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FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

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Application for the Pilot Project 'Mental Health and the Social Reconstruction of Destabilised Communities in South Eastern Europe'

Currently a four-year research project at the Department of Psychology at the University of Oslo that is funded by the Norwegian Research Council is in its final stage (finishing at the end of February next year). The research has been carried out by Evelin Gerda Lindner, psychologist and physician, based at the Department of Psychology at the University of Oslo. It addresses the psychological aspects of war and genocide. Extensive material has been collected in Somalia, Rwanda / Burundi, and in Germany from 1997-2000. The doctoral dissertation that is based on this fieldwork was delivered on 31st October 2000. Fifteen articles have been submitted to international journals during the last year (6 have been accepted, the others are still in the review process). A handbook for the United Nations and international organisations on the topic of humiliation is currently being written.

The research project focuses particularly on the notion of humiliation. Feelings of humiliation are among the most potent forces that create rifts between people, rifts that are also among the most difficult to heal, and that form the most serious barriers to building trust and co-operation. Humiliation is at the core of traumatic experience – material damage can be repaired, floods, storms and accidents can be tackled – what is profoundly hurtful, however, is when damage is inflicted by human beings on other human beings. This new field of research within psychology, namely research on humiliation, links human rights to trauma. The research carried out at the Department of Psychology has made an important contribution to this new field, according to highly respected commentators, and it is currently receiving wide attention. Political science, sociology and anthropology all contribute to conflict resolution. However, psychology stands at the centre, and has a vital part to play in view of the destructive potential of humiliation.

The Department of Psychology in Oslo herewith applies to the 'Cooperation Programme with South Eastern Europe' founded by the Norwegian Research Council, on behalf of the project leader Evelin Lindner, as a means of widening the research on humiliation from Hitler's Germany, Somalia, Rwanda and Burundi, to include also South Eastern Europe. Not only have wars been a major disruptive factor in this region, but the after-effects of war have been intensified by the severe hardships of social transition processes. The combined effect of these factors has been the creation of deeply 'destabilised communities.' The lessons that have been drawn from the fieldwork in Africa and Germany need to be deepened further and may be applied with great aptness to the particular circumstances of South Eastern Europe. Initial contacts with



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citizens from South Eastern Europe have validated the assumption that the dynamics of humiliation are at the core of the suffering that permeates this region, and that they also represent one of the most significant barriers to reconciliation.

The aim of the further research envisaged on humiliation is to collect data and develop pilot community-based interventions that will not only strengthen the theoretical foundations of the notion of humiliation but also, in a very practical way, lead to the development of more effective tools for achieving peaceful coexistence, healing, stability, and reconciliation, not only in Africa, but also in South Eastern Europe. The material that has been collected in Africa will, together with the material and the new experiences to be collected in South Eastern Europe, yield results that are more universally valid and applicable in cross-cultural settings, than material that is only collected in one region of the world. Thus the fieldwork that has already been carried out in Africa will be deepened and widened in its scope and applicability by supplementing it with material from South Eastern Europe.

The ultimate aim of this work is to develop tools that will be valid universally and can also be implemented without delay in future conflicts in other parts of the world. The assumption is that the dynamics of humiliation have a universal core that is relevant in all cultures (together with culture-dependent triggers that vary from one cultural setting to the other). The universal core has to be described in more detail, and ways of healing the destructive effects of humiliation have to be devised, so as to create a theoretical framework and practical guidance for the healing of the destructive consequences of humiliation.

The project envisaged is planned in co-operation with the Department of Psychology, University of Zagreb, Croatia. This department had the leading role in responding to the crises generated in the past ten years in the Balkans. Professor Dean Ajdukovic is the Chair for Social Psychology and Head of the Postgraduate Psychology Program at the Department. He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the European Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ESTSS) and of the Council of the International Society for Health and Human Rights (ISHHR). Apart from this, he is the president of the Society for Psychological Assistance (SPA), a regional non-profit, non-governmental mental health organization that has been very active in the SE Europe region. This organization has been able to maintain contacts with colleagues throughout the region in spite of the war and political problems. It has provided training, supervision and services in Croatia, Bosnia Herzegovina, Albania, Macedonia, Kosovo and recently in Serbia to over 2,400 care-providers. The SPA web site at www.dpp.hr provides further information.

Professor Dean Ajdukovic's professional work has been involved, among other issues, within community-based psychosocial assistance to victims of war and refugees. He is also looking into the relations between mental health, trauma, losses, conflict management and social reconstruction processes. He is working on establishing a regional center for SE Europe that would bring together the mental health professionals from this region to share and work together with colleagues from the West. This initiative is fully compatible with the current application and would bring together the lessons learned and good practices developed for facilitating social reconstruction, stability and peace processes through helping people to heal the wounds from massive traumatisation and losses, and build self-esteem and feelings of self-efficacy. Within this framework he sees the importance of humiliation and the experience of being devalued as a person as important factors that extend beyond individuals and are related to the building of civil society institutions.

Professor Dean Ajdukovic and his colleagues have maintained links with Norwegian colleagues since 1992 when they started working with the Norwegian People's Aid and the



Norwegian Council for Mental Health. They have very good connections with the Psychosocial Center for Refugees. Professor Dean Ajdukovic personally has been in Norway a number of times giving workshops and talks. Professor Dean Ajdukovic sees a number of potential areas of collaboration within the field of research should this be on a mutually acceptable partnership basis. He is willing to serve as a focal point for bringing together colleagues in the research project from the South Eastern Europe region.

This application entails a double-track approach. One track aims at producing a high quality application for June 2001. The other track entails data collection until 31st December 2001.

Track I:

In order to build a project application for co-operative research that can be submitted in June 2001, a pilot project is necessary. It is envisaged that this pilot project will start in January 2001 and last for 6 months, until June 2001. During this time a network of scholars will be put in place, in co-operation with the Department of Psychology at the University of Zagreb, with scholars who are willing to work on the psychological aspects of war and reconciliation, and particularly on the notion of humiliation. The network will be limited to three to five people. This is because the topic of humiliation is of a very delicate nature, and it has been found that researchers have to be able to combine empathy, authenticity, and the ability to build trust within the population in which the research is to be carried out. Large numbers of questionnaires delivered by a numerous team who are, as would probably be the case, much less dedicated and experienced, would not produce research results that would meet the necessary standard of validity. Qualitative research has to be combined with very careful quantitative approaches.

The aim of the pilot period is to develop a high quality research plan that gives each researcher who is involved his or her particular focus, linking all the projects together in a meaningful way. The ultimate aim of the full 3 year research is to draw lessons that can be applied not only to peace building in South Eastern Europe, but also to other parts of the world that are currently unable to overcome rifts that split their people into factions that meet each other with hatred and suspicion.

Track II:

From March 2001 until 31st December 2001 the Norwegian project leader will collect data in Zagreb (Croatia), Belgrade (Serbia), and Kosovo that will supplement the data already collected in Africa.

The research on humiliation requires the building of new theory with the help of a broad basis of empirical data. Since research on humiliation is an innovative field within psychology, much work has still to be done to anchor the concept of humiliation theoretically and practically in other fields, such as trauma, mobbing, abuse, power, group relations, identity, and emotions.

As a result of the data collection in South Eastern Europe, the already existing body of data, in combination with the new data, will be subjected to new and deeper analysis. A series of articles that deepens the current approach will be produced towards the end of 2001. From 2002 this work will become part of the broader research co-operation that will be applied for together with the Department of Psychology in Zagreb, Croatia, in June 2001, a co-operation that will also include Serbia and Kosovo.

To draw Belgrade into this co-operation is seen as particularly important, since Serbia is the most recent member included within the Co-operation Programme of the Norwegian Research Council. Dragan Popadic, associate professor of Social psychology at Faculty of Philosophy,



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Belgrade (Dept. of Psychology) is interested in co-operating. He writes: 'Your topic is close to mine not only for professional reasons: since 1993, as a member of group MOST ('Bridge') which has been part of Center for Anti-War Action, I was actively involved in attempts to deal with numerable and violent conflicts which occurred during that period and with processes of establishing mutual understanding and communication between people from different sides. Currently I am director of Peace Studies, organized by MOST as a part of programs conducted by AAEN, Belgrade (Alternative Academic Educational Network). And, since one of our the most important aims is to establish communication with similar groups in the region, topics as humiliation and responsibility are those we have to deal with intensively.' Professor Popadic also proposes to draw in Nina Berisha, an Albanian colleague who lives in Belgrade, working on ethnic distance and stereotypes.

The Norwegian Research Council states that the Co-operation Programme aims at working 'within the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe.' The Norwegian Research Council pursues the goal of helping to build trust and promote healing between divided peoples in South Eastern Europe with the assistance of Norwegian resources. This goal is based on the psychological hypothesis that a concerted effort and a strengthening of linkages at numerous levels will contribute to this aim.

Psychological research is at the centre of the question how trust may indeed be built between people who have been ravaged by trauma and humiliation.

Yours sincerely,

Evelin Gerda Lindner
Cross-cultural psychologist and physician

Professor Dean Ajdukovic
Professor of Social Psychology

PS: This application has been discussed with Ragnhild Dybdahl, Department of Psychology at the University of Tromsø. Synergy with her work is envisaged.

Furthermore, a network of interested researchers has already emerged: For example, Duša Hibon-Zgonec, a linguist from South Eastern Europe working on the notion of death, has shown interest in co-operation.