

FACT



From the Story to the Act

Violence processing and
prevention through empathic
communication & theatre

ACT!

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1. Introduction



What is the ACT! project?

ACT! is a collaboration between Violence Prevention Network (VPN) in Germany and Zoukak Theatre Company in Lebanon. The one-year project (02/2020-12/2020) was funded by ifa – Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen e.V. (zivik funding scheme) with resources provided by the German Federal Foreign Office.

Project organisations and approaches

The ACT! Project set out to explore the connections of the work between two non-governmental organisations, working in different settings, with many years of experience in their respective fields of work.

Zoukak was created in 2006 in Lebanon dedicated to theatre practice as a social and political involvement, with a belief in theatre as a space for common reflection and in collectivity as a position against marginalizing systems. It positions itself outside the dominating discourses in its context through direct action within communities. It tested and developed theatrical, psychosocial and drama therapy interventions in emergency situations and beyond, working with incarcerated youths, children with multiple disabilities, women subjected to domestic violence and other marginalized fractions of the society. Zoukak is committed to work with people directly and indirectly affected by war and is committed to applying theatre in various fields: through social engagement, therapy and education. Through its artistic creations, Zoukak tackles topics that question the status quo in its context and beyond. The theatre company structures its research and creation processes around cycles of work, producing an array of projects around specific themes; such as gender and sexuality, history, power and religion, death and immortality, childhood and violence, re-enactment, among others. Zoukak also endeavours to develop an environment of dialogue and reflection around the performing arts in Lebanon and to provide artistic development and international touring opportunities for local artists, for instance by curating since 2013 “Zoukak Sidewalks”, an international festival and “Focus Liban” a platform for the support and diffusion of work by local emerging artists.

Violence Prevention Network (VPN) is a German NGO working on the prevention of extremism, offering intervention and deradicalisation programmes for ideologically motivated offenders since 2001. VPN was one of the first organizations in Europe that focused its initiatives on the topics of deradicalisation and exit work within and outside of the penitentiary system. VPN's tertiary prevention programmes successfully address reducing ideologically motivated, serious crime and extreme acts of violence, particularly in the areas of right-wing extremism and Islamist extremism.

The programmes are based on *anti-violence work and education of responsibility®* and focus on *non-judgmental approaches, conversation at eye-level, and developing trustful long-term working relationships* to sustainably support individuals in their distancing processes from extremist scenes. This includes working with families, prison and probation staff, as well as schools and other institutions. Violence Prevention Network's international projects focus on collaboration and knowledge exchange with local project partners in various topical areas, seeking to improve practice and research in the area of preventing and countering extremism.

Background information and project goals

In our first calls to start what later became the ACT! project, we realised that while the methods and approaches to our respective work are different, our work is connected by shared values and topical links, as well as an overlap in beneficiaries. It is for this reason that we sought to combine the methodological advantages of both organisations' work and explore these links. The ACT! project therefore set out to have a collective associative experience, explore and pilot the idea of combining the methods of anti-violence work and theatre work. The project aimed to design and deliver a training, which mixes theatre and anti-violence techniques by Zoukak in Beirut, Lebanon.

The project took place at an exceptional time in Lebanon and worldwide: in the middle of a lockdown due to the international COVID-19 situation, Lebanon's financial-political collapse since October 2019, as well as during and after the 4th of August blast of Beirut's port.

Any community approach has to connect with the context in which it is delivered, which often have multiple layers of violence intersecting with each other. The Lebanese context includes the deeply hidden, denied and forgotten layers coming from the wars and invasions (civil war 1975-1990, Israeli invasion 1978-2000); the ones rooted in the logic of the political system (i.e. the confessional system); the ones rooted in the social structures related to the patriarchy or extremism; the ones more recently related to the *economic* and *political collapse*. All of those layers create a potential field for the escalation of a violence on various levels.

Given the international partnership and explorative, process-oriented working style used in the project, it seemed limiting to focus selectively on one type of violence or context. So the conversations and training designed in the frame of this project sought to work across different types of violence and contexts. Moreover, it became an invitation for youth and young adults to connect with their personal experiences of violence and rewire their own systems in order to perform new actions within their contexts.

This document is not a classic type of methodological publication nor a ready-to-use guidelines' publication.

It is conceived as a self-reflection on own practices; as a next step in the discussions with peers that rely on distinct sets of tools: theatre and Nonviolent Communication (also called empathetic communication), which were combined with the exchange and input delivered by Violence Prevention Network and external experts.

While the original project set-up was designed around two one-week in-person workshop weeks, due to the global pandemic, we were facing restrictions on international travel. We changed forms of exchange to adapt to this new situation, with workshops, meetings and discussions taking place on Zoom and GoToMeeting instead of in Beirut. While being fully aware that these cannot replace the original idea of the exchange in all respects, we found new ways of creatively and flexibly overcoming problems and working together to reach our project goals.



The training implemented through this project relies on empathic communication / Nonviolent Communication and theatre tools to create a space of personal and collective action to connect with and process experiences of violence.

The process of reflecting on one's own experiences of violence – as an individual or as a group – is a helpful exercise of self-reflection, which can contribute to changing patterns of violence. In preventative uses of anti-violence work for example, the exploration of biographical experiences and connection points to different forms of violence is a first step to reaching the goal of violence prevention. It is the basis for enhancing an individual's understanding of their own role and options in decision-making; an experience that can be profoundly empowering.

The way of artistic creation Zoukak adopts is experiential and process-oriented. The process itself is open and flexible, based on freedom of expression and neutral listening. This seeks to create equal opportunities of participation in the creation process to all participants. Process-orientation means that practice and theory melt into synergy in the final process (in our case: Zoukak's final workshops). *Therefore, the outcome of the creation is not only output oriented but is also a reflection on the process.*

In that sense, the design and delivery of the training was part of the development of the methodological approach impacting the grid used for approaching violence. During the project development, various topics were identified as potential points of exploration and as meeting points for theatre and anti-violence. Some of those topics will be introduced below before delving more in details in the training itself.

2. Focal Topics

The cornerstones of anti-violence work

One of the topics we have drawn inspiration from is anti-violence work – as practiced at Violence Prevention Network and beyond. We understand anti-violence work as a set of methods and principles that are strongly based in conversation, biographical work, empathy and continuous reflection of our client's reality and current situation.

Violence is a manifestation of a complex process, which involves a variety of social and psychological factors, as well as the history of an individual and their environment (i.e. social, political, etc.). Violence is expressed through a variety of different channels, including verbal, psychological or physical forms of violence. The understanding of the complexity of violent behavior is a key element in the approach to tackle violence as a phenomenon. This observation is crucial in attempting to find methods of analysing violent behavior and to motivate the subject to engage in a self-reflection process.

Violence Prevention Network's focus is on support for individuals in changing violent behavior and distancing from extremist scenes. Together with our clients, we develop strategies for maintaining stability and work towards a life without (physical) violence. This includes developing the ability to *assess own needs, understanding one's own offenses and dynamics of violent behavior and developing a plan for the future*. While one of our main target groups for this long-term work are sentenced offenders within prison, these strategies can be usefully implemented in more preventative spaces, too.

For instance, key to working with clients, their families and social network are relationships that are built on trust. In order to reach this level of *trust and credibility*, interventions tend to work best when based on transparent communication, confidentiality, a voluntary engagement with the programme or activity, and *non-judgmental communication at eye-level*. This often requires long-term interventions. Another way of reaching client's trust and developing a *space for self-reflection and change* is to support individuals in developing their own set of goals and aims. These can then be the basis for mutual work together, including supporting individuals to assess and strengthen available resources, positive networks and helpful influences in their lives.

Being that large parts of anti-violence and biographical work are largely *conversation-based*, the ability to use a variety of communication techniques is essential. Violence Prevention Network's practitioners are trained in the use of different communication techniques, including guidance on how to create open communicative spaces using different question and interview techniques. *Open and non-judgmental (or, as it is often put: empathetic) communication is a very powerful tool of conveying the feeling of being accepted and heard by a conversation partner*. An open and non-judgmental approach is not equal to agreeing with the ideological stances of our clients. On the contrary, it includes taking clear stances of *not* accepting ideologies of injustice and group-based hatred. At the same time, practitioners communicate that although they do not agree with these ideological positions, they are open to listening to the client, continue to support them and take their needs seriously.

The feeling of being accepted and heard is one that many violent offenders are and have been lacking in their lives. It can therefore offer something of interest to them and thus presents a good connection point to mutual work. In order to connect with a client, empathy and mutual respect are two of the most important factors that contribute to creating a positive working atmosphere.

There are different tools in anti-violence work for supporting clients in analysing their own situation and violent behavior. One of those tools is biographical work. When persons get involved in the process of reconstructing their own biography, they learn to view themselves and their surroundings differently. In this process, they can gain more clarity, self-reflection and often unexpected insights on patterns of interaction in their life, as well as social settings that influenced their path towards extremism. It enables a reflection of the circumstances one is brought up in, those that we often see as "normal", either because they are an everyday lived reality or because they are in the past and were never scrutinized. This new knowledge mobilizes emotional and cognitive processes that are essential in the process of self-reflection.

The project partners saw synergy in exploring whether the basic ideas and stances of anti-violence work could be performed and therefore moved to a higher emotional level if combined with theatrical components. It is by combining the concepts and ideas of conversation-based approaches with artistic expressions where we see future synergy. In the training designed in the frame of this project, the approach is considered as an invitation to participants to connect with their own history and their own relation to violence in an autobiographical effort.



Artistic Exploration: The film “Die Rüden”

To further explore the linkages between anti-violence work and performative arts, we introduced the German movie *Die Rüden*¹ as an artistic exploration example to our project exchange. The movie was directed by Connie Walther and conceptualised together with the actress and experienced prison theatre implementer Sabine Winterfeldt, both of whom introduced and discussed the movie and artistic choices and development with us during the project.

Plot: The movie is set in prison and centers around a group of four sentenced violent offenders and their pathway of change. One of the vehicles the movie uses to explore the notion of toxic masculinity is a prison programme, in which the young men partake and work with aggressive dogs. The interactions in the programme and joint analysis of the dogs' aggressive behavior is led by a professional dog trainer, who seeks to inspire change and self-reflection in the young men. See trailer [here](#).



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Reflection: Key elements of the connection between the dogs and the prisoners evolved around the intention the prisoners had when approaching the animal (confrontation, connection etc.), the way they manage their emotional states (fear, anger etc.), the awareness of the various personal and collective spaces, connected to the idea of limits. At various moments in the movie, experiences of those layers were presented and related to the interaction between the human and the dog showing how an empathic connection can be established as a dance between self-empathy and empathy, between me and the other, in order to reach a safer space of connection and communication.

Connection: In experiential theatre, intention is at the root of the practice. For Zoukak, the intentions of the actor toward themselves, the other and the audience, this triangle of relationships, in the here and now, are at the core of the theatrical approach. In Nonviolent Communication, the intention we have toward the other and our relationships are the prerequisite of any form of communication. Such connections between the intention, the management of own emotions and the focus on the present moment were developed in the training approach presented in this paper. The training therefore focussed on the importance of listening and empathy as an entry point to process violence, giving specific attention to non verbal communication.

The activities the “walking”, “the blind dance”, “The intention the pulse” presented below give a good illustration of personal spaces and non-verbal communication, which are key elements in establishing contacts with self and others. In the “walking” and “the blind dance” exercises, participants explore within their body their awareness of their own spaces and those of others; how they can intentionally connect with honesty and respect with the other spaces through specific theatre exercises. “The intention of the pulse” is a body-to-body dialogue. It seeks to work beyond language and verbal communication by focussing on impulses and body language. The activity “Introduction to Non-violent Communication” is a good illustration of the relationship between intention, emotions and needs.

Drama therapy and theatre work

The drama therapy approach has developed from an experimental process based on two different schools: *experimental theatre* and *clinical psychology*. It uses the technical basis of theatre as a tool to allow alternative ways of expression, as well as a personal investigation. At the same time, it relies on a specific methodology, which is based on a therapeutic approach characterized by:

- > The neutrality of the facilitator, their availability and their ability to listen to the group and to each participant without judgements.
- > The use of group dynamics as the catalyst of the resolution of personal dilemmas and group conflicts. The facilitator highlights and protects the freedom of each participant and the limits of that freedom in relation to that of the other participants.
- > The specificity of the time and space of the work and its particular method of communication that relies “exclusively” on theatrical mediums.

Zoukak provides a specific approach to psychosocial interventions of drama therapy and socially engaged theatre. It builds its drama therapy interventions around three dynamic factors: time, space and sensory perception. The time frame of the workshop is presented as personal body/mind experimentation,

where each participant can immerse in their own psychosomatic emotive universe, amplifying perception of the self, and developing the socio-emotional competences, observing their past and re-appropriating the responsibility of their own future. While these topics are also explored in anti-violence and biographical work outlined above, the methods and aims are very different here: the objective of such interventions is to lead the participant, through theatrical exercises, to become aware of their corporeal self-defense mechanisms and to navigate through a personal exploration path from a point A to a point B while reflecting on their relation to themselves.

This approach works on the body image and the relation to the self and the body, reinforcing self-esteem and confidence, in a group dynamic context that fosters empathy. Further effects include the development of personal contentions and social behavior, personal expressive skills, imagination, and social communication skills.



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In this project, Zoukak used some of the key settings of its drama therapy and theatrical approaches to develop a newly designed training. More precisely, it *creates a safe space of self-exploration through the use of the coded languages of theatre and Nonviolent Communication, combined with a neutrality of the facilitator / trainer* as described above. Both theatre and Nonviolent Communication channel any communication through an exclusive set of specific frameworks and tools. Those framework and tools - the codes - create a space and time where emotions and needs can unfold more easily: on the one hand, through the imagination and improvisation, and on the other hand through empathy and a set of key code of conducts:

1. **Respect privacy: any statement and action done in the room does not leave the room.**
2. **Avoid judgments on comments on what the others say or do in order to avoid self censorship and to respect the freedom of each participant.**
3. **Use the language of I as appropriate: say “I felt this way” not “you made me feel this way”; base the communication on observations and facts.**

Those simple requests guarantee the resolution of the collective dynamics in a nonviolent way while guaranteeing the freedom of choice of each person.

Intersectional violence prevention

One of the first exchanges during this project tackled the concepts of intersectionality and epistemic violence. Myassa Kraitt introduced the framework and concepts in order to include domination, discrimination and oppression into the discussion about violence and anti-violence work. She is a social- and cultural anthropologist and trainer specialized on anti-discriminatory violence prevention.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is understood as a *framework that takes into account several forms of discriminations and disadvantages of individuals or groups*. Intersectionality analyses and conceptualizes the overlapping and intersecting aspects of identity like ethnicity, religion, sect, gender, class, age, etc. and their combination in order to understand discrimination, oppression and forms of violence. This concept acknowledges the individual and unique experience of discrimination and that different forms of oppressions are linked with each other. The Oxford Dictionary defines the term intersectionality as “the interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage”. Its importance was first highlighted and after recognised by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989.

Why should we care about intersectionality in violence prevention?

Developing a holistic and complex idea about violence is crucial for understanding how different forms of violence affect and shape us as individuals and as practitioners but also influence the life-realities of the beneficiaries we work with. An intersectional understanding of violence does not narrow its lens to physical and psychological forms of violence. Instead, it opens its perspective to understand the complexities of personal, social, cultural, and economic realities of our beneficiaries, which cannot be understood by using narrow definitions of and approaches towards violence. It is of importance to understand that personal life-realities are influenced by individual, historical, generational, social, political and global factors. Narrowing these aspects down to psycho-social readings of violence and methods hinder the ability of developing a holistic and deeper understanding of the life-circumstances of our clientele. A narrow lens that limits the ability to see violence in relation to the interconnectedness of different aspects of identity and political power structures often leads to the understanding of causes for violence, including its psychological and cultural factors. Therefore, it is crucial to not only keep an analytical eye on the forms of violence that may be obvious to us (e.g. physical violence), but also on the forms of violence that are often not mentioned and discussed (e.g. epistemic violence, structural violence, etc.).

Approaches of intersectionality and a wider definition of violence can be fertile for a deeper understanding of anti-violence work and violence prevention. For instance, it can inform our thinking and analysis when asking essential questions of why and how our beneficiaries became victims and/or offenders of different forms of violence. It supports our analysis of how these experiences and events can be understood in relation to each other and uncover the influence that less visible forms of violence may have on our clients.

Epistemic Violence

Epistemic violence explains how *domination* can be (and is being) directly or indirectly maintained and justified through *knowledge and knowledge-production*. This concept of violence was elaborated by post-colonial theorists, who understood it as vital to *reflect on knowledge that is taken for granted*. It includes questions like: *How do we know what we believe is true? Who and how is this knowledge gathered? Whose perspectives are represented? Whose are left out?* In doing so, it connects the concept of knowledge (and “truth”) to the concept of power (i.e. whose voice is being heard).

Why does thinking of epistemic violence help practice?

By connecting the topic of epistemic violence to the topic of “extremism” and “radicalism”, we entered the ground of critically examining knowledge-production and discussions in this field. It enabled us to reflect on our own assumptions, beliefs and funds of knowledge about extremism, violence and violent perpetrators. This is of particular interest, because we often encounter complex biographies, which include being a victim, while being a perpetrator at the same or another time – with overlapping and continuous experiences of violence. Missing these pieces of the puzzle would lead to a reduction of our understanding, and possible misjudgment of the interventions needed. Intersectionality offers opportunities for preparing and designing methods for interventions without neglecting the relationships between social inequality and discrimination.

In Sum

In our project, the topics of intersectionality and epistemic violence were combined with psycho-social models of understanding violence in order to discuss concepts of radicalisation and violence on the micro-, meso- and macro-level. Discussing different forms and effects of violence of these levels is crucial for practitioners' and professional stances. In line with the project's objective to adopt a critical approach on violence through theatre work, it was crucial to understand the complexities and dynamics of violence.

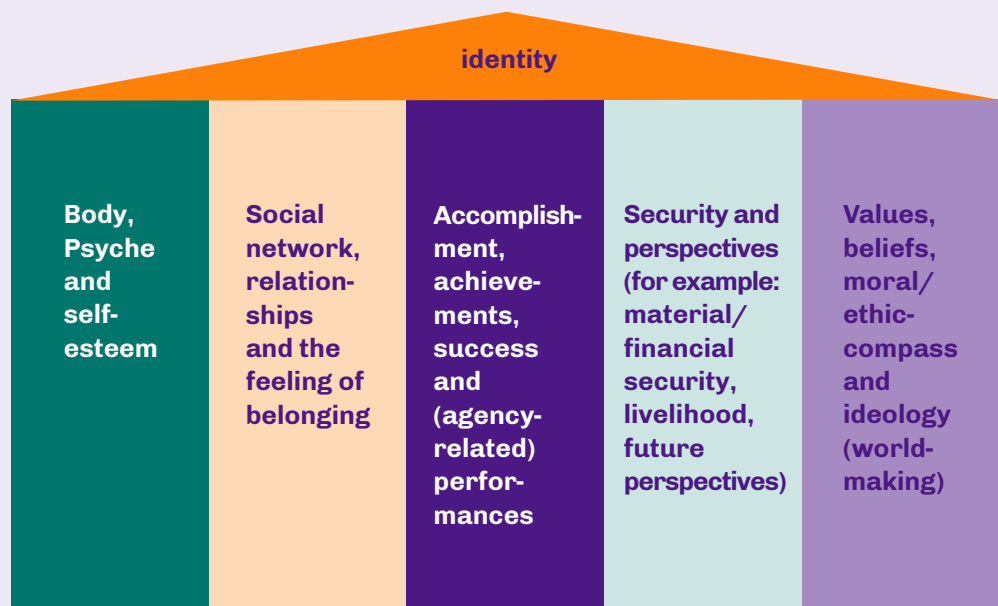
We chose to engage with the topic of epistemic violence, as it informed our understanding of the context of the training (see 1 c). It provided important signposts and values feeding into the approach to tackle the variety of sources of violence in the Lebanese context.

Adaptation of the Five Pillars of Identity Model

A model for explaining radicalisation

Another topic of inspiration was Hilarion Petzold's¹ Five-Pillars model and an adaptation of it based on a detailed counselling approach of Sylvia Neuberger². The approach helps to understand dynamics that can lead to radicalisation and different forms of violence. It does so as a reflection on identity from different perspectives.

According to the model identity³ is a construct of following pillars:



The goal of the analysis is to bring the complexity of social identity and self-perception from different angles of life. The model is a tool to work on and counter narrow and simplistic constructions of identity. A narrowing of identity constructions, as well as the gradual adoption of a black-and-white worldview is a very common theme in processes of radicalisation. For instance, many radicalisation processes include a strong perception of in-group and out-group ("us" and "them") and connected devaluation of the "other". This is often connected to a rigid understanding of what is "true" and "false", according to in-group norms and ideology.

Why is this helpful?

The model can provide a tool in addressing these rigid identity constructions. It does so by inviting the user (be it client or practitioner) to analyse and ask questions about what happened in a person's biography before the person started to sympathise and affiliate with an extremist group according to the five pillars introduced. In doing so, it considers the needs-level of a person and supports an analysis of the different pillars of identity of a particular person by asking questions like: What are possible reasons why the offers made by extremist groups became attractive on different pillars of identity of a particular person?

The model further helps to switch perspectives and understand the perspective of the person we are seeking to work with by asking: What would the directly affected person say why the extremist group is crucial for their life? In doing so, it can become a helpful tool in understanding the path of radicalization from the inside perspective of the acting subjects of radicalization. It is also a framework to break through rigid identity and victim/offender constellations.

In connection to the previous sections, the intersectional approach of working with this psychosocial identity model included the reflection about structural violence such as discrimination, exclusion (i.e. institutional racism or sexism), or trauma and the effect structural factors can have on radicalisation dynamics. The connection of intersectional violence approaches with the psychosocial model of Hilarin Petzold helped to grasp the entanglements between violence, discrimination, and radicalisation.

By discussing and explaining the pillar of "social networks", the importance of building relationships was highlighted as a requirement for *non-judgmental approaches, conversation at eye-level, and the development of trustful long-term working relationships*. It emphasized the importance of building relationships in the face of violence, e.g. when working with individuals who are in the process of radicalisation (also see part a). For the person going through a process of radicalisation, the quality of their relationships is a key to entry/exit points and distancing processes from extremist scenes.

In the training developed in this project, several activities worked on the image of self and the connection with others. Empathy and relationship-building were highlighted as key areas in our work.

The Occidentalism-Critique Perspective

In connection to the questions of creating narrow identities around the notion of "us" and "them" and the importance of understanding violence in a more complex way as elaborated above, anthropologist and historian Fernando Coronil offers a set of categories that enhance the analysis of the political and historical levels that are crucial to consider.

One major point of criticism was that the academic and media efforts of defining terrorism are based on eurocentric assumptions (Brunner 2011: 25) and conceal power relations and hierarchies in respective discourses (Elshtain 1987: 91). From this viewpoint, the knowledge about terrorism often says more about one's own idea of terrorism than about the phenomena itself (ed. Schneekener 2005: 10). Acknowledging that knowledge about terrorism itself is entangled with issues of domination and power, inspired to experiment with the topic of power and dominance in practice. Superiority narratives and ideologies justify the exclusion, pathologization and criminalisation of certain groups and people. The discussion around occidentalist narratives of superiority in recent identity

politics discourses was one starting point for the practical encounter.

Coronil's analysis helps to understand and question occidentalism and the production of binary (two) opposing pairs of "occidental self" and "orientalised others". Occidentalism favors a diversity of blind spots on how we think, speak and write about the "other" extremist offender (cf. Brunner 2011: 39). Occidental practices encompass all representational practices, which are involved in the production of conceptions of the world that:

1. **divide the components of the world into distinct units; → binary**
2. **separate their relational histories;**
3. **transform difference into hierarchy;**
4. **naturalize the representations and thus**
5. **participate in the reproduction of existing, more asymmetrical power relations, even if it is so unconscious. (Coronil 2002: 186)**



The above-mentioned points inspired a key experience to think about how hierarchies are manifested in literature, arts, science, media etc. and how they are rooted in our thought patterns. This led to a practical transfer by experimenting with Coronil's critique in one of the developed exercises in this project ([white socks](#)): Participants receive different instructions based on one of their physical features to create a power structure among the participants depending on such superficial features; in an attempt to reenact a situation of exclusion and to reflect on it afterwards.

Nonviolent Communication

[Nonviolent communication](#) is a process of communication that stipulates that the root of violent interactions or communications is an unmet need that one is not able to express clearly. Another standpoint is that violent interactions can be a tool for gaining and/or maintaining power and control.

Formal education can shape us to think in terms of judgments and interpretations; right and wrong; to prioritise outputs and accomplishments. As a result, we can develop a tendency to suppress our emotions; and start expressing ourselves in a way where our interpretations become our observations. And where we are not able to connect with our emotions and needs, nor to the ones of the other. This leads to two violations: we violate our personal space as we do not take responsibility for our own needs and emotions and the other's personal space as we expand to invade it; the other in return becomes violent (aggressive or passive aggressive). And this is the vicious circle that we experience a lot in the public space at various levels of clarity and dependencies.

In order to be aware of our needs, emotions are a great asset. Nonviolent communication underlines the idea that being mindful about our emotions is a gateway to our true self and to beauty. Being able to listen and accept our emotions and the emotions of the others is key in this process. Therefore, one of the most important skills, the foundation to incorporate in any violence management approach is the listening skill. Nonviolent communication develops a set of tools in order to foster this empathic listening and assertiveness based on the

responsibility of each party to own its emotions and needs. In this way, it links to the communication techniques described above and used in the scope of anti-violence work. Nonviolent communication has a coded language based on the observations, emotions, needs and requests.

Additional details about Nonviolent communication is detailed in the activity below [“introduction to Nonviolent communication”](#). The training developed in this project mainly focussed on the Nonviolent communication and theatre coded languages as different perspectives on how to deal with violence. The hybridity of the approach comes from the blending of different perspectives about this same topic with a common goal: process violence.

3. A hybrid experiential approach

An attempt: on Violence & Theatre

Different forms of violence such as sectarian, structural (e.g. severe socio-economic crises), conflictual surroundings and geopolitical influences are some of the key problems Lebanon is facing. The absence of adequate public support to tackle multiple crises and the refugees' situation, specifically on the socio-economic levels, open the door to frustration and bringing about racist and sectarian discourses.

Understanding the entanglement as well as the complexities of (post-)war situations, forced displacement, corruption and of different forms of violence on a societal level is key for developing an understanding of the life-realities of our target groups and the challenges they are facing. In addition, disregarding institutionalized forms of discrimination and oppression and their dynamics of violence leads to the failure to encounter them. For this reason, a practical and theoretical discussion of intersectional violence prevention was needed for the further development of the process and practice.

Our exploration of focus topics and methodologies presented the first step to exploring a hybrid approach, which combines the strengths of all of these different schools of thought to best address the issue in novel and inspiring ways.

General framework

The training developed in this project sought to enrich theatre work with the relevant topics of violence prevention, Nonviolent Communication and anti-violence work, along the topics outlined in the previous section.

Theatre is a great way to open our perceptions, to listen by our ears, our body and all our senses. Zoukak's approach relies on two conditions: creating a safe *and* non-judgemental space. The approach aims to accompany participants in a personal path that brings them closer to themselves, their needs and their emotions, as well as to their desires and fears. Nonviolent Communication is based on the fact that our acts are connected to stories and narratives in connection to our needs: Beliefs shape behaviors. We designed the training as a nonviolent self-exploration to connect, reflect, adopt or change own narratives as a way to reach better connections with others.

It is designed as an experiential journey that uses the capacity of the participants to observe themselves in the act of seeing, the act of acting, the act of feeling and the act of thinking – which are materialised by the theatre itself. The training culminates with the use of representation as a way to create a space for emotions to be processed to re-create new potentials of connection.

It also connects with the local context where the training was designed: Since the early 90s, Lebanese children have been raised on the belief that they are the holders of change in the country following the civil war, and that their actions will determine the future of the country. This huge responsibility has led to a perpetual crisis situation that needs continuous efforts and has an underlying sense of emergency to be overcome. Due to these circumstances, a situation of pressure has emerged in which time can only be spent on something productive, and in which every action done, every thought shared, every word said should have a meaning and produce a direct impact in order to start building an illusive brighter future.

Individuals feel the need to ask themselves:

- > Is what I am doing now a factor of change?
- > Is what I am doing now denouncing the absurdity of what I am living?
- > Is what I am doing now good for society?
- > What is the impact of my actions?
- > What kind of change?
- > How to free ourselves of this need of productivity of solving problems that put us in a vicious circle of inconsequent actions, that forbid us to see and make an assessment of the scale of the disaster that is surrounding us?
- > How to allow ourselves to be useless in order to go out from this state of denial that forbids us to just be in the present and not trying to build an illusive brighter future that will never arrive?
- > How to listen to “the other” in front of me with just being present to them and not trying to save them with my ideas, my thoughts, my judgments on how things should be done or lived?
- > How can I create a series of non-actions that have as only purpose to underline the scale of the disaster, without trying to hide the rubbles and the corpses?
- > How to be here and now, to take time to mourn our death, to see from where we were , where we are so that we might start one day dreaming of where we want to go?

These questions combined with the various exchanges between Zoukak, VPN and the project partners detailed above, drove the design of sketches of activities below to lead the participants to a more empathic listening of themselves, of the other and of their context.

Activities

One of the core foundations of this encounter between practices is to develop an awareness of the various “personal spaces” and their multiplicity as well as the multiplicity of the encounters of those spaces. It is developed as a personal journey leading participants to connect with their own paths and their moments of (experiencing) violence. Further, it creates a space to connect with own patterns and personal triggers and to open-up new paths for the dance between the “spaces”, for each participant and between participants.

Each activity after the introduction round below has a short introduction to explain the general goal, followed by the instructions of the activity and at the end some of the trainers’ feedback given to participants by the trainers is listed to help readers to better understand the goal of the exercise.

Please note that the instructions below are written to give more understanding for the reader. They are not ready-to-use instructions for trainers.

The introduction round

The introduction of the training engages the participants with their longing, emotions and intention. The idea behind this is to put the participants in connection with key elements that are at the core of the approach: being clear about our own intentions and managing our own emotions.

What brings you to this place today (on this morning during lock-down)?
What motivated you to come here?

Instructions

- > Get into pairs
- > Individually, write down in words, phrases or sentences, answering the question: What brings you here today?
- > Share notes with your partner
- > Write a list of things that make you feel happy
- > Write a list of things that make you feel angry
- > Share your list with your partner
- > Open up to the larger group, to share observations about this exercise

Misunderstanding

In this part of the training, participants explore the impact of beliefs / narratives on behaviors / acts; how our mind works in terms of constant association of ideas; and how value of life is similar in all of us. The purpose of those activities is to let the participants reflect on the “choice” as an act (nonviolence is a conscious choice) and connect with how beliefs shape our actions. As violence is generally related to ideas we have in our mind, this first part of the training invites the participants to explore the connection between stories and acts.

> Arm wrestling

This exercise is an experience of how the stories we are told influence our behaviors.

Instructions

- > Get into pairs and sit in front of each other on a table.
- > Clarify if all participants are familiar with the game of arm wrestling. Explain the rules: the more often the hand of the other person touches the table, the more you win.

Most of the participants would immediately begin to play as soon as the word “arm-wrestling” is pronounced. Most of them would follow the rule of the classical arm-wrestling, e.g. they would try to put the other arm down once to win and enter into a “push-push”-dynamic rather than “push-pull-push”.



Reflections by the trainers

Three factors can explain why only few participants followed the instructions i.e. the one who puts down the other most wins and not the one who puts the other once down wins.

1. **Habits/Patterns:** Habits & patterns generally come from a need for safety, they are part of any coping mechanism. It becomes problematic when they are passed as judgments. To change habits one must consciously make an effort. This could be with the help of a therapist or coaching, through re-programming yourself and by changing simple routines.
2. **Listening:** We spend most of our waking life communicating. Around half of this communication happens through listening, and round half of listening goes to waste.
3. **Narrative/Stories:** Humanity has been able to tell stories since 30-70 thousand years (the cognitive revolution). We are always telling stories whether we are conscious of them or not. Arm-wrestling widespread instruction is the product of the society’s narrative of strength: the survival of the fittest, as the most violent or aggressive wins: the ones who put the other’s hand down. While in nature, cooperation and harmony are strengths. Ants and insects that cooperate would survive the most to change and adapt more quickly.

The not thinking mind

This exercise is an experience of the fact that our mind is in constant activity. So, a given act has conscious and unconscious roots. This realization is key to be aware of the various roots and layers of violence and how it can express itself.

Instructions

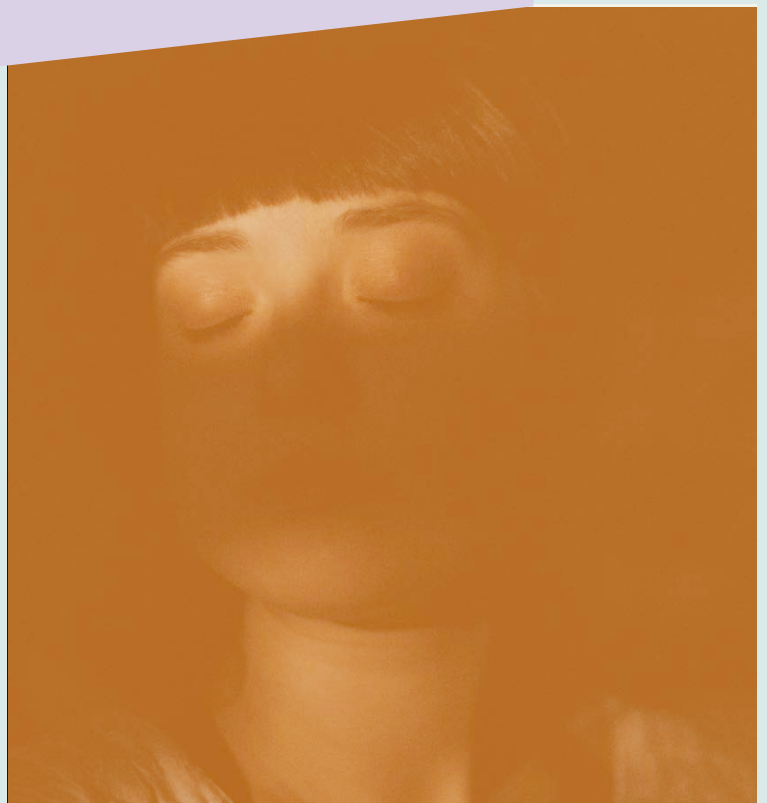
- > Relax your body on a chair.
- > Close your eyes, do not think of anything.
- > When you reach a place of not thinking, open your eyes.

Some additional tips shared by the trainer during the practice:

Sitting down in a relaxed position, in a lazy manner, as this is the mode where we can receive the most.

Reflections of the trainers

Did anyone hear the cars outside? The noise outside? Did you feel the heat of your body? Our body absorbs all the information. It takes it into the mind and transforms it into an 'idea'. The sound of the cars outside, make me think I am in this location and this reminds me of that moment etc. We think all the time – consciously or unconsciously. Our body sensors take data and pass it to the mind into ideas. Ideas can not be wrong or right; they can simply exist.





Words Association

This exercise is an experience of how our unconscious mind works; i.e. without much control from our conscious mind. Often emotions are related to conscious and unconscious ideas and we are responsible for our emotions in both cases. This activity helps the participants to better connect with this responsibility.

Instructions

- > Form a circle.
- > **Part One:** I will start with a word, and one by one, say the first word that comes to your mind following the person before you.
- > **Part Two:** Do the same exercise, but this time saying words that are opposing.

Reflections of the trainers

We realize that the whole universe is in our minds. We are perceiving millions of pieces of information, and we are aware of just a few dozens. In theatre, we try to open our body sensors, just as children, as they have more flexibility. We cannot force our brains to submit to certain conditions, such as: I should or I shouldn't. The brain is likely to resist. All our upbringing is based on "should" and "shouldn't". Opposites are impositions on the brain, they do not come naturally. We are taught how to think of opposites, e.g.: A man is the opposite of a woman, rich is the opposite of poor etc. While connection and association are natural, oppositions are human constructions.



White socks

This activity is a way to let the participants know more about each other and start forming more connections. It also is an experience on how judgement works from the perspective of the initiator and the receiver; and how they can fuel power structures.

Instructions:

Part One

- > Sit on chairs in a circle. There is one less chair than the number of participants in the exercise.
- > One stands in the middle and asks a question, for example, "Who is wearing white socks?"
- > If you identify with the question (i.e. you wear white socks): you get up and find another seat.
- > The person who ends up standing in the middle (as there is one chair less), asks the next question.

Part Two (after everyone has had at least the chance to ask a question)

- > Stand in the line from tallest to shortest.
- > Divide the group in two sub-groups: the tallest and the shortest.
- > “Everyone clap for the tallest, clap for the second tallest. The tall group is great! Short is... also great.”
- > Get back to the chairs and play again, but this time only the tall people may participate.

Some additional tips shared by the trainer during the practice:

Most of what we know about each other when we meet is from what we see. How can we go further?

Reflections of the trainers

Participants would enjoy the first part of the play. The participants' feedback would vary from confusion, shame and empathy during the second part of the game.

What we did in this game was (second part):

- > We separated the groups, focused on a particularity and generalised it. These are the beginning of judgments and identity based biases.
- > We created a hierarchy.
- > We added a power structure. Who has and who does not have the chance to play.

We all have equal values of life. To a rich person, happiness might be a big car, a pool, a luxurious house etc. Material happiness to them might be measured differently to the one of a person living in poorer conditions. We have the same values of life but different measures of it. Nobody can force these measures but violence arises when my measures are at the cost of others' needs. Value of life of a harasser is equal to mine. But when you add justice, morality, etc., its meaning differs.

The spaces experience

In this part of the training, people experience within their body the idea of spaces and the personal ownership of their own emotions and the idea of co-responsibility when we do any act.



The walking

This activity is an invitation to experience how we have several spaces of presence and how the awareness of our own spaces and the spaces of others are key for stability. It is also an experience of inter-connectivity as the whole group is moving as one group in quest for balance.

Instructions

- > Spread out across the room.
- > Imagine a golden thread pulling you up a couple of centimetres. Stand in beauty, ready to absorb anything.
- > Imagine an aura of light around you that is your personal space (PS), when you pass a person, you feel the warmth, you have entered their personal space.
- > Start walking around the room, evenly filling it and keeping the balance. This is PS1.
- > Your personal space is growing now, you cannot cross into someone else's. This is now PS2 in speed number 1.
- > Try different combinations of speeds and personal spaces. For example, PS2 speed number 3.
- > Now spread your arms out widely. This is PS3.
- > Try new combinations, including PS3.
- > Finally get back to PS1.
- > Enter in each other's spaces gently. Let the temperature of your PS meet with those of others. Look into each other's eyes. What are the eyes saying? What are they telling you?

Some additional tips shared by the trainer during the practice:

"The room is a tray. It needs to stay balanced and not tilt. Be aware of each other's movements and tempos."

"Remember we are all responsible for each other: I am one cup on the tray, if I am not acting reasonably for all, the tray will tip and we will all fall. On a boat, if one causes the boat to tip the whole boat drowns. I am responsible for everyone in the boat, I am aware of people with me."

Reflections of the trainers

- > “We are always dealing with personal spaces and speeds. When we are speeding, we bump into each other. When we feel threatened, we go faster, we step on others. We are always moving; we are always in a threat of danger.”
- > “I am responsible to listen to whether the other allows me to enter their space, and which space.”

**The blind dance**

This exercise is an experience of leadership as co-leadership. It is also an experience to connect with others through the body.

Instructions**Part One:**

- > Get into pairs, one of you is blind and the other leads.
- > Leader, put your hand on your partner's shoulder.
- > Walk with your partner, first slowly to acquire trust, then faster, exploring different levels.

Part Two:

- > Close your eyes, and put your hands out.
- > I will pair you with someone. When you feel the other's hands, begin to dance.

Some additional tips shared by the trainer during the practice:

- > Remember that there is so much being communicated through touch.
- > Change speed, change shape, break patterns.

Reflections of the trainers

- > After a certain moment, you would experience that you are both leading; the one who sees and the one who has the eyes shut. Leadership is shared; it is built with others.
- > If communication only encompasses action and reaction, there is no life and no communication. Plain “action and reaction” results in guilt, anger, etc. because there is no feedback.
- > If I say something hurtful, I am responsible for my action; when the other gets hurt, they are responsible for their emotions while my action was the trigger.

- > If I am responsible for their feelings, I will feel guilty. When I feel guilty, I make myself innocent.
- > We are brought up and educated through guilt. We need to deconstruct that within ourselves. When I am responsible for my actions, I would be listening to myself and others. When I am responsible for my emotions, I will take action.

So far participants have explored the connection between beliefs and actions. They started a body exploration about spaces; this is one key element when approaching others to avoid unnecessary conflicts that could happen when those spaces are crossed with a lack of awareness. At this stage the key elements of Nonviolent communication will be presented.



Introduction to Nonviolent Communication

This exercise is an introduction to the key concepts of Nonviolent Communication: the observations, the emotions, the needs and the requests. It aims at equipping the participants of four basic concepts that they will practice for the rest of the training.

Instructions

- > Think of a situation in which you were triggered by a person.
- > Write down the facts, observations of what happened, and share with a neighbor.
- > Write down how you felt, and share with a neighbor.
- > Write down what your needs were at the time, and share with a neighbor.
- > Identify requests that take into account your needs and the needs of the other.

Reflections of the trainers

- > In Nonviolent Communication, you get to understand needs by first identifying observations (head), feelings (heart), needs (stomach), then reach the request (feet & hands). The request is specific, doable, positive and takes into consideration both needs.
- > Nonviolent Communication is about expressing with honesty and listening with empathy; accepting the emotions without resistance.
- > I can't change you, or the reality, but I can change my relationship to it.
- > The art of non-violence in communication is a balance, a dance between the self acceptance and self-empathy and the empathy and acceptance of the other. Nonviolent Communication is like a muscle between the mind and body. It requires strength and training and becomes stronger gradually.

> The handshake

This part reinforces the learning experience with role plays and is a first attempt to represent situations i.e. to give a form to an emotion/idea.

It offers the participants the possibility to live a violent interaction and a Nonviolent interaction in the same situation. In doing so, it is an opportunity to practice and to reinforce that non-violence is a choice.

Instructions

- > Choose any character whose role you would like to act.
- > Get into groups.
- > Create a scene that ends with a slap: discuss, who the two characters are, what is the conflict between them? Why does it end up with a slap?
- > Create another scene with the same characters and topics, create a scene where actors are sitting and that address the same problem through Nonviolent communication and that ends with a handshake.

Reflections of the trainers

- > Body language plays an important role in communication. When two persons are sitting, they are more passive, receptive, listening, able to take in and accept the information sent and received.



> The Practice of Empathy

After having explored body awareness and connection with others, participants are asked to practice empathy with verbal communication.

The first step of empathy - the choice of perspective

The goal of this activity is to explore taking different perspectives of a given topic such as climate change, pollution or any other general topic. It is an invitation to be aware of the multiplicity of perspectives in a given point of time. Coming from the viewpoint that violence is born when we ignore this multiplicity.

Instructions

1. Select a topic
2. Do a discussion talk from an "I" perspective about the topic
3. Do a discussion talk from a "you" perspective about the topic
4. Do a discussion talk from a research/expert perspective about the topic
5. Reflection:
 - A: How was this exercise taking roles between perspectives?
 - B: How did you feel about it?

Reflections of the trainers

The choice is important in the empathy process. One chooses to be empathic because they care about the person/relationship.

> Not to know, not to do

Just be present & listen to the other's experience, emotions and needs.

The goal of this exercise is to allow the participants to practice empathy through the presence/focus/confirm process detailed in the instructions.

Instructions

1. Each person chooses an experience / moment to share with some emotional intensity
2. Person A shares feedback about the topic
3. Person B does the following:
 - A: presence (being present, accepting the wave, the moment, the other)
 - B: focus (focus on the other, soft focus first, then focus on their face, the life energy in what they are saying)
 - C: confirm (reflect what is happening inside person B, what they are feeling, what their needs could be etc.)
4. Change person A & person B by Wednesday
5. Reflection:
 - A: How was it to be in presence/focus/confirm?
 - B: How did it feel to be listened to?

Reflections of the trainers

Empathy is the act of being useless, i.e. not looking to give solutions, advises or fix the other; i.e. being simply present here and now and where the other is.

The empathy within asymmetric relationships



The choice of non violence in social and political change

This activity is an additional experience of empathy through role /scenario playing. The context is more politicised with little personal emotions involved. This gives another perspective for the experience of empathy with less personal involvement.

Instructions

- > Read two texts about two persons who adopted the choice of nonviolence as a an act of resistance
 - One about Rosa Parks and one of the key activists of the Montgomery bus boycott
 - One about Khan Abd Al Ghaffar Khan, the founder of the non violent Muslim army of Pakistan
- > Get into groups and choose one of the stories
- > If you choose Khan: create a dialogue between Khan and his disciple, where the disciple is not being able to accept the proposition of a non violent army, and Khan is trying to use empathy to connect with him.
- > If you choose Rosa Parks with the driver of the bus, create a dialogue where Rosa is empathetic with him while he is shouting at her to stand-up.

Feedback of the trainers

In general, we find it hard to be empathic with our (perceived) enemy. In many situations, we tend to use our power rather than our empathy when we can. However, empathy is precious in those contexts, as it helps us connect with "the other" when needed.

One of the main dynamics of radicalisation is a move towards a less nuanced worldview; a move towards dividing the world in "us and them", in friend and foe. Changing the perspective by putting ourselves in the situation of the "other" helps to work on empathy.



The intention and pulse

This exercise is an invitation to open body acceptance and perceptors. It is building up to the final representation. It works on the body connection with others. Empathy as a first step to non violence is a mind-body experience. In this section, the body is invited to let go of the mind.

Instructions

This is an exercise in theatre, let go of any pressure and attempt to understand the relationship between NVC and theatre.

I would like you to try something, while looking at me. My eyes are like a camera lens, I will soft focus, relax the muscles of my eyes. I look in front of me and I don't anymore see the person in front of me, just a presence and a possibility of a person.

Perception is passed on through thousands of generations. It comes with a judgment of understanding of what this medium we are perceiving is. What we would like to do now, is undo this perception. So we can see the medium in front of us without judgment. We soft focus, let go of the pre-conceived perceptions, and listen.

1. Get in pairs as Participant A and Participant B
2. Stand in front of each other, a few meters apart, and look at each other in soft focus. Take the information in, allow yourselves to feel & accept the information you are receiving from the other. For example: you are light.
3. Participant A says to Participant B, "You are [the information you are perceiving]
4. Participant B receives the information, feels it, accepts and responds to it in relation to the impulse perceived from Participant A by saying: "Yes, I am [the information received]. For example: yes, I am light.
5. Keep repeating the phrase to each other in dialogue, each time responding to the information exchanged between your presence & the presence of the other person.
6. After a while of dialogue, continue with new variations: standing at different distances, the second person saying, "No, I am not...", and sending new phrases to each other.

Some additional tips shared by the trainer during the practice:

- > As much as possible, erase the features in front of me, and see the aura of the person, removing any judgment: woman, man, tall short, fat, thin, Christian, Muslim etc. This is not a person; this is a presence. In your presence, listen to the information that the other presence is sending you.
- > Sound carries the energy, it carries the ways the information is accepted and received. Be aware how the change in tone changes something in you, respond to the other, with the new information you are receiving.
- > Take your time to play the game, lie to yourself if you still don't believe the game, imagine all that is changing in you, when you send your information again, it is as if you are leaving your aura.

Reflections of the trainers

This ability to receive & respond to information can be used in everyday conversations. You can see how the intensity grows in this exercise. Just as two children talk to each other even when they don't have words.

Notice how at some points it was very hard to accept or speak without filter. This is about gaining awareness of yourself, the blockages you have from the judgments you learn in society. We need to accept, open up, receive, understand the person's pulse, and then choose how to react.

In Nonviolent communication, we need to live the present moment, not to be thinking and analyzing the moment, but just to accept it and feel it.



The self-trigger

This exercise is an experience of connection with one's own needs guided by a colleague through empathy. It helps provide an experience of the need based on the longing. So this is an invitation for a new relationship between mind-body based on the longing. The purpose of this activity is to build-up intensity and digest it. Also it is to push the participants toward a non analytical approach to the needs. Being able to experience needs is a door to position our acts at that level which is in itself a door to process violence.

Instructions

1. Get into Pairs
2. Select a sentence/situation that is triggering
3. Write down all the triggers and judgment this sentence/situation creates in you
4. Read the triggers loud.
5. Then repeat them by saying when I hear/do "sentence", I "triggers".
6. Identify the emotions. Connect with them through your body.
7. Connect with the unmet needs. Name them. Feel them in your body. Connect with the pain of not having those needs met. Accept the pain.
8. Connect with the longing; the longing behind the need. The longing is beautiful. It is energy. Connect with the beauty of this energy.
9. Recall the initial situation/sentence from the beauty of the longing. Hold both in your arms.
10. How do you feel? What is the next small step that you can do to deal with this trigger?

Reflections of the trainers

- > We have a tendency to want to put words on our emotions and needs in order to communicate. Which is needed for any verbal communication. Remember the impact of the non verbal word. The need is a longing before being a word. Connecting with the longing even when the experience is painful will turn out to be liberating. You would connect with the beauty of the need.



The final representation / The tribunal

This activity invites the participants to experience self acceptance through reenactment and observing self feeling and thinking through representation. In this exercise participants use role playing in order to share a personal experience high in intense emotions. Then they repeat the same role play as a director directing an actor to play their own role.

Instructions

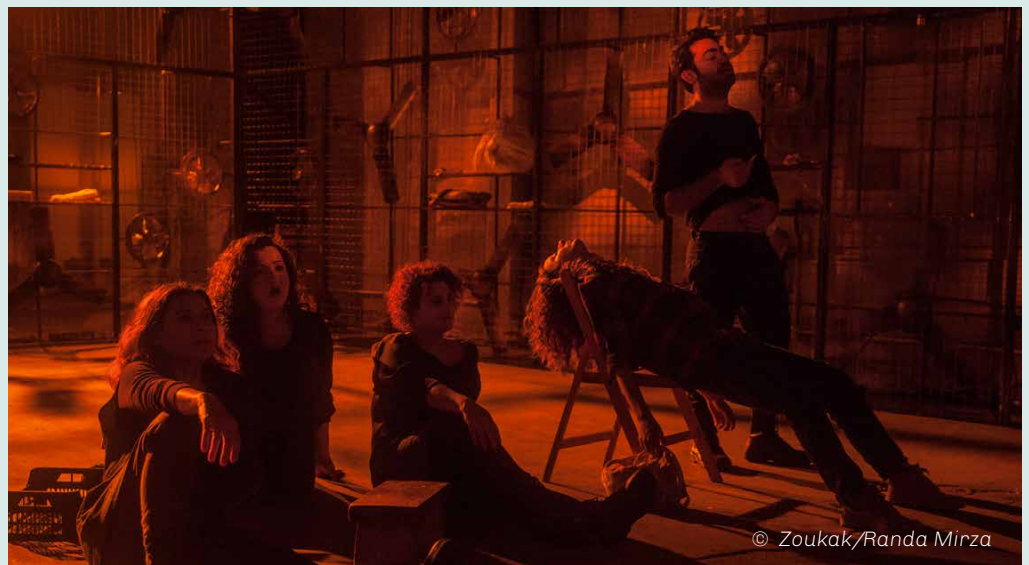
1. Get into groups of three
2. Share with each other a memory of a situation where you faced a conflict with someone, got angry and lost control.
3. Choose one story and act it out, dividing the roles as such: if A shares her story, A acts out herself, B acts out the person A is in conflict with, and C is a bystander, an observer, or judge.
4. Act it out again, but this time A and C switch roles. A, you are now the director, telling C and B exactly what they did and what emotion they were speaking.
5. A, observe the act being played out.

Some additional tips shared by the trainer during the practice:

- > To the one observing themselves in the act, what did you feel towards each character? Do you recognize their individual needs?

Reflections of the trainers

- > When you become the director, you can see you are a bit more detached from your own emotions positively, able to see them and digest them. Then you become more open to the other.
- > When we see the needs of both people, they both seem beautiful. When we see in them the need for safety, acceptance, communication, etc. we can understand.



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4. Conclusion

The ACT! project was an exploration of linkages, overlaps and positive potential of bringing together anti-violence work and theatre work. The exercises and training we conducted in the scope of the project inspired us to test methods across these areas of work, methodological preferences and cultural contexts. In order to further exploit the strengths of each way of working and engaging with beneficiaries, the next step towards a comprehensive methodology would be to build on these learnings.

Several key aspects can be noted for further exploration:

- > the importance of a hybrid approach built on different practices to create *coherent interventions rooted in their context*,
- > the importance of the *experimentation as part of the development* of a theoretical framework and methodological approach,
- > the advantages of using a variety of possibilities available to create successful and *diverse approaches* in facing violence and radicalization,
- > the *potential of practicing art* to facilitate synergies and create new forms of interventions,
- > work with the potentials of self-awareness *beyond verbal communication* and include the physical experience,
- > *non-judgemental professional stances and thinking* can be translated and transferred from anti-violence work to theatre and vice versa,
- > theatre can provide guidance in developing *bottom-up and life-oriented approaches* for radicalization prevention/intervention, namely by facilitating more accessibility for beneficiaries and offering opportunities of meaningful violence and radicalisation prevention without labelling programmes in the context of "preventing and countering extremism",
- > a method mix to *enable agency of beneficiaries* can be promising to offer more variety and opportunities to interact,
- > further exploration of the framework needed for creating open, non-judgmental and engaging spaces for working on the topic of violence; further exploration of the *professional roles and methods to develop such spaces of trust* in the context of anti-violence work and theatre work in order to support the agency of practitioners in both fields,
- > creative settings in violence prevention can *raise curiosity* for different beneficiaries and open doors to trust building and further intervention in violence prevention,
- > *violence and radicalisation*, including the topics explored in the scope of the project offer *engaging topics and methodological inspiration* for the transfer to theatre work,
- > the value of and need for more creative space and experimentation in order to develop awareness and sensitivity towards dynamics of *power/ domination and discrimination* in connection with one's own context and biography,
- > the need for more *creative space* and experimentations for a theory and methodology of *intersectional violence prevention*, visibility and support for bottom-up spaces to critically reflect on own experiences of violence and discrimination.

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Footnotes

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