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# Kiss, don't tell: attitudes towards inter-ethnic dating and contact with the Other in Bosnia-Herzegovina

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## ABSTRACT

Structural segregation and normative divisions in Bosnia-Herzegovina make dating across ethnic lines difficult. A rich scholarship outlines why this is and why young people who want to interact across ethnic lines choose not to. This paper builds on this scholarship by investigating how individuals overcome obstacles to inter-ethnic dating in communities recovering from ethnic violence. It examines dating through an adaptation of contact theory, which focuses on activities that are not seen as imposed yet still hold acquaintance potential. These result in the type of contact that can transform relationships between ethnic groups. This framework is applied to data collected through Facebook focus groups and follow-up interviews in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The empirical results show that individuals overcome obstacles to inter-ethnic dating through cooperation and shared aspirations that are inherent to the activity. These enable individuals to overcome structural segregation and to resist divisive normative frameworks that prohibit inter-ethnic contact.

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## Introduction

The obstacles to inter-ethnic dating in Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as in other divided post-conflict contexts, are well known. Structural segregation and societal norms make inter-ethnic mixing difficult, if not impossible. Young people who want to interact with other ethnic groups, romantically or otherwise, often choose the path of least resistance by not mixing with other groups. A rich literature – led by authors such as Helms (2010; 2013), Hromadžić (2015a; 2015b), Jansen (2018), Stefansson (2010) and Pickering (2007) – provides detailed accounts of this in Bosnia-Herzegovina and outlines the nature of the everyday obstacles that citizens face in their attempts to interact with other ethnic groups.

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This article provides a different perspective by asking the research question: what are attitudes towards inter-ethnic dating in the Bosnian context? And, how are obstacles to inter-ethnic dating overcome? The answers to these questions not only reveal something broader about inter-ethnic dating in post-conflict contexts elsewhere, but also about how dating can serve as a proxy to show how contact can result in positive outcomes for inter-ethnic relations. This makes an original contribution to the scholarship, which has so far focused on obstacles to dating and contact across ethnic lines, and which paints a pessimistic picture of the contact hypothesis (David 2020).

Dating across ethnic lines shows the potential for inter-ethnic relations to improve following conflict. It captures some of the potential effects that positive routine contact may have on individuals, such as the fostering of good relations; reducing prejudice or anxiety; or, increasing trust, knowledge of the outgroup, empathy or perspective taking (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 2008). It indicates that individuals are able to form meaningful relationships and that the obstacles to such mixing are either eroding or being successfully navigated. In order to theoretically capture this effect, the article adapts contact theory. Allport's (1979) contact hypothesis provides the starting point for many studies of prejudice, but it also comes under criticism for potentially increasing tensions between groups (Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux 2007; Kinder 1986). In the post-conflict context, a pessimism envelops the theory to the extent that contact is often ignored in scholarly endeavours, even when it may have positive effects. This is because Allport's theory is decontextualized from the post-conflict environment, where positive contact under managed circumstances is difficult (Hughes 2018, 629). If we strip away contact theory's requirement of a managed setting in which groups must meet, then we also better take into account the post-conflict environment. We therefore focus on activities that involve routine contact but are not managed in this way can have an inherently positive outcome on inter-ethnic relations. Dating is one such activity that can transform relationships because it involves both physical and symbolic (for example, with an outgroup's symbols, culture or tradition) contact with members of other groups.

The aim of this article is to explore inter-ethnic dating in Bosnia-Herzegovina and how an adaption of contact theory can help explain it, which future research can expand on. It does so by using a mixed methods design, based on Facebook focus groups and follow-up interviews. This article next turns to an outline of ethnic segregation and nationalist narratives in post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as the research undertaken to study these. The following section discusses contact theory, its limitations in the post-conflict context and how an adaption of it can help us examine positive outcomes of dating. The subsequent discussion of methodology

outlines the mixed methods design, before the paper turns to the empirical analysis of the data.

### **War, segregation and mixed marriages in Bosnia-Herzegovina**

War ravaged Bosnia-Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995. It claimed over 100,000 lives and led to the displacement of half the country's pre-war population (Merdzanovic 2017, 22). The war ended with the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, and since then has been the site of a major peacebuilding intervention. The agreement established a consociational democracy, which was aimed at limiting opportunities for ethno-nationalism to dominate politics, but was negotiated by elites who represented the three distinct ethnic groupings in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Bosniaks (or Bosnian Muslims), Serbs and Croats (Hromadžić 2015a, 887). The Agreement brought peace to the country, but it failed to establish a functioning democracy (Merdzanovic 2017, 22).

What used to be a highly diverse and ethnically mixed region, is now shockingly homogenous. Consociationalism has resulted in structural segregation and has crystallized the antagonistic identities that the nationalism of the 1990s produced. Together these have created a gulf in social distance between ethnic groups in the Yugoslav republic that prior to the war had the lowest levels of ethnic distancing among all of Yugoslavia's republics (Dević 2014, 85). Survey data supports this; respondents in Bosnia-Herzegovina are more prepared to socialize with other ethnicities than to come into familial relationships (Majstorović and Turjačanin 2013).

The key obstacles to inter-ethnic dating, as well as inter-ethnic contact more generally, in Bosnia-Herzegovina can be summarized as structural segregation and normative divisions. Bosnia-Herzegovina is a structurally segregated society where inter-ethnic contact is discouraged. 'Imposed consociational democracy' promotes political behaviour that reproduces ethnic segregation (Merdzanovic 2017, 1). In Bosnia-Herzegovina it has helped reduce the likelihood of repeated conflict, but simultaneously resulted in 'high segregation among groups, low-level conflict, frequent government crises, and divisive rhetoric from both sides' (Stroschein and Gisselquist 2014, 98). It has effectively marginalized non-aligned individuals and limited cross-ethnic cooperation. It has also entrenched the importance of ethnic interests at the expense of issues such as human rights, LGBT rights and the implementation of environmental policies, among others, which transcend ethnic boundaries (Piacentini 2019, 283). Any inter-ethnic activities are, therefore, significant markers of improved inter-group relations.

Normative divisions in the context of dating are based on ethnic identity constructions. Ethnic categories have been portrayed as sharply bounded, rather than emergent properties (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 28). The institutionalized ethnic classificatory system has made ethnicity a legitimate and

readily available category for individuals to represent their social reality, to frame their political claims and to organize political action, with little room to manoeuvre outside of this ethnic frame (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 27). These divisions are ubiquitous and associated norms of proper social conduct are reproduced by families, communities and public institutions (Hromadžić 2015a). This study explores how activities across ethnic lines can transform this and it questions the extent to which institutionally imposed ethnic categorizations approximate real 'groups' - these are open questions that can only be addressed empirically (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 27).

### ***Existing research on contact in Bosnia-Herzegovina***

Existing research on Bosnia-Herzegovina has explored this topic both directly and indirectly. Hromadžić's (2015a; 2015b) studies of why high school students in Mostar and Neum are willing to flirt across ethnic lines, but not date, is directly relevant to this study. They outline the normative environment that young people in Bosnia-Herzegovina inhabit and the pressure they feel against inter-ethnic mixing. Hromadžić identifies the problem: young people are open-minded and want to interact with other ethnic groups but feel they cannot. This article builds directly on her work, by further studying what happens when individuals successfully date across ethnic lines.

Closely connected is Pickering's (2007) work on how ordinary citizens in Bosnia-Herzegovina navigate the post-conflict environment. Similar to Hromadžić's work, she shows how Bosnians contest categories and identities that are imposed by the state (Pickering 2007, 70). Her work, however, does not examine how inter-ethnic divisions are overcome, instead it provides an in-depth analysis of factors that shape identities. Jansen (2018), Stefansson (2010) and Helms (2010; 2013) all examine everyday life in the ethnically divided state. Jansen looks at the life of ordinary people in an apartment block in Sarajevo to show how individuals go about their daily lives; while Helms looks at the effect of women having coffee together as part of reconciliation initiatives. Finally, Stefansson examines how primarily elderly Serbs and Bosniaks co-exist and cooperate by silencing sensitive political questions about the war. All of these studies are predominantly, if not wholly, ethnographic investigations of micro-level effects and dynamics. They outline how post-conflict state structures affect the lives of ordinary citizens, how ordinary citizens navigate this society, how they interact with it and how they mobilize against it. They show that there is a willingness at the level of the everyday to interact with outgroups and that individuals feel nationalist structures are imposed on them. The works offer a diverse set of positive outcomes and highlight the difficulty of studying inter-ethnic relations.

Studies also examine individuals who fall outside of the boundaries of the institutionally prescribe ethnic groupings. Agarín, McCulloch, and Murtagh

(2018, 300) show how these groups can be sidelined from society. These individuals instead use alternative, civic and non-ethnic forms of identification and have the potential to change the ethnically exclusive model of democracy (Piacentini 2020, 707). They reject ethnicity as the category they identify with and instead seek political participation on another socially relevant identity, such as gender, sexuality or any other core identity features not accounted for in the consociational structure (Agarin, McCulloch, and Murtagh 2018, 303).

This scholarship has both theoretical and methodological gaps that warrant further investigation. Theoretically, this research does not look at how ethnonational cleavages are transformed, rather it only outlines how they are resisted and navigated. Jansen (2018) does not examine how relationships are transformed in an apartment block and Hromadžić (2015a; 2015b) does not follow couples who did overcome all of the barriers placed before them. This article addresses this by examining how relationships may be transformed positively. Stefansson (2010) does examine how relationships are transformed among the elderly, where peaceful co-existence allows individuals to share a social space once again. But I argue that if we examine young people, we can see activities that go beyond peaceful co-existence and may have a greater potential to foster change. Finally, these authors do not try to investigate these transformative mechanisms. They present the obstacles, they present some strategies to overcome them, but they do not focus their studies on them. The aim of this study is to build on their findings by offering a broader set of considerations and transformative practices in the context of inter-ethnic dating.

Methodologically, all of the studies are quite similar, because they are all predominantly ethnographies of typical Bosnian citizens who follow societal norms, which helps us better understand such norms. They do not look at deviant cases, such as those individuals who oppose divisive nationalistic norms and change the nature of their relations with other ethnic groups. This article, on the other hand, focuses on those deviant cases. In this sense, it is like studies of non-aligned individuals and groups. However, these studies do not show how non-aligned individuals go about overcoming the obstacles they face through everyday activities. This study builds on this literature by looking specifically at how young people do this. The paper provides a step towards showing how certain types of activities, as a modification of contact theory, can overcome ethnic divisions to positively transform relationships. This can provide a foundation for future studies that can delve into this further.

### **Activity and contact theory following ethnic conflict**

Inter-ethnic activities develop inter-ethnic cultural understanding based on more frequent interactions with other groups, which can reduce the

tendency to stereotype and discriminate (Allport 1979). According to contact theory, body contact is in itself not sufficient for the reduction of prejudice, instead relationships need to have the potential to meaningfully develop, into friendships and beyond, where individuals can gain an understanding of the outgroup perspective (Donnelly and Hughes 2009, 150). Activity involves a broader understanding of contact, which can be either physical (akin to traditional contact theory) or symbolic (for example, with an outgroup's symbols, culture or tradition). More recent meta-analyses have provided strong evidence that contact results in positive relationship transformation (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Unstructured inter-group contact has now been shown to decrease prejudice and increase positive attitudes towards outgroups in a variety of settings (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Contact theory, however, is often 'decontextualized from its structural environment, in particular, where segregation greatly limits the opportunities for positive routine contact between groups' (Hughes 2018, 629). The key question, therefore, is not whether contact theory works, but whether it can work in structurally segregated post-conflict societies (Hughes 2018, 629).

Contact theory is, however, often criticized. Studies of designed efforts to foster contact have found that contact can result in an entrenchment of negative attitudes towards outgroups (Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux 2007; Kinder 1986). David (2019) argues that in the Western Balkans and Israel/Palestine, designed face-to-face encounters, such as inter-ethnic dialogue projects and workshops, ossified divisive historical narratives and nationalist sentiment. But the existing scholarship does not take into account how imposed efforts at contact seem artificial and can result in negative outcomes. It is the quality of contact that matters more than the quantity of contact (Mak, Brown, and Wadey 2013).

The contact literature now recognizes that Allport's optimal conditions are more nuanced than initially thought. The conditions present an ideal type for contact, but positive relationship transformation is also possible in their absence. Activity builds on these studies that employ contact theory since it takes into account that the post-conflict setting may not be as controlled or managed as Allport suggested was necessary for contact theory to work. His optimal conditions – equal status between groups, common goals, inter-group cooperation and support of authorities, law or customs – may not be achievable in a structurally segregated post-conflict environment. Conflicts do not end in any uniform manner and many remain in a perpetually 'frozen' state, thereby making the environment for Allport's optimal conditions poor, but within this context inter-ethnic endogenous activity is still possible.

Contact can occur informally, at the margins of society and without any external funding. Activities do not require the mediation of trained professionals, which can make efforts seem artificial (Hughes 2018, 635). Equal status between formerly opposed groups, one of the required optimal

conditions, may not be possible and efforts to create spaces for groups to meet on an equal basis, especially in the context of structural marginalization, can be interpreted as forced (Hodson and Hewstone 2013). Activities do not require this, since participants are also beneficiaries. This is in line with Allport's claim that 'To be maximally effective, contact and acquaintance should occur in ordinary purposeful pursuits' and should 'avoid artificiality' (Allport 1979, 489). This study provides an empirical example of how this can occur, using the Bosnian case study.

## Methodology

The paper employed a qualitative, mixed methods and sequential research design based on a single case study. The first part was composed of focus groups conducted on Facebook. These are useful for qualitative, exploratory research, and are well-complemented with more traditional methods, such as face-to-face interviews (Jamison et al. 2018, 2). In this case, they allowed users to contribute to a group discussion over the course of a week and as they went about their everyday lives. The researcher asked a new question each day and watched the discussion evolve, using further prompts when necessary (the interview guide can be found in [Appendix A](#)). The second part involved follow-up face-to-face interviews with participants. Together, such a research design can both explore and test emerging themes. This type of deep, qualitative analysis allows for detailed theory development and analysis, but often at the risk of generalizability.

A total of 41 participants from all three major ethnicities took part in six focus groups, which were conducted from October 2017 to January 2018. Five of these were held in Bosnia-Herzegovina, a further control group was held in Croatia. 30 women took part and 11 men, aged 18 to 36 (mean age of 24.5). Since the sample is not representative, it is not possible to make any conclusions on the gender discrepancy here. Recruitment was conducted through snowball sampling and through the extensive use of gatekeepers. This produced a self-selected sample of individuals who view other ethnic groups favourably. Many of these individuals, much like the rest of the population, were nevertheless not willing to date across ethnic lines. This presented an opportunity to select deviant cases – those who were willing to date across ethnic lines – and to study them in more detail.

The transcripts were analysed inductively, in order to identify how dating may result in relationship transformation across ethnic lines. The analysis focused on the two key obstacles to dating and other inter-ethnic activities: structural segregation and normative divisions. The purpose of the follow-up interviews was to further delve into how these obstacles were overcome and to alleviate the risk of the social context of the focus groups from affecting the data. The interviews were held in Sarajevo, Tuzla and Banja Luka in



January 2018, with a total of ten individuals. The interviews were semi-structured and recorded.

## **Obstacles to dating and how they are overcome**

### ***Structural segregation and cooperative activities***

Structural segregation in Bosnia-Herzegovina makes it difficult for young people to have positive routine contact with their peers from other ethnic groups. However, the individuals in this study's self-selected sample of participants, who saw other ethnicities favourably, were keen to discuss strategies and places where they could have this routine contact. These findings are different, but complementary, to the numerous ethnographic studies discussed earlier in the paper. While those studies were able to observe how individuals navigate and sometimes overcome segregation in particular moments, the focus groups and interviews in this study capture a broader set of contexts where segregation can be overcome. These participants are not only pointing to problems in their lived experience, they are also highlighting particular types of activities that can overcome these problems and that they wish to see more of.

The activity participants saw as most effective at overcoming structural segregation was cooperation through inter-ethnic civil society efforts, volunteering, activism and travel. Groups that facilitated this included international civil society organizations (for example, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement); regional civil society organizations that provide exchange programmes (for example, the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, YIHR) and various classes and discounted travel opportunities. Many organizations are either designed to be inter-ethnic (such as the YIHR) or are not based on or legitimated by ethnic identity in the way that political structures in the country are (see Helms 2010; Puljek-Shank and Verkoren 2017). All participants, regardless of their views on inter-ethnic dating, expressed a desire for more such efforts and viewed it as the best strategy to overcome ethnic division. It featured in all focus group discussions and all interviews.

These activities provided opportunities to meet other ethnicities outside of institutionalized segregation. For example, Marija (Croat that grew up in Travnik; Sarajevo group 2) listed the various workshop, seminars, exchanges and camps she attended and how they allowed her to meet people and reduce prejudices against others, to which Jasmin (Bosniak), responded, 'How are you supposed to make friends [with other ethnicities] if you are separated in school based on religion? If you are forced to vote based on ethnicity? You need to consciously fight against institutional divisions'. Much like Piacentini (2020, 707) and Agarín, McCulloch, and Murtagh (2018, 303) find, these individuals are looking for alternative, non-ethnic forms of identification,

but the effect is more subtle than seeking political participation along new identity features. Instead, it is about pursuing one's interests through activities that involve contact with other ethnic groups.

Participants in the study were calling for change that would help result in positive relationship transformation between ethnicities, but this change was not explicitly political. For example, Davor (a Croat from Vitez; non-Sarajevo group) wanted to see 'centres for young people, also in small places, or somewhere where people could meet thematically. Right now, in small places, this only happens ad hoc'. Davor is connecting societal change to the shared pursuit of activities. The transformative potential in the activities is implied, which speaks directly to Allport's original conceptualization of contact theory. The pursuit of common objectives lessens prejudice, since 'Only the type of contact that leads people to *do* things together is likely to result in changed attitudes [...] It is the cooperative striving for the goal that engenders solidarity' (Allport 1979, 276). It is also different to what, for example, Hromadžić (2015a) observes in schools or Helms (2010) observes over coffees. These young people are not talking about how they navigate segregation, they are talking about how the effects of segregation can be diminished.

This cooperation is laden with dating potential because these activities were a space where the 'forbidden' was allowed to occur, such as inter-ethnic or same-sex dating. Individuals discursively connected dating to positive relationship transformation. For example, Marija (above) continued her discussion of cooperative activities, 'all of these encounters, of that type, are an opportunity for the evolution of our conscience on a personal level, to meet friends, and in doing so potential partners'. Participants understood that cooperative activities were imbued with this potential. These were activities not constrained by segregation and were therefore regarded as transformative by participants. Adna (Bosniak from Tuzla; non-Sarajevo group 2) remarked the following when discussing individuals who volunteered for various humanitarian causes, 'I know of at least 10 people who had prejudices and strictly stuck to their own, only to then interact with [other ethnicities]. And this does not have to be just dating, even if they are only friendly connections something is achieved'. Participants are aware that activities with this type of contact are imbued with transformative potential because it goes beyond the casual. It is instead acquaintance contact combined with the acquisition of knowledge about the outgroup, such as intercultural educational efforts and social travel, where individuals gain direct experience with other groups (Allport 1979, 266–267).

The transcripts were littered with examples of individuals meeting during such activities, including clear moments when attitudes changed, and how such efforts were directly related to socialization outside of family and community circles. This was even more pronounced for individuals coming from small and ethnically divided locations. Adna continued, that joining

organizations and travelling allowed her to meet people outside of her circle of friends. She continued, 'I have the feeling that if I stay only in my community and consider my friends, as well as their friends. Then I realize this is quite a homogeneous area'. Cooperation also results in socialization. In a follow-up interview, Adna reflected 'I would return home after these seminars and talk about the people there. And I would always mention that it was not only Bosniak kids there. I think that my parents would really notice that' (interview; non-Sarajevo group 2). Adna is describing a process of internalizing a different set of norms and ideologies in society. Cooperation in the context of dating lies at the intersection of primary and secondary socialization, since the individual can be simultaneously caught between the influence of the family (primary) and peers (secondary).

### ***Normative divisions and the pursuit of shared aspirations***

The pursuit of shared aspirations helps break ethnic stereotypes and resists dominant ethnic frameworks. This is not only a micro-level effect, it has also been observed among municipal elites in Bosnia (Butler and Tavits 2020). It occurs because information on shared aspirations focuses attention on non-ethnic categories, based on preferences rather than ethnicity, which are not divisive (Butler and Tavits 2020). Such information enables individuals to perceive outgroup members as part of a new ingroup, thereby promoting a process of recategorization (Hewstone, Rubin, and Willis 2002). This enables relationships to overcome normative divisions that religion and family represent. It is in these settings that norms against inter-ethnic relationships are particularly strong. Individuals who date across ethnic lines transgress these divisive social rules. The activity of dating (often) holds two shared aspirations for individuals: marriage and children. The general acknowledgement that 'every relationship is a potential marriage' (interview with Jasmina, a Bosniak from Sarajevo; Sarajevo group 2) is a part of the reason why families worry so much about inter-ethnic dating.

Participants were acutely aware of this. Even if they were not expressly forbidden from dating other ethnic groups, they were advised to avoid it. Amina (Bosniak from Tešanj; non-Sarajevo group 1) recounted her experience,

I recently spoke to my parents about this topic, and they would be OK with it, but if I can, that it is best to avoid [dating across ethnic lines]. When I asked why, they said a few things I never thought of – kids.

Amina continued to say that her concerns, conveyed from her parents, are that these children would be confused and treated differently because they would be 'mixed'.

The participants saw religion at the core of this problem, however, religion itself was not constructed in a negative light in the eyes of participants. Although religion and ethnicity were used interchangeably by participants to define groups, most felt that ethnicity was constructed and imposed on them (potentially reflecting the well-educated nature of the sample). It was subsequently rejected. Religion was on the other hand embraced. Religious values were equated to family values and, for many, religion represented a functioning part of a dysfunctional, nationalist society. One participant who was relatively cynical about religion in Bosnia, said that it also provided opportunities for various religions and ethnicities to mix. She cited the example of the midnight mass concert in the Sarajevo cathedral, which was attended by a mix of ethnicities. Some enjoyed the music, some the company and some attended since it was a major event on the Sarajevo cultural scene. Many participants cited examples of how they celebrated Bajram, Orthodox Easter or Catholic Easter with their neighbours of a different religion. However, religion's pragmatic elements were also seen as insurmountable obstacles to inter-ethnic dating. Emblematic and ubiquitous were questions over what holidays a couple ought to celebrate, whether or not to circumcise a child and how to name children:

Lejla: [My ex-boyfriend and I] used to celebrate his holidays together. We would go on lunches, dinners, and so on. Since my relatives did not accept him (other than my sister), we did not have lunches or celebrate holidays on my side. Then later I was with a guy (Orthodox) and realized that because of our different beliefs, customs and so on, I would rather be with someone of the same faith as me

(Bosniak; Sarajevo focus group).

Blanka:[discussing her inter-ethnic relationship] people are always asking how do we decide what holidays to celebrate? What will we name our children? (Croat; interview, Sarajevo group).

These seemingly trivial problems were significant to many participants. Celebrating more than one holiday or not using a name with clear ethnic or religious identification resulted in not belonging to a clear group. Mixed religious background or atheism both presented separate groups; in other words, it was difficult to be Bosniak and atheist, just as much as it was difficult to be Bosniak and Catholic. Likewise, being Bosniak and Serb, meant that one was neither one nor the other. Amina, whose parents advised her to avoid mixed partnerships, could not think of how she could reconcile her wish to raise her children according to Muslim traditions with someone who equally prioritised their own religious identity.

Religion makes claims about every aspect of individuals' lives, from dietary requirements to dating customs (Grzymala-Busse 2012, 423). Individuals who were prepared to date across ethnic lines, and their partners, had developed

repertoires of practices that changed these everyday aspects into something new and transformative. Emblematic and ubiquitous were questions over what holidays a couple ought to celebrate, whether or not to circumcise a child and how to name children. Celebrating more than one holiday or not using a name with clear ethnic or religious identification resulted in not belonging to a clear group. Typical of this was the scenario discussed in the Tuzla focus group:

Merima (Bosniak): I know of an interesting example from my neighbourhood, where a Bosniak married a Serb. They have two sons, one they gave a Muslim name, the other Orthodox. When they grew up, the boy who had the Orthodox name, he chose his own religious affiliation, and he went to the mosque, he identifies as Bosniak. The parents let them choose who they were, where they belong, without any pressure.

Lejla (Bosniak): In those types of relationships the parents usually give their kids some kind of universal names [ . . . ] or they celebrate both Christmas and Bajram.

Such efforts to think outside of the prescribed normative framework were common with individuals who were prepared to date other ethnicities. These individuals were developing their own repertoire of practices that allowed their relationships to function and allowed them to maintain peaceful relations and civility with those around them (Mac Ginty 2014, 554). Mixed partnerships are thus presented with three choices should they wish to enter into a formal union: they can choose not to enter one at all; they can adopt the customs of one side only (which was not seen as an option by participants); or, they can have a non-traditional wedding by combining traditions or shunning them altogether. Some mixed couples decide against marriage due to the symbolic and ethnically homogenous nature of marriage (ceremonies are predominantly religious and they are celebrated with national or ethnic symbols, in particular flags and music). For example, Blanka (Croat) commented:

Blanka: Here in Bosnia it is customary to have a flag at a wedding. Which flag? How will I tell my uncle which flag? If I need to call 300 people to a wedding, how do I tell them that 'the rules are this'. That they cannot order this song. This is one of the reasons why I will never get married. When someone in my family asks me why I have not gotten married yet, I tell them it is because I cannot tell every idiot in the family that they cannot do this and that. Just so that they know, it is not me, it is them (Croat; interview, Sarajevo group)

This is reflected in the most recent census data: 80.3% of ethnically mixed couples are married, versus a mean of 82.6% for homogenous couples from the three main ethnic groups (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2017). Moreover, 4.4% are in consensual unions, whereas the mean for homogenous couples is 1.7% (the remainder of family units are made up of single parents; *ibid.*). These alternatives highlight the complex predicament

inter-ethnic couples face. The shared aspiration of marriage can have a transformative effect, but the obstacles couples face in this process mean that many choose not to pursue it and think of alternative solutions. These solutions open the space for alternatives to, not only marriage, but also ethnic division. Dating, as a road to marriage, is imbued with transformative potential because it promotes the creation of innovative practices to overcome divisions. In the context of marriage, these practices involve a key facet of Bosnian society, religion, which can bring people into positive contact with the religious norms of ethnic others and thus lower prejudice. Even when religious symbols are used instrumentally, for example to hold a wedding in a church, this can have unintended religious consequences since it brings people into contact with religious norms of a certain group (Mitchell 2006, 1145).

### *The family and dating*

Family pressure is the greatest obstacle to inter-ethnic dating in Bosnia. Participants were acutely aware that families, including extended family and especially grandparents, were not supportive of dating across ethnic lines:

Aleksandra (Serb from Novi Pazar): Those who do not care about national or ethnic belonging, they feel an enormous pressure from their family and their community to which they often surrender, due to a strongly expressed call to 'respect traditional' norms of behaviour.

Blanka (Croat from Sarajevo): I agree. The feeling that you are betraying your family values is too strong and makes personal beliefs secondary.  
(Sarajevo group).

Participants aligned their identities to family expectations. What were families so scared of? The prospect of marriage and, therefore, children. Participants were aware that their parents feared their potential grandchildren would not belong to their group or to any group; they could be the end of their family line, echoing Hromadžić's (2015a, 899) findings that inter-ethnic partnerships are referred to as sterile.

Planning for these eventualities requires pragmatic solutions to normative ethnic and religious divisions. Agreeing on non-ethnic names, wedding customs and holiday celebrations are just examples of these acts. They challenge collective stereotypes and resist established normative frameworks. Participants were aware an inter-ethnic relationship was defined by everyday acts of resistance to the dominant normative framework. Blanka described meeting her Bosniak partner's extended family,

They came to meet me, smiling, and when I introduced myself, you could see the disappointment in their faces and the strange looks. But I always make a joke of it and it passes. It is important that he takes a stand (interview; Sarajevo group).

Blanka resists through humour and her partner must 'take a stand'.

### **The role of structural conditions – the Croatian control group**

The Croatian control group validated the findings from Bosnia-Herzegovina and highlighted the role of structural segregation in inter-ethnic dating. Participants lived in a similar normative environment to their Bosnian counterparts, but Croatia does not have a consociational model of government that reinforces structural segregation. This enabled young people to more easily date across ethnic lines. Participants in Croatia held a positive view of outgroups and faced similar obstacles as their Bosnian counterparts: family and religion. Cooperation and shared aspirations were also observed in the Croatian focus group, just as they were in the Bosnian ones. What set the Croatian group apart was that structural segregation was not as pronounced.

Participants highlighted this in terms of education and economic mobility. Education is, for the most part, not split in Croatia and there were few complaints about ethnic divisions in schools. The divisions that do exist, in Vukovar, were criticized in much the same way as in Bosnia-Herzegovina. A second key factor was economic mobility: Croatians had more of a chance to move out from home and away from local pressures. Many of the participants in Petrinja and Sisak had moved to Zagreb for study or work, thereby exposing themselves to a new set of norms and expectations. Participants explicitly mentioned this: that if they faced problems about inter-ethnic relationships at home, then they could easily move. For example, Marija, a Croat in a mixed partnership in Sarajevo, still faced structural segregation, '[in the old town] people openly say, only Muslims'. Additionally, Marija found it difficult, even in urban centre such as Sarajevo, to rent as an unmarried couple, 'My partner and I searched for an apartment in Sarajevo. It was a great problem that we were not married'. Segregation and expectations over relationships thus overlap to cause a significant obstacle for these couples: even if they can find an apartment as members of minorities, they then have to marry, which is difficult because of their mixed ethnic backgrounds. In Croatia, participants found locations, such as Zagreb, where this was not an issue. This highlights the validity of the findings in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where structural segregation severely limits potential for contact and inter-ethnic dating, even among individuals who see other groups favourably. Common interests, common participation and social travel are easier to pursue without these limitations (Allport 1979, 276). Consequently, acquaintance potential is increased.

## Conclusion

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, as in many other post-conflict contexts, structural segregation and normative divisions make dating across ethnic lines difficult. A detailed and rich scholarship outlines why this is and why young people who are eager to reach across ethnic lines still do not do so. Authors, such as Helms (2013), Hromadžić (2015a; 2015b), Jansen (2018), Piacentini (2020) and Stefansson (2010), among others, show the many obstacles that prevent positive routine inter-ethnic interactions. They also show how individuals navigate these obstacles to cope in the aftermath of conflict.

The existing scholarship captures coping mechanisms that allow for peaceful co-existence, but it does not go beyond this to examine the transformative potential of specific activities. The studies do not examine how relationships are transformed or how young individuals conceptualize positive relationship transformation with their ethnic others. This paper does so by speaking to young people about dating across ethnic lines, and thus capturing a broader set of considerations that guide these inter-ethnic practices.

This study analyses inter-ethnic dating through an adaption of contact theory that focuses on activities that result in the type of contact that can transform relationships between ethnic groups for the better. Inter-ethnic dating is thus found to transform relationships because it involves cooperation and shared aspirations, which enable individuals to overcome structural barriers between ethnicities and to resist divisive normative frameworks. By examining attitudes towards inter-ethnic dating, it is possible to understand the cooperative interactions that young people in Bosnia-Herzegovina see as potentially transformative. These young people also show a repertoire of practices that can be used to overcome ethnic divisions. By examining young people, we can see activities that go beyond peaceful co-existence and may have a greater potential to foster change.

An examination of inter-ethnic dating also reframes Allport's contact theory, in order to better understand of how contact can have a positive outcome in a segregated post-conflict context. This is because activities involve a type of contact between different groups, both physical and symbolic (such as interaction with outgroup symbols), which allows them to gain knowledge about the outgroup. These activities can take place in domains often ignored by the scholarship. Activities that occur in day-to-day life are not seen as forced or artificial by publics (Hodson and Hewstone, 2013); they do not aim to create shared narratives in order to overcome a violent past, which are often rejected (Hughes 2018, 629); and, they are laden with acquaintance potential that can transform relationships (Allport 1979). Other types of activities which, much like dating, are not seen as artificial or imposed on inter-ethnic communities provide an avenue for future research



in this area, which could start identifying which activities can transform inter-ethnic relations for the better and why.

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## Appendix A Interview guide (questions and prompts)

- (1) What do you look for in a partner?
  - (a) Does where a person lives play a part in your choice of partners?
    - i. Why?
  - (b) Does ethnicity play a part?
    - i. Why?
- (2) How did/do you meet potential partners?
  - (a) Where?
- (3) What would you say are the practices associated with dating in (your city)?
  - (a) Why do you think this is?
  - (b) How could you improve the dating scene/choice of partners in your city?
- (4) Where do you and your friends go on dates?
  - (a) Why?
- (5) Do you or have you had a partner from a different ethnicity?
  - (a) Was the different ethnicity a barrier?
  - (b) How did you overcome it, if it was?
  - (c) Did your friends, work colleagues or families know about you?
  - (d) Did you meet each other's friends, work colleagues or families?
  - (e) Could you discuss the relationship freely with your friends, colleagues or families?
    - (f) Why would you/would you not date a different ethnicity?
- (6) Do you see a difference between dating and being friends with someone from a different ethnicity?
  - (a) What about working together with someone from a different ethnicity?
- (7) Closing comments/any questions?