OPENING PAAR SPACES IN BULGARIA: REFLECTIVE ACCOUNTS

Galina Markova a; Haralan Alexandrov a; Nadejda Angelova b; Silviya Yordanova b

a Education Management, New Bulgarian University, Sofia, Bulgaria
b JobTiger, Sofia, Bulgaria

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Galina Markova\textsuperscript{a*}, Haralan Alexandrov\textsuperscript{a}, Nadejda Angelova\textsuperscript{b} and Silviya Yordanova\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Education Management, New Bulgarian University, Sofia, Bulgaria; \textsuperscript{b}JobTiger, Sofia, Bulgaria

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This text is a reflection on the process of opening participative appreciative action and reflection (PAAR) spaces in the Bulgarian context of career counseling within the project Reflect-OR. The authors – career counselors and university educators and researchers – describe and provide examples of how they perceived the methodology of PAAR and how they creatively applied it in various spaces they created. The process of the project is presented in the text as a move from inside out – from the creation of individual and personal PAAR spaces, through professional group spaces, and ended with setting up more public interdisciplinary PAAR spaces. While it was easy to open such spaces, the authors argue that the methodology represents a new relational culture that is difficult to sustain. The ‘facilitation’ performed by an individual or a team that can authentically and consistently maintain the values of PAAR is considered to be the ‘tool’ for achieving sustainability of PAAR.

Keywords: PAAR; post-totalitarian culture; facilitation; attachment theory; ethics

The project

The goal of the Reflect-OR project in Bulgaria was to introduce and study the effect of PAAR in the field of career counseling. PAAR methodology focuses on the strengths of the practitioners, analyzes professional success and thus facilitates more conscious utilizations of the identified strengths and successful strategies in everyday professional practice.

Applying the methodology in Bulgaria was organized in three stages, chronologically planned in the project. The first stage was the training of three Bulgarian educators and researchers from the New Bulgarian University in PAAR theory and practice. The second stage required that the trainers facilitate 10 PAAR group sessions (laboratories) with career counselors. The third stage required further transfer of the PAAR methodology in other professional settings by the researchers and by the career counselors acquainted with the approach in the first two stages of the project. It involved the creation of special settings for the laboratories – both physical and relational which we, the project participants called ‘PAAR spaces’ – pockets of new culture. How was the PAAR space different from the Bulgarian cultural space? This was a key question.

PAAR stands for participatory and appreciative action and reflection. Each one of these four words suggests new and challenging processes in Bulgarian life. Participation...
of the people has become a theme of the public discourse after the democratic changes were supposed to start with the end of the totalitarian regime in 1989. The possibility to use the freedom to participate in the new democratic processes was hindered by the deeply set beliefs that the state was the major agent of change fostered during communist years. Additionally, Bulgaria suffered many centuries of Ottoman domination, which has left a stamp over the free participation of people in public spaces.

Regarding appreciation, there is a popular Bulgarian saying that has guided generations of parents: ‘Modesty is what makes a person beautiful’. With this short sentence many people can associate their current difficulties to advance, to take a lead, to enjoy appreciation. Comparisons between members of a group rather than appreciation of one’s capacities were used to foster the collective unity rather than the development of the individual. Again, the roots of this trait can be traced back to our history. It can be seen also as an effort to preserve the traditional patriarchal Bulgarian values that fitted to the value of equality and the collective fostered during socialism.

Action research and reflection are also new to the culture. First, research as an instrument to study reality was in conflict by the planned communist economy, which was difficult to study critically. Similarly, reflection on one’s own practice was traditionally not encouraged as external criticism was the practice of evaluation of one’s work achievements. In current times, as a country in transition, Bulgarians are bombarded by Western regulations, theories and methods, often in conflict with the traditional ones, which limits reflections and learning from experience. After the democratic changes started, reflective practice was firmly settled (mostly in the caring professions through supervision and the theories of individual development) as a tool for self-knowledge and exploration – the basis of PAAR.

The project that came before Reflect-OR was in the field of education. The first Reflect project focused on reflection on ‘critical incidents’ as turning points that would carry potential for learning and change in education. The goal of Reflect-OR was to transfer the results achieved during the first project but also to implement four ‘turns’ away from it. Those were from the deficit-based discourses ‘towards the development of appreciative insight, understanding the root causes of success and sustaining strengths-based discourses’; from the self-to collective learning, from one way of knowing to an acceptance of more pluralistic view of ways of knowing, and from reflection to extract practical wisdom and act on its basis (Ghaye et al., 2008). Again, the goals of the new project – to introduce the ‘turns’ – were fenced by the traditional values of the culture. Studying success in Bulgaria sounds like a heresy among its citizens, who feel unhappier than the Haitians after the earthquake. Reflective practice even though known, is deficit-oriented (Bilson & Markova, 2007). In general, collective activities have been eroded both by the anomic processes in the society and as something that was overemphasized during communist years. Regarding the last two ‘turns’, addressing the pluralistic ways of knowing and the capacity to learn from practice and act upon this knowledge, Alexandrov (1998) states:

All aspects of the education – rigid curricula, boring training techniques, preoccupation with discipline in the organization of the class work and outdoors activities, ritualized hierarchical interactions between teachers and students – are permeated by the understanding of learning as a one way process of instruction. The assumption about the social mission of education is that of molding on a mass scale the clay of the virgin minds in an appropriate form. The young are provided with the ‘right’ type of knowledge, indoctrinated in the ‘correct’ understanding of the world, coerced to adopt the ‘true’ version of reality, established once and forever and sanctioned by authority. Students are system-
atically discouraged to discover and experiment with innovative ideas, creativity is considered deviance, critical viewpoints are outlawed and often punished, and thinking is channeled in strictly set didactic models.

In summary, both the introduction of PAAR and the innovations it represented were challenges to the culture. The question was how to facilitate PAAR that was based on autonomous participation and exploration in a culture that fosters dependency; how to encourage group collaboration in a culture which has corrupted the idea of the collective; how to contain positivity and appreciation in a deeply pessimistic society and how to study practice in an environment overwhelmed by foreign regulations. Finally there was the issue of how to introduce PAAR – another foreign methodology.

Below are presented the reflections of the project participants who experienced the two conflicting cultures in several PAAR spaces we opened. The first two examples are about the internal PAAR space we opened within ourselves as starting points of the change. The third one was about a group space that one of the career counselors created while teaching surfing. The fourth example is about how a community PAAR space was opened. What integrates these experiences of creating PAAR spaces in an anti-PAAR culture is discussed against the challenges stated above.

PAAR as an internal space (the story of the project coordinator)

As the coordinator of the Reflect-OR project in Bulgaria and as a person who felt new to both – the field of career counseling, and the PAAR methodology – what guided me at the beginning of my work was my training and practice in psycho-dynamic social work according to which opening any space in reality starts with opening the space within yourself. The more secure I would feel in and with this space, the more secure would be the project environment for experimenting with the new approach for learning through reflection. Luckily, the project in Bulgaria was flexible enough to allow me to start opening my own internal PAAR space before all other activities. Instead of following a pre-planned schedule with already selected groups of participants, it was possible to learn about the approach first and then start inviting career consultants to shape the group in Bulgaria.

The first PAAR setting was the administrative meeting of the project where the leaders of the project partners gathered together to discuss how to make the already set project frame consistent with the values PAAR – ensuring participation, appreciation of the contribution of the participants and their strengths, and reflection on the project’s actions. The group comprised two career consultants – leaders in the field, the administration of the project – managers and researchers working in academia. Tony (the group’s facilitator) was teaching us PAAR by facilitating the group in a way that everybody participated, that everybody’s contribution was appreciated, that our activities were reflected upon and that we were learning from the process. We were planning our project, reflecting on the way we were planning it, while relating to each other appreciatively, learning from the process and guiding it further by planning the same experience in a way that more people feel it.

The physical space of the meeting was under the ground floor of a building. The space, created for educational purposes was comfortable and home-like. People who were at the meeting knew each other well: they had worked on the previous Reflect project or/and had previous training in PAAR. I was new to everybody and everybody was new to me. Nevertheless, I did not feel a stranger. My task for the meeting was to
present the context of the career counseling in Bulgaria and I performed it. The team listened, questions followed and at the end suggestions were made how to plan the project in my country. There was a special space in the group that was created before I had become part of it. The pace was slow; there were moments of silence between the questions, the answers and the suggestions. I enjoyed the space. It allowed me to think about additional ideas, remember additional information, and reflect on my own presentation. I did not feel pressed to have answers to all questions. I was able to recognize my own uncertainties and doubts. I felt secure enough to disclose those. Feeling safe was the first building block of my internal PAAR space. This space facilitated my getting in touch with my own questions and thus made me open to learn.

The second key element of my internal PAAR space was the experience of freedom. Another task of the same meeting was to contextualize the pillars of PAAR by co-constructing their meaning in our multicultural team. ‘Participation’ was the PAAR pillar under discussion and the question our team struggled with was about what was the kind of participation we needed for our project. The group talked about how liberating but also how challenging and threatening participation can be. My thoughts got me back to the communist years when we, school girls and boys had to demonstrate how actively and enthusiastically we can march at the Labor Day on the May 1 during the obligatory parades. Thinking about the post-totalitarian context of Bulgaria, I shared that non-participation has been a form of active resistance against the totalitarian regime and therefore a very active form of participation. I added that even if the political situation has changed, this learned attitude is still alive even though it often blocks genuine participation in Bulgaria. The group did not comment but later the facilitator asked the group: ‘Shall we agree that our participation has to be active?’

I felt several things in that moment. First, I felt that my comment was heard and reflected upon. Second, I felt confronted with a rule that would not respect my own potential difficulties with participation. Third, I was confronted with a rule of the group. Fourth, I was given a choice to participate actively or to leave the project. Paradoxically, despite feeling conflicted, I experienced a wave of energy. This situation made me feel free. I chose to participate.

A couple of weeks later, I realized that in that moment I obtained a space to choose whether to participate or not. The question was why did I feel free? First, before I was confronted with the question, after I had already developed a feeling of safety in the group. Second, my explanation about the non-participation as a cultural type of participation was heard and it changed the definition of the term ‘participation’ that we planned to use in the project into the term ‘active participation’. My contribution changed the frame of the project. Third, the message that I received was ‘we know that you can actively participate but still it is your choice to do it or not’. I did not choose to participate because I did not have choice to refuse participating. Facing the choice, I had a freedom to choose and I chose the space where I had the freedom to make choices.

Back then I was not conscious about these processes. After my return to Sofia, sharing about the meeting, a member of the Bulgarian team told me that I was changed: I radiated enthusiasm. In summary, feeling safe, freedom to make choices and active participation were the pillars of my internal PAAR space. Still, I have got the space in a foreign country. Parallel processes of experiencing the same happened in the project team. After the meeting, feeling more prepared I started inviting people from the field of career counseling to participate in the project. Interestingly enough, the participants who decided to participate were those, either knowing (and I hope) trusting our team or those referred by others they trusted. Feeling safe became a shared
experience even before the project started. In my inviting people I did not make efforts to convince them – the people had the choice to participate. In terms of the last ‘pillar’, the group actively participated throughout the project.

**Opening PAAR space in the consulting room (the story of a career counselor)**

I grew up in Bulgaria and still live there. It is sad to confess but here many people relate to each other without recognizing their strengths. Too often the topics of conversations are about who feel worse than the other one. The same is the situation in the professional practice. Unfortunately, I also used this model until I felt it suffocating. In the books I read that this behavior does not lead to anything good. I tried to see the world in a more positive way. I did not have success all the time but I kept trying. Talking about strengths during the labs confirmed my conviction that this is the path to success, to personal and professional development even though at the beginning it was difficult to discuss strengths only.

I tried to present PAAR ideas to my friends and they opposed. I took this reaction as something natural having in mind the attitudes of contemporary Bulgarians. I decided that I have to present PAAR not just as a theory, but to apply its ideas first to myself. I accepted that the relationship with the other person is mirror-like: that the other person reflects my own reaction; that whatever I present will be reflected back to me. This method did not always work and I did not always get the reaction I expected. The changes happened slowly and I needed to be patient.

I tried to apply PAAR in my professional life too. I used the same mirror-like communication. As a career counselor I meet people with very negative attitudes that hinder their personal and professional development. One day, a 34-year-old unemployed man asked for a consultation. He was arrogant and mistrustful. In a situation like this, it was normal for me to respond in a similar aggressive way. Nevertheless, I decided to use the mirror-like communication. First I thought that it was him who asked for help – who took the first step – and I tried to make him comfortable by creating a space for myself where I would feel safe and protected. The man, being accustomed to traditionally rejecting behavior, got confused. He left but I felt that the first seed was planted. In two days the man returned. He behaved differently. He was not aggressive and he participated actively in our conversation. He shared that our first meeting was different experience for him. He also explained how his long unemployment the stress the rejections from the others made him feel useless, which in turn made him aggressive and affected his wish to develop. The reason he returned to me was my different behavior. We started talking about his professional experience. Our relationship helped him to pass the stage where he was overwhelmed by his past negative experiences and to start planning for the future. I asked questions that encouraged the development of his creativity and his strengths. After we ended our meeting, he felt more secure and self-confident. In applying the PAAR methodology I succeeded to help the man to regain his hope.

**Opening PAAR space in a group (The big waves and PAAR…or how to use our strengths when a two-meter-high wave falls on us and fills our ears with sand: a story of a career counselor)**

The labs made me experiment with PAAR in situations where there was no hierarchy, formalities or rules. What made me write was that in order to make changes we
need many additional circumstances. And the best thing about PAAR is that we can create them.

If a huge wave hits you and throws you on the sand you start experiencing the strange feeling of helplessness coupled with the question: ‘Shall I recover this time?’ Whatever strengths and skills we have it is not probable that we use them at such moments and look respectable with seaweed and sand covering your body. So I decided to study the effect of PAAR in such circumstances. I asked myself whether I would find a connection between knowing our strengths and ways of using them well, and learning when the things are outside our comfort zone and limits of our control.

I met a group of surfers who could not learn to surf despite their efforts. They shared that they were scared, that the conditions were not good or that their equipment was inadequate. These people did not have experience, theory or trust in their instructors. After several conversations with them, they started surfing. Their comments included: ‘I cannot believe, I thought I would not ever be able to learn’.

How did this change happen?:

(1) It is important to be a good role model.

This group saw in me a person who could surf. I realized how important it is to show to others that you can cope in such a way that the others believe: that they can do this too, that they want it. I realized that they needed somebody next to them while they were learning. In this role, it was important to challenge them. Every time I set new tasks, new goals. I did not set the time frame for their achievements, which freed a lot of resources to take care of myself and to learn the things that I needed to learn myself.

(2) It is important to care.

I definitely cared about whether they would succeed and did not let them waste their time in negative beliefs.

(3) It is important to make small steps.

I provided them with practical information in small portions. I told them funny facts about hydrodynamics etc. that they could use and try. I learned how important curiosity was in studying and how many ways there are to make one interested in the things he/she does if you know his/her strengths.

(4) It is important to encourage many tries and provide feedback on those.

After every piece of information I left them to experiment. I asked them about what they felt and experienced. I watched how the things went better and easier, and how they started learning from their own experience. We were in touch not only during the ‘classes’ and we encouraged each other to try new things. The success of one person led to more successes in the rest and our satisfaction was incredible.

(5) It is important to recognize individual qualities.

Each one of the participants was different. I could tell each one of them why I thought he/she would succeed delving into their ‘motivation’, ‘former successes’, ‘high spirit’, ‘consistency’, ‘personal style’ and ‘the specific way they needed support’. Even though I was not a psychologist, they asked me whether I was one. This opened new professional themes and opportunities for business ideas. All of them had one goal but everybody reached it in his/her own way. After this PAAR experience these people liked the taste of the sand in their mouths, the bruises on their knees, the hits of the waves. All their negative beliefs disappeared, and they felt desires for stronger wind, bigger waves and higher jumps. This change attracted more new fans in the group.
Reflective Practice

Even though I am not sure whether I have made any contribution to these people overcoming their fears, as a conclusion I would write that when you hit the right moment, the right people, the right attitudes and the right communication, and when there is mutual respect, inspiration and practice, the things sooner or later happen in the best possible way. And if any of these elements are absent, you can open the bag with the tools, take out PAAR and something else and start creating...until you fill the deficits.

Opening PAAR space in the community (the story of a project researcher)

This is the account of my attempt to practice PAAR apart from the work of the Sofia Reflect-OR project laboratory, applying the approach to the task of community development in rural Bulgaria. Inspired by the idea of opening new reflective spaces we – the Bulgarian team of the project – committed ourselves to identifying and utilizing the opportunities for experimenting with the approach and testing its applicability to various local contexts.

The context: the LEADER approach to community development

The specific approach to rural development, known as LEADER, originally evolved in EU in the 1990s as an attempt to invigorate the local economy of depopulated rural regions, creating incentives for the young people to live and work there. The aim of the program was to encourage sustainable development according to local potential, and the elaboration of new strategies and their implementation through strong focus on cooperative partnerships and networks. The philosophy and practice of LEADER is explicitly participatory – ‘Decentralized, integrated and bottom up approach to territorial development’ – and strongly relies on the voluntary involvement of the local community.

The LEADER approach in Bulgaria was slightly modified to address the major problem faced by the countryside in the transition period: continuous depopulation due to underdevelopment and lack of employment opportunities. The project was targeted at the most impoverished rural municipalities, and the explicit objective was to foster self-employment and entrepreneurship in agriculture, tourism, forestry and services.

The major goal of the project was to build local capacity for proper utilization of the forthcoming EU funding for rural development. The assumption was that at the end of the project local expert knowledge would emerge that was owned by the communities and enabling them to successfully grasp and use various opportunities for sustainable development. For this purpose the establishment and training of local action groups (LAG) as grassroots organizations, responsible for drafting and implementing strategies for local development, was crucial. The project aims to strengthen the capacity of municipal authorities, local farmers, land and forest owners, small and medium enterprises, non-governmental organizations, extension service providers, professional associations and cooperatives so as to become leaders in sustainable rural development. The mechanism for achieving those objectives is the establishment of local action groups.

LAGs were registered as non-governmental organizations with representation of various local stakeholders: businesses, citizens groups, professional associations, etc. Guided by local coordinators, these groups were actively involved in the process of
establishing the rules and procedures of the work, developing the strategies, design and implementation of pilot projects.

**The field experience**

My role in the community development projects informed by the LEADER approach was twofold: to facilitate meetings with the local people and organize client-tailored trainings for the ‘informal leaders’ in the community on various issues related to rural development such as needs assessment, participatory planning, mobilizing local resources, fostering innovative projects and social entrepreneurship, building cooperative partnerships and networks, etc. The philosophy of involvement and empowerment, inherent to the LEADER approach, was quite compatible with the spirit of PAAR, so I decided to take a step further from the requirements of the project and engage the participants in reflective learning experiences, informed by PAAR.

I started by presenting the method for my colleagues, responsible for the training and the meetings in the villages. They were intrigued and inspired, but also anxious as to how the method would be accepted by the local people, who hardly had any experience with community development work, let alone with participatory approaches. These concerns indicated one of the key factors of resistance to PAAR and reflective practice in general: the lack of trust on the part of professional developers in the capacity of the common people to reflect upon their experience and learn from it. The tacit assumption was that reflective learning was a sophisticated intellectual matter, accessible only to properly educated people. This assumption was mobilized to sustain social distinctions and thus reinforce a culture of dependency and alienation between the ‘ordinary’ people and the professional elites. On a deeper level of analysis, it can be seen as a social defense against anxieties provoked by genuine involvement with marginalized and impoverished people: the ‘losers’ of the economic and social transition in Bulgaria. Indeed, the concerns of the professional moderators about the capacity of the community to accept such a paradigmatic shift were partly justified, as the following incident will illustrate.

One of the start-up meetings of the project took place in the community hall in a small village at the Greek border, where all families owned vineyards and grew grapes, although some of them had other jobs. The households were quite poor and the money earned by selling the production formed a considerable share of their income. That year the harvest was very good, but the price offered by the wine producers was poor because of the collapse of the market of Bulgarian wines. The people, who had expected a decent earning for their hard labor through the year, had to sell the grapes at a much lower price than the previous year. Naturally, they came to the meeting angry and frustrated, and instead of reflecting on the possibilities for innovative projects provided by the Program for Rural Development, they indulged in vicious accusations and blaming. The government, the municipal council and the mayor were suspected in conspiracy with the big wine-producing companies against the interests of the farmers. I was also attacked as an agent of the hostile government in my capacity of representative of a program launched by the Ministry of Agriculture. The program and the opportunities it offered were devalued: ‘These projects are for the rich folk, the same people get all the money; we the common people are always at the losing side’; the good intentions of the experts were questioned and ulterior motives were attributed to our work: ‘Why don’t you tell us what money are you earning from that program?’
We became painfully aware that empowering the people to develop their own agenda of the meeting we had actually opened a Pandora’s box. Faced with such a hurricane of distrust and suspicion, in a moment of despair we were at the point of acknowledging our failure and leaving the meeting ashamed and defeated. Fortunately, I managed to withstand the pressure and reframe positively this outburst of anger as a legitimate protest against the difficult circumstances with which they had to cope. This intervention gave immediate effect: the group calmed down, the people stopped shouting all in one voice and started to listen to one another and to us. This was the first step in containing the anxiety of the group and shifting the emotional dynamics of the meeting to a more constructive discussion: we appreciated the right of the participants to be angry and they responded by appreciating our empathy. This made possible a different perspective to be voiced and listened to in the group. Still, the paranoid, black-and-white picture of the situation was far from extinct, only that now we were seen not as enemy but as potential ally against the ‘bad guys out there’.

In the ensuing discussion I suggested the farmers to organize and withstand their collective interest by bargaining a decent price for their production. It turned out that they had tried to form a sort of local trade union, but this attempt for collective action had proved futile: some of the members, pursuing their short-term private interest, had decided to sell at lower prices and had thus failed the agreement. This betrayal was quite discouraging for the rest and had reinforced the distrust and the individualistic survival mentality. Once again, the group regressed to a blaming mode, looking for a scapegoat, but this time the ‘bad guys’ were not outside, but within the community. When the passion was exhausted, the anger gave way to depression. A feeling of despair and self-contempt took over the group: ‘We are good for nothing; we are not trustworthy people; we know only how to survive on one’s own’. At this point I intervened again with the comment that they as a group have an opportunity to reflect upon this experience of failure and learn some important lessons for the future. They can either chose to follow the self-defeating strategy of individual survival or make another more adequate attempt for collective action. This time the group was silent and thoughtful for some time, and then an elderly man suggested that they remain after the meeting to discuss this idea among themselves. Finally the critical incident was over and we were able to pursue with the original agenda of our meeting. These same people listened attentively to the presentation of the program, asked relevant questions, participated quite positively in the discussion and identified a number of areas for local development.

This episode illustrates the challenges encountered by PAAR practitioners in cultures dominated by negative patterns of blaming and shaming, and puts forward the issue of the limitations of the approach and the need for its contextualization.

**Entering the PAAR spaces**

The project started at a university. The project group comprised of members of a university departments, career counselors from JobTiger (a business organization) and three other members who were caring professionals working in different settings.

Career counselors who chose not to participate in the project were those who worked in the state sector. In the first case the coordinator invited the potential participants individually in a private space where the consultant could hear about PAAR and ask questions. The coordinator had to invite the state consultants by writing an official latter to a ministry, and the ministry responded on behalf of the organization refusing
to participate. It looked then as if the invitation itself was a necessary PAAR space, a transition to the group PAAR space. It turned out that the coordinator’s assumption that attracting people into a PAAR space starting from opening space within the person who invited them was an illusion. At the end of the project it became clear that all of the participants entered the project space because this space was recommended by a person with whom they had already had a trustful relationship. Cornwall (2002) explores issues of power and difference in relation to how spaces for participation are created in development. She writes that the space is shaped by the way people enter it, and claims that it is different to invite people from people expressing rights to participate. In Bulgaria, another specific layer to this process was that it mattered whether the person who invites you to engage with PAAR was trusted.

**Security and the PAAR relational space (facilitation and attachment theory)**

A basic postulate of attachment theory – one of the most prominent theories that considers the role of the attachment relationship on individual development – is that only when the individual feels secure enough he/she can start exploring reality. This reality can be the reality of the external world but it can also be the inner reality of his/her world of emotions and states (Bowlby, 1973). When the caregiver is available and attentive to the child’s needs, the child’s is able to focus on these realities rather than checking the whereabouts of the caregiver. This interrelation between the two parties is the process that transforms the parent into a secure base for the child from which it can explore the environment (Bowlby, 1973, p. 236). This interrelation builds the child’s sense of self because sensitive and responsive parenting forms the child’s internal working model of him/herself as a valued individual whose communications with others are important. In contrast, unresponsive or abusive parenting creates an internal working model for the child of him/herself as an inadequate and unworthy person. Bretherton and Munholland (1999) summarized that people who had unresponsive parenting tend to interpret other people’s behavior in a negative way and to expect rejection. People who had sensitive parenting tend to expect acceptance and respect from others. The repetition of this behavior can become unconscious and difficult to alter (pp. 89–90). Bowlby argued that the Internal Working Models (IWMs) are open to new information and can change and there is enough evidence that this happens both in the early and in the adult years of life (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). The key is a new relationship with an attachment figure that can provide security which facilitates security that the shared emotions can be reflected upon, respected and understood (Fonagy, Steele, Moran, Steele, & Higgitt, 1993). This though can be performed by the attachment figure only if her/his own experiences have been understood and reflected upon by an adult mind. Otherwise insecurities of the parent are likely to be transmitted to the next generation.

Minkov (2002) defined our patriarchal culture as anxiety-prone, meaning that members of the society feel anxious in uncertain situations instead of curious of exploring them. In contrast, Western societies enjoy novel events and value differences. There are fewer rules and people are encouraged to discover their own truth. Minkov argues that the familial organization of the Bulgarian society leads to an external locus of control and, consequently, to the need for predictability in the environment and dependency upon an authority figure. He claims that the patriarchal culture in Bulgaria is maintained by parenting that fosters anxiety in children by rearing them in a forbid-
ding manner, which later makes people feel anxious when confronted with the unknown (p. 248). According to attachment research, security can be fostered within a relationship with a trusted authority figure who provides a new relational model (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). What somehow resonates with the above is some thoughts of our project’s group:

What kept me in the project was the power of the external authority figure. The farther an expert is from the work and the relationships in our team, the easier people hear from him and trust him, try to experiment with their practice’ and ‘only facilitation from a foreign culture can foster change in the group.

The above suggests that PAAR is welcomed because individuals are wired to seek security in relationships within which they would be appreciated, their needs met and their achievements acknowledged and reflected back. The question is how to sustain the feeling of security that PAAR brings in the culture. It is important to note here that the matter of sustainability is not just a question that relates to the project’s goals. It is a question that has direct link to the ethics of opening PAAR spaces because according to attachment theory, changing ‘parenting’ styles is disruptive to development of individuals because again, the feeling of security is minimized. In summary, in relation to the Bulgarian culture, the PAAR space of fostering active participation, different ways of collective learning, appreciation of success is new to the Bulgarian culture and its sustainability depends on a lasting and secure PAAR relationship. Below is what a project member shared:

At the beginning of the project I was not clear to what extent the Bulgarian project team were engaged with the project. I had a feeling that the things would dissolve after the project ended and that it would not be possible to continue working on the project together. At the beginning there was no communication between the leaders of the Bulgarian (BG) team and there was a feeling that I was serving somebody else’s interests rather than participating for myself. With the time this changed.

How did this change happen? The following summarizes the group’s thinking: ‘What made me keep participating in the labs was the field of interest, the nice space in the group and of course the facilitator’. To make the PAAR space sustainable in the Bulgarian context, it needed to be modeled. Before entering the role of PAAR facilitators, it was important for all members of our teams to experience the PAAR facilitation with its author (Tony) for a longer time than planned for the project. He committed to the task by planning two additional visits for the Bulgarian laboratories.

Last weekend two of the ‘graduates’ of the project started their first PAAR group. As the reader can imagine, most of the nine members of the group are people who did not have trustful relationships with the leaders. Still, they have become members of the group to learn how to become facilitators. They were not invited: they expressed their right to participate. The PAAR space is changing (see Figure 1).

Conclusions
In the Bulgarian part of the Reflect-OR project, opening space for PAAR started with invitation from a person whom the future participants trusted. After participating in 10 labs facilitated by the author of PAAR, some of the participants applied the approach either in their professional field, or in informal spaces as the stories above present.
Figure 1. PAAR-in-practice.
What appears especially difficult here is to behave PAAR-like in the grim institutional cultures that most Bulgarians abide. The values implicit in this approach are so often at odds with the basic assumptions underlying those cultures that engaging genuinely with PAAR might easily put the individual in tension, if not in conflict, with the organizational mainstream. In effect, people who enthusiastically engage with PAAR in the protected space of a group event are likely to relapse to the alienated and pessimistic mode of social participation in their daily work contexts.

The major conclusion is therefore the need for contextualizing PAAR in the specific environment in order to give it a chance to get integrated in the culture of the respective community or institution. This entails not only careful gearing of the approach to the capacity of individual participants to accept and embrace changes in their perspective, but also to the capacity of the culture to integrate and sustain those changes without threatening its equilibrium. This means establishing lasting relations with people in organizational roles who are open to PAAR and developing those relations in time, respecting the organizational idiosyncrasy and responding positively and supportively to its often modest propensity to learn and change. Such humble and culturally sensitive strategy can trigger, we believe, profound transformation of both individual mindsets and cultural patterns.

Notes on contributors
Galina Markova has a PhD in social work and is program director and lecturer at the MA clinical social work at the Bulgarian Institute of Human Relations, New Bulgarian University. Her field of expertise is de-institutionalization of children and integration of the strength perspective in the development of community services. She does research, consults organizations and maintains private practice.

Harlan Alexandrov works as researcher and consultant in the Bulgarian Institute of Human Relations and as assistant professor in the New Bulgarian University. He holds a masters in Bulgarian philology, a PhD in social anthropology and a second PhD in organizational studies from the Centre for Psycho-Social Studies, UWE Bristol. His academic interests are in the fields of education, social policy and organizational theory. He is involved in various community development and research projects, applying participatory approaches such as action research, reflective practice and cooperative inquiry.

Nadejda Angelova is a member of JobTiger’s team – a leading recruitment and career counseling agency in Bulgaria. She is been a Global Career Development Facilitator [GCDF]-certified career counselor and trainer by NBCC International (US) since 1995, and now designs and conducts trainings in the field of HR and managers’ development. She is also an extreme sports practitioner and loves to challenge people to do their best.

Silviya Yordanova is a career consultant with JobTiger Ltd.

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