of Vukovar: a case study of a divided community*

Vukovar is a city in Croatia that lies along the Danube River on the border with Serbia. It is a city of approximately 27,700 inhabitants with a 57% Croat and 35% Serb population (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). Following Croatia's declaration of independence in 1991, the ethnic violence that waged during the breakup of the Former Yugoslavia disrupted the social fabric of Vukovar. During this time, between 7000 (according to Serb sources) and 14,500 (according to Croatian sources) members of the Serb paramilitary forces, as well as 500–600 Croatian defenders, were killed (Sebetovsky, 2002). Of those who fought to defend Vukovar, one third successfully escaped the city following Croatian surrender, while those remaining were captured and sent to Serbian concentration camps (Sebetovsky, 2002). The destruction of trust during the war, alongside feelings of confusion and betrayal, caused the deterioration of intergroup relations between Croats and Serbs (Ajduković & Čorkalo, 2004; Sekulić, Massey, & Hodson, 2006).

Vukovar today represents a divided society. Political policies of ethnic separation permeate social institutions in an effort to safeguard minority rights (Čorkalo et al., 2004). As young people grow up in a context of tension and conflict, and are separated from their peers of different ethnicities, elders worry that conflict and the "ethnicization" of everyday life will continue into the future (Čorkalo Biruški, 2012). Young people in Vukovar have no experience of an integrated community, and thus, cannot recall a city characterized by harmonious intergroup relations and inter-ethnic friendships (Ajduković & Čorkalo Biruški, 2008). Exploration of the political socialization of young people in such an environment is critical to understanding the perpetuation of tension and violence in Vukovar and to efforts toward the establishment of peace in the region.

### 1.2. *Political socialization*

Almond and Verba's (1963) *The Civic Culture* provided the original theoretical justification for the study of political socialization as a process by which a political culture could be developed. Hyman (1959) *Political Socialization* offered a more micro-level approach and defined political socialization as an individual's learning of social patterns associated with his/her societal positions as mediated through various agencies of society. In the context of Vukovar, political socialization involves learning about social relations, including relational power and group status within a multi-ethnic community. The concept of political socialization offers a framework for understanding the origins of orientations that are politically-consequential among adults, whether concerning politics specifically or intergroup relations in settings of ethnic divide (Sapiro, 2004; Sears & Brown, 2013).

Although some theories conceive of political socialization as "society's modeling of the child to some a priori model, usually one perpetuating the status quo" (Kinder & Sears, 1985: 714), other conceptualizations leave space for action that disrupts current norms (Kuterovac-Jagodić, 2000; Langton, 1969). Adopting Hyman's micro-level approach to political socialization, related to intergroup relations, this study investigates two questions: (1) Are political socialization processes relevant to supporting or disrupting the current system of politically-relevant social relations? (2) Is the transmission of information deliberate? These questions inform the examination of the intentionality of political socialization between youth and relevant agents, and the lived realities of young people's attitudes toward and behaviors in intergroup relations.

Theoretical foundations of political socialization identify its prime agents to be parents, peer groups, schools, and the media. Parents are primary transmitters of social norms and political orientations (Verkuyten, 2002), as well as of prejudicial attitudes (Rodríguez-García & Wagner, 2009). In an environment where ethnic conflict is high, parents play a powerful socialization role (Aboud & Amato, 2001), though their influence on the development of youth's political or intergroup attitudes is rarely deliberate (Kosic & Livi, 2012). Parental influence is often manifested through indirect forms, such as overhearing adult conversations, asking questions about political issues, and listening to stories about national history (Kuterovac-Jagodić, 2000). Moreover, a youth's own political interest and search for meaning is critical; young people are active participants, rather than passive recipients of political socialization (Sears & Brown, 2013), and parental accounts may

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