

Non-violent communication and theatre of the oppressed: a case study with Syrian refugee women from the Kareemat Centre in Turkey

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Abstract

This field report describes a case study on the applicability of non-violent communication (NVC) within the Syrian refugee context, and the usefulness of theatre of the oppressed techniques in practicing NVC. The intervention was applied to refugee women working or attending activities in a livelihood centre in Turkey. Through the work, NVC was explained and discussed with participants, who brought real-life themes and scenarios to practice learnt skills using theatre of the oppressed techniques. Participants reported improved self-compassion, compassion, communication and collaboration with others. They also reported that such activities changed their view of conflict. Theatre of the oppressed helped participants achieve more empathy and understanding and to try different solutions to scenarios in which they faced conflict.

Keywords: Non-violent communication, refugees, Syria, theatre of the oppressed, training, violence

INTRODUCTION

As an impact of the relentless conflict in Syria, violence has not only prevailed as open war, but has also been adopted into the communication of daily life. Metaphors related to weapons and war are now embedded into the culture and are heavily used. It is, for example, common to describe someone who has had a huge impact as having ‘detonated a bomb’ or ‘shelled a frontier’. In one particular song, entitled ‘The Russian Bullet’, the singer describes his love as a bullet coming out of an AK-47 rifle that ‘if [she] didn’t kill, [she] would paralyse’.

However, it should also be noted that, even before the current crisis began in 2011, violence was already rooted within the society. Certain family members were, and are still, inherently more powerful than others, and seek control within the family group. For example, a parent over a child, a mother-in-law over a daughter-in-law, the eldest male sibling over other siblings and a husband over a wife. These relationships are inherently imbalanced, with the former having authority over the latter, and all involved accepting that authority without question. This also applies to other relationships, such as teacher/student and sheikh/follower. These patterns within relationships are considered to be one of society’s deepest structures; ‘a deep-seated pattern of

relationships of which affected people are not self-conscious despite their sustained, pervasive influence on their collective behaviour’ (T. Arai, personal communication, May 12, 2017).

Combine this acceptance with common stories, in which the protagonist achieves great good through tolerating the hardships of life and being a passive pacifist, or the concept of ‘honouring of parents’, making it possible for parents to interfere in the smallest detail of their children’s lives, including what to do for a living and who to marry, leaving the children with no choice but to ‘kiss the hand’ of their parents (a ritual that shows the child’s devotion). These could all also be examples of society’s deep culture, ‘a cultural pattern of meaning-making embedded in the unconscious . . . [which] evolves through a trans-generational transmission of symbols, rituals and stories’ (T. Arai, personal communication, May 12, 2017). The result is a society in which violence, in its broader concept, is normalised, where authority figures are idealised

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and automatic obedience to them is expected, be it governmental authority, clergy, or senior family members.

Such obedience can lead people to subordinate their own feelings and needs to the needs and will of such figures. This form of violence is worsened by the fact that Syrians have been forced to be internally displaced or seek refuge, so that natural boundaries that existed previously, such as living in a separate house or far away which lessened the effect of violence, have disappeared as people are forced to live together in smaller spaces, such as camps or family houses, resulting in such violence becoming more common.

Overall, these forms of indirect violence were, and still are, also part of everyday communication. It can be seen in the way polarisation, prejudice, judgements and diagnoses are commonly used, and all can be considered communication that blocks compassion (Rosenberg, 2003).

Non-violent communication and theatre of the oppressed

Non-violent communication (NVC), developed by Marshall B. Rosenberg, is a process of communication that promotes collaboration and compassion through focusing on feelings and needs, acknowledging these feelings and needs, and then collaborating to mutually fulfil those needs. Evidence has shown that NVC reduces anger, increases self-compassion (Suarez et al., 2014), improves communication and relationships with others (Burleson, Martin, & Lewis, 2011), improves the ability to express oneself without criticism or blame, and show appreciation and concern for others (Branscomb, 2011).

Theatre of the oppressed (TO), developed by Augusto Boal (Burgoyne et al., 2005), constitutes a set of techniques that helps people overcome oppression through acting, both in the sense of being an actor and being active (Boal, 2002). In a study on TO, Burgoyne et al. concluded that after completing theatre classes, participants' understanding of oppression had changed, and that techniques learnt provided them with more options regarding actions to take in oppressive situations; such techniques made them aware of the possibilities and alternative strategies in the face of oppression (Burgoyne et al., 2005).

This field report attempts to answer two questions:

- (1) Is NVC beneficial for Syrians who have fled the Syrian conflict?
- (2) Is it helpful to use TO to practice NVC among Syrians?

METHODS

The fieldwork presented herein was part of a Social Sciences University of Ankara (SSUA) and International Organization for Migration (IOM) Executive Professional Certificate Program on Psychosocial Support and Conflict Transformation and was approved by the SSUA Ethical Board. The work took place in the Kareemat Centre; a livelihood centre for women in the city of Kilis, south Turkey. The management of the

centre offered a place to facilitate the fieldwork, and as the centre targeted women only, this restricted the target group to women. The work was originally targeting teachers in the centre, but as only six teachers were available at a time, beneficiaries were added to the target group as suggested by the centre management. Ten participants took part in this fieldwork, with ages ranging from 21 to 54 years, six livelihood activity teachers and four beneficiaries. All participants gave informed consent to participate in this work.

Intervention

This fieldwork was delivered in two training sessions and three weekly follow-up sessions. The training focused on Pat Patfoort's Major–minor model to explain violence as the result of an untransformed conflict in which 'two seemingly incompatible viewpoints exist side by side' and where one party might feel minor if he or she would give in (Patfoort, 1995, p. 37), and the equivalent model of non-violence, in which both parties are on the same level, considering their viewpoints to be emerging out of their needs (Patfoort, 1995). The training also included Rosenberg's NVC process as a structured form of NVC, this process has four components: making non-judgemental observations, expressing feelings emerging from those observations, linking those feelings to needs and making a negotiable request to fulfil those needs (Rosenberg, 2003).

TO techniques were used in combination with the above-mentioned concepts of violence and non-violence, serving as tools for both visualisation and practice. The last 2 h of each training session, and the second and third follow-up sessions, were exclusively dedicated to theatre exercises, additionally, the first follow-up session was dedicated for further group contracting, as the time schedule of the livelihood centre changed due to holy month of Ramadan. TO techniques used included image theatre where '*participants . . . make still images of their lives, feelings, experiences and oppressions . . . [this] frozen image is simply a starting point for . . . action*' (Boal, 2002, p. xxii), as well as forum theatre, which is a '*theatrical game in which problems are shown in an unsolved form, to which the audience . . . is invited to suggest and enact solutions*' (Boal, 2002, p. xxiv) and finally, rainbow of desires, '*a therapeutic process . . . [in which] a spect-actor [spectator and actor] re-enacts a real-life conflict and identifies . . . [his or her] desires. Other members of the group embody these desires*' (Burgoyne et al., 2005, p. 3).

All sessions were also designed with three concepts in mind. First, the complex circle, in which individuals build linear relationships with others that allow them to be free and express themselves. These linear relationships start in pairs and build up to include more individuals, as shown in Figure 1, in which individuals are represented by letters and each row represents a linear relationship. When these linear relationships include all participants, a ritual circle is created, in which everyone is enabled to freely express oneself to the entire group (Schinà, 2004). Figure 2 illustrates the individuals in their ritual circle

represented by letters, and lines represent the linear relationships between them.

Second is the developmental paradigm for drama therapy session where sessions mimic the dramatic play of children, starting with embodiment, focusing on the immediate sensory world, and then projective play, focusing on objects in the immediate surroundings, followed by roleplay (Jennings, Cattanaach, Mitchell, Chesner, & Meldrum, 1994). Third is the drama therapy session model, in which a certain structure is followed: contact, group contracting (a term to describe ground rules for the drama session), warm up, main activity, cool down and feedback (Schininà, personal communication, June 16, 2017).

These concepts were included to build an atmosphere where participants would feel comfortable and ready to use theatre techniques within the group. For example, the third follow-up session started with an 'emotional mime' exercise, in which each participant did a mime that represented her current feeling while other participants tried to

guess that feeling (contact, embodiment and projective play). This was followed by a 'gibberish' exercise, which started with participants working in pairs, trying to talk simultaneously, gradually turning sentences to loosely connected words to incomprehensible voices, then in larger groups were asked to act that way in a certain situation like discussing a wedding they recently attended (warm up, projective play and roleplay, building up linear relationships). The main activity was built on forum theatre (roleplay and more complex relationships), followed by a 'hand squeezing' exercise, in which participants stood in a circle with their arms crossed in front of them, holding others' hands, one would squeeze the hand of another, saying words that represented things she wanted to take from or leave in the group, the other participant whose hand was squeezed would follow her and so on (complex circle and cool down). Then feedback followed, with each participant choosing a photograph that reminded her of her experience with NVC from a pile and tell the group why she chose that particular photograph (complex circle and feedback) (Emunah, 1994).

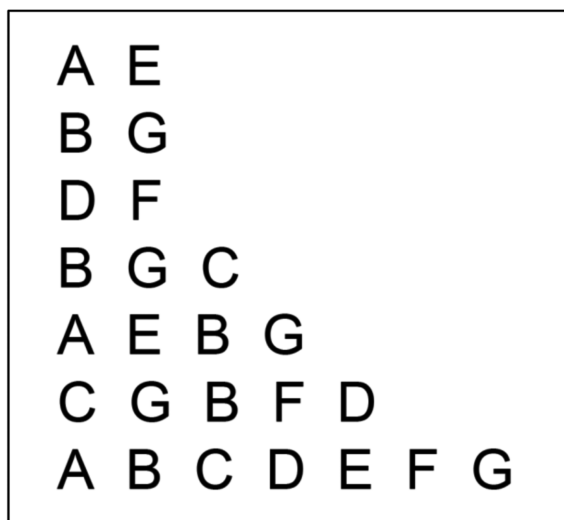


Figure 1: Linear relationships within the group

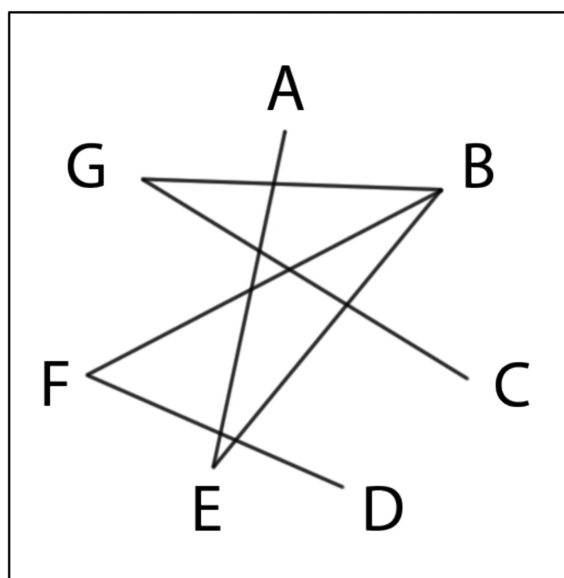


Figure 2: Ritual circle in complex circle

Procedure

Through the initial training, alongside theoretical concepts of conflict, violence and NVC, participants were introduced to TO techniques to experience with these concepts, and in follow-up sessions participants continued to practice these techniques with scenarios related to violent communication they faced in real-life, such scenarios included a quarrel with an angry husband commenting on wife's work, a situation with a mother-in-law insisting her daughter-in-law should stay and offer help, and an angry uncle questioning his niece's behaviour without listening to any explanation, to name a few. Using image theatre, participants dissected these scenarios into fixed images; a set of four images that represented an introduction to the situation, escalation, climax and resolution. With the help and direction of the scenario owner (the person who brought in the situation), they enacted those fixed images in sequence, and each participant in the image was asked to say a sentence that represents what the person she was playing was thinking at that moment. Afterwards, they were asked to join the four images by moving and elaborating on the same ideas and thoughts they had expressed. These scenes formed the basis for rainbow of desires and forum theatre techniques. Rainbow of desires was used to help participants reflect on characters' feelings and needs. Participants were asked to freeze a scene and reach out and touch any of the characters, and then verbalise what they thought that character's inner voice, feelings, or needs were at that moment. This is a process, through which, participants were able to understand and empathise with characters and use this understanding and empathy to apply NVC skills. After that, participants used forum theatre to practice NVC skills. As participants had already understood the situation in hand and the feelings and needs of each character in the scene, they used that knowledge to propose and act alternative solutions to the situation which the protagonist could have applied to resolve the situation. Anytime a participant felt like she had a suggestion to resolve the situation, she

said 'stop', replaced the protagonist and acted her solution. Later, participants discussed the practicality of the solution and whether it was non-violent or not, double-checking with the story owner to see if she thought the solution proposed would apply to her real life. Initially, upon suggesting alternative solutions to proposed scenarios, participants relied on their previous reactions, that resulted in suggestions related to violent communication. Such suggestions included denying others' feelings, escalating the situation or avoiding it altogether. Later on, they gradually started to use techniques they learnt, making their suggestions more non-violent. For instance, in a particular scenario, a participant suggested a solution in which the daughter-in-law acknowledged the mother-in-law's needs and feelings, expressed her own, and negotiated ways to meet needs of both.

Collecting qualitative and quantitative data

Three surveys were used to collect qualitative and quantitative data from participants, before the training, after the training and in the second follow-up session, measuring participants' understanding and application of the NVC process, their willingness to continue learning and teaching others about NVC, and their evaluation of their own compassion with self and others, collaboration and caring for others. The follow-up survey contained an additional narrative part about participants' experience with NVC. In addition, a fourth survey was handed to a partner nominated by each participant with whom she had daily contact. This survey aimed to get more feedback from partners about participants' sharing knowledge and applying skills of NVC in their daily life. Partners were either co-workers or family members outside the participants' group. Each participant was given an open envelope containing the partner's survey, she in turn handed it to the partner who, after filling out the survey, handed it back sealed in the envelope.

RESULTS

All participants attended the training and the first follow-up session; one participant dropped out of the second follow-up session due to 'social commitments', and an additional two participants had to travel back to Syria and could not attend the third session. All participants submitted pre and post training surveys, with nine of them submitting the follow-up survey and eight submitting the partner's survey. All submitted surveys were included in the analysis. Eight out of ten participants showed improvement of knowledge about the NVC process, scoring an average of 58% in the pre training survey and an average of 69% in the post training survey. Also reported in the post training survey, nine out of ten participants were keen to apply NVC in their lives, and all were willing to tell others about it. The most significant progress made by participants was in perceiving conflict as an opportunity to improve relationships, evident in their answers to follow-up survey. When evaluating their own compassion, collaboration and caring for others, average scores were less in follow-up survey than in pre training survey; participants commented that through the training they gained deeper insight about these aspects of relationships with others, and upon re-evaluation of

their earlier answers, they realised that they had initially overestimated their own capacities. However, participants on average reported slight progress in self-compassion in follow-up survey.

Participants were asked in the follow-up survey if they were applying NVC skills, educating others about them, and their suggestions for sharing the knowledge of NVC. All nine participants submitting the survey stated that they had already started applying NVC skills, four of them stated that they faced some difficulties; a participant sometimes feared the reaction of the other party, another wanted to avoid escalating the conflict to the point where it would be hard to resolve, the other two stated that it was challenging in the beginning, but became easier with practice. Other participants had less challenges; one in particular stated that she had the experience of transforming a conflict into a dialogue, another said she was able to transform an argument into a discussion that was resolvable. Eight out of the nine participants also started talking about NVC to others, only two had negative experiences while doing so; one stated that she was rejected when she talked about the topic, while the other said she was not taken seriously. Other participants had positive experiences doing so; one participant said her colleagues showed interest in the topic and wanted to learn more about NVC. The majority of participants stated that spreading the knowledge about NVC should start with one's own family, and two stated that it should start with oneself, while only one participant stated that it should be effected by advocacy, awareness raising and trainings.

Eight participants identified a partner who would fill out the partner's survey. All partners stated that participants had started talking about NVC. Partners also stated that their impression on the topic was positive and that participants had started applying NVC skills. Partners were also asked to report any change in certain aspects of participants since the beginning of the training. They reported improvement in participants' ability to make negotiable requests instead of demands, and their will to resolve conflicts and ability to communicate until both parties were satisfied.

Application of TO techniques started from the first training session and participants engaged in exercises and enjoyed them. Although they were intimidated, because they had no experience in acting, they were surprised by their ability to engage in these activities. Participants found TO techniques very useful and fun, and enabled them to gain a new perspective on their own real-life problems.

LIMITATIONS

Although the facilitator is an experienced trainer and familiar with NVC, he is not a certified NVC trainer. However, the aim of the programme was to experience with learnt topics in the field, and the facilitator was supported by his supervisor to address any challenge arising in the process. The venue available for training and follow-up sessions was the livelihood centre itself; a busy place during working hours. Sessions were held either after working hours, causing

participants to be tired from work and concerned about returning home to do their chores, or in a small private space which limited the choice of physical activities included in the TO. Additionally, due to time restrictions, only three follow-up sessions were possible, by the end of which participants were starting to master both TO techniques and NVC skills; eight sessions would have been ideal to deepen their experience in both topics. Due to the small group, no generalisations can be made, but the positive results suggest further research would be fruitful.

CONCLUSIONS

NVC is a tool for communication that concentrates on feelings and needs of oneself and others, emphasising compassion with self and others and collaboration with others. TO is set of techniques that helps people to be active and view their oppression from new perspective, where they can reflect and try different solutions to their problems. This fieldwork consisted of a training in NVC with three follow-up sessions that used TO techniques in place of relying heavily on classical roleplay. Overall, participants showed some improvement in self-compassion, compassion, communication and collaboration with others; partners of participants confirmed such improvement. The training changed the participants' concepts of conflict, communication, compassion and collaboration. After the training, participants started sharing information about NVC and applying learnt skills, although they faced some challenges while applying them. Theatre techniques used in the training were useful in helping participants connect with their feelings and needs, and the feelings and needs of others, thus facilitating the NVC process. Due to time restrictions to report this fieldwork, only three follow-up sessions were possible; additional sessions would have given participants more opportunities to practice their learnt NVC skills. In conclusion, NVC was appropriate and applicable to the group, and TO seemed a beneficial and enjoyable way to practice NVC skills. It would be useful to further apply such techniques to larger groups that would also include male participants, with more follow-up sessions to provide a safe environment to practice NVC skills and build confidence related to applying them.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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