

Does the Truth Heal?

A Psychological Perspective on Political Strategies for Dealing with the Legacy of Political Violence*

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War and civil strife no longer affect only the combatants. Entire societies are victimized, civil institutions are destroyed, and the social fabric severely undermined. Dealing with the aftermath of such conflict demands strategies of social transformation aimed at rebuilding the shattered political, economic, and social relationship characteristic of prolonged conflict.

Recently, processes such as truth commissions have been identified as helping in this task by exposing the full magnitude of the destruction and breaking the silences of oppression. Patricia Hayner argues that such institutions can promote reconciliation, outline necessary reforms; allow victims to air their pain, provide acknowledgment of a long-suppressed past, and keep abuses from being repeated. Despite there having been over twenty truth commissions in the last two decades, it is the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that has commanded the most international attention. This has been one of the most extensive to date. Enormous resources were put into publicizing its work and popularising its mission, both domestically and internationally. It has been heralded as a unique and significant advance in the field of reconciliation and transitional justice, on account of its exposure of the truth through a combination of victims' testimonies and the granting of amnesty on condition of full disclosure of the crimes committed. Not only has this opened up new possibilities within the field of transitional justice; it has also provoked debate about whether truth commissions really can contribute to healing and reconciliation in societies struggling with a history of human rights abuse.

Impact of the Past

The brutal impact of decades of systematic segregation, social and economic degradation, and more specifically the direct impact of a plethora of gross violations of human rights in South Africa are captured in the report of the South African TRC. The South African TRC's report argues that "South Africans have had to deal with a psychological stress which has arisen as a

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result of deprivation and dire socio-economic conditions, coupled with the cumulative trauma arising from violent state repression and intra-community conflicts.”

But can the impact of a violent past on individuals and society be captured in words? One way of doing so is through the concept of “extreme traumatization”, which was developed by mental health workers in the Chilean context. Extreme traumatization is characterized by an individual and collective process occurring in a specific social context; namely, when authorities have the power to violate human rights regularly, causing successive and cumulative injuries.

Consistent to some degree with this notion of extreme traumatization, the TRC’s report gives paramount importance to the socio-economic and political context of victims, when considering the psychological impact on them of human rights violations. It points out, for example, the fact that poor living conditions caused additional emotional difficulties that intensified other traumas, “resulting in a complicated traumatic cocktail that demanded more than a mere therapeutic or healing intervention.” It explicitly states “the mental health of a person could not be seen or understood in isolation from socio-economic realities.” The report thus supports the view of a host of mental health professionals who are increasingly moving away from the medical model toward recognizing the importance of social context for mental health.

Truth Commissions and Healing

Despite little research and empirical evidence, the ability of processes of recovering the truth to contribute to healing and reconciliation with the past has been ubiquitously asserted. In its report, the TRC affirmed the “healing potential of storytelling, of revealing the truth before a respectful audience and to an official body.” Psychologically speaking, sleeping dogs do not lie; past traumas do not simply pass or disappear with the passage of time. The past will not let itself be ignored and past traumas can always be expected to have emotional consequences for an individual and society at some later stage. Psychological restoration and healing can only occur through providing space for survivors of violence to be heard, and for every detail of the traumatic event to be reexperienced in a safe environment. A truth commission could provide this to a degree.

The importance of having wrongdoing acknowledged and of uncovering the truth is also commonly affirmed as healing for survivors. By removing the fear of repetition from the lives of survivors and the families of victims, more psychic space is created for healing.

Victims react to extreme trauma in accordance with what it means to them. The meaning of an atrocity is critically important to survivors. An officially authorized truth commission can provide a framework in which victims can begin to understand, integrate, and create new meanings for themselves. By recovering the truth and creating a realistic perspective on past human right abuses, truth commissions may be able to assist this process.

Official acknowledgments and reparations can also be instrumental in healing. They can serve as symbolic markers defining spaces for grieving and for addressing trauma. They can also help to remove responsibility from victims and alleviate their feelings of guilt. A process of “social reparation” is also desirable for the individual and for society. Ideally this involve according to Agger and Jensen the revelation and condemnation of past human rights violations, the formal doing of justice, an individualized and collective healing process, and structures to prevent future violations. Truth commissions, depending on their mandate, can, to lesser and greater degrees, further this process. In South Africa formal justice has been the most obvious missing ingredient.

Truth commissions can also break the silence characterized by extreme and severe traumatization. Breaking the silences of the past and creating a vivid unforgettable record of the atrocities committed under apartheid has been one of the greatest successes of the TRC. Survivors who testified before the TRC affirmed the usefulness of its publicizing of the plight of victims, and the resultant increase in awareness among certain sectors of the population of the extent of past atrocities.

Victims’ own testimonies speak volumes in this regard. Mr. Sikwepere, who came to the TRC to tell of being blinded after he was shot in the face, said: “I fell that what has been making me sick all the time is the fact that I couldn’t tell my story. But now it feels like I got my sight back by coming here and telling you the story.”

Nonetheless, the long-term ability of a once-off statement or public testimony to address the full psychological impact of the past is questionable. Some survivors and families of victims only began to experience a range of psychological problems months after their testimony. In South Africa the revealing of the truth and the reopening of wounds have been extremely painful. Some survivors still remain angry about amnesty for perpetrators, and some perpetrators and beneficiaries of the system still deny their responsibility.

The TRC has undoubtedly begun a healing a process for many, and for a fortuitous few it may have spurred on a complete recovery. However, despite these successes, it would be an error to exaggerate the ability of truth commissions or public testimony to address all the needs of individuals struggling with a personal and social history of human rights abuses.

Revealing Is Healing?

Some of the strongest advocates of truth commissions often espouse an oversimplistic view of what it takes to address the impact of human rights violations. It should not be assumed too easily, as the banners displayed by the TRC did, that “Revealing is Healing.” Hayes writes: “Just revealing is not just healing. It depends on how we reveal, the context of revealing, and what it is that we are revealing.” All the public revelation of truth in the world will not guarantee immediate psychological restoration. Telling the story is only one component of the victim’s typically lengthy and painful healing process. A truth commission may be a necessary first step, but in itself is insufficient to meet the myriad psychological needs of individuals. As the TRC’s own report acknowledges, in many cases the experience of testifying or making a statement “initiated more than it closed.”

Any strategy for dealing with the needs of victims after political conflict must acknowledge their social and cultural context. To some degree the TRC did this in its report, but it was only late in its public proceedings that its rhetoric consistently acknowledged the long road that victims would have to travel toward healing. The TRC has been praised for opening the door for more reconciliation work and for popularising the need for psychological support, but has also been criticized for creating the impression that healing is a simple linear and straightforward process

In terms of victim’s response to violence issues concerning context, whether social, political, or cultural, are principal factors in the psychological healing process. This process is complicated further by the highly individualised way people choose to deal with it. Collective wisdom states that it is better to “cough it out” (as they say frequently in South African townships) than to keep pain festering inside, can be identified in many societies. Furthermore, much of the discipline of (psychoanalytic) psychology is dedicated to dealing with repressed pain and willing the truth out. Nonetheless, when it comes to models such as truth commissions, there is little research that measures the exact psychological impact of uncovering the past on individuals, and even less on how it affects society.

Individual and collective processes of healing are also often collapsed into one another in the field of transitional justice, but the healing of individual and the healing of a nation are not the same thing. Michael Ignatieff challenges the notion of speaking about nations as if their psyches are the same as those of individuals (e.g., as in the assertion that by truth telling the nation will be healed). He feels that it is problematic enough to vest an individual with a

single identity, let alone to talk of the healing of a fissured national identity as if it was an individual with a conscience, identity, and memory.

Thus, social processes aiming to acknowledge pain and provide space for victims to speak out can be necessary starting points, but progress thereafter can be haphazard and slow. The political process is fundamentally different from the personal healing process. A country and its politicians may be ready to move on before victims have come to terms with the magnitude of their personal pain. Individual healing is an inescapably prolonged and enigmatic process. There are often no clear starting points, and fairly often no clear signs that the psychological impact of the past has been completely ameliorated. Personal healing is distinctive, and it often stands at odds with social demands to bury the past.

Bridging Past and Present

Truth commissions are caught between the internal needs of victims (and their ambivalence over holding onto or letting go of the past) and society's external political exigencies, including the need for stability. This implies that dealing with the past is a matter of undergoing a process, and not crossing a magic boundary. Strategies for dealing with the past such as truth commissions can ease this process, provide a framework for dealing with conflict, and may even approximate victims' personal needs and society's political needs over time. This has occurred in some cases in South Africa. However, despite the integral link between their own internal states and their social context, victims can never override the internal psychological journey they have to make as they struggle to make sense of their loss.

All of South African society has been affected by the past. This requires the type of social and political rehabilitation policy that the TRC has partly championed. The need for ongoing medical, traditional, self-help and psychological support services to thousands of individual victims of past violence must remain a national priority. In addition, where societal functioning and cohesion have been damaged, or where there is abject poverty, repairing community and cultural bonds and socio-economic upliftment may be as important as offering psychological assistance to individuals.

Reparations are integral to this process, but here the new South African government has faltered significantly. The TRC's reparations recommendations made in October 1998 were only acted in April 2003 when it was announced that victims of apartheid who testified before the TRC would receive a once-off final reparations grant of R30,000 (US\$4,200). A total of US\$80 million would be paid to 19,000 victims, substantially less than the US \$400

million recommended by the TRC, and fundamentally different in structure to a quasi-pension scheme approach spread over 6 years the Commission also proposed. Many victims remain dissatisfied with this whole process.

Furthermore, despite many scholars lauding the uniqueness of the South African attempt to trade truth for justice, the legacy of a culture of violence and continuing unease with impunity have received limited attention to date. Exchanging truth for amnesty may result in more information being made public, but public information alone does not guarantee nonrepetition. The impact of a truth for justice trade-off needs to be measured, not only by its ability to achieve political stability, but also by the degree to which the lessons of the past are absorbed into the present.

Despite the TRC and its revelations of police misdoings, a significant number of gross human rights violations continue to be perpetrated by the police service in post apartheid South Africa. This is happening in spite of the instatement of democratic governance and the TRC's investigations into past misdeeds. There is little evidence, at least at this stage, that the TRC's exposure of the past directly influenced the current practice of the police service. If anything, the new climate of high rates of crime and increasingly public demands for tougher policing paradoxically give the police a freer hand to commit violations.

Human rights violations committed by the public are also fairly common, such as vigilantism against suspected criminals and xenophobic related incidents. A survey carried out by the Community Agency for Social Enquiry revealed that thirty-one percent of all South Africans feel the police have the right to use force to extract information from criminal suspects.

Thus, not only does a legacy of authoritarianism still exist within the South African police, but the brutality of apartheid has left remnants deep within the core of every South African. An entrenched culture of human rights has not been, perhaps predictably, the immediate by-product of the TRC process.

Despite the TRC's efforts to highlight ongoing police abuses in its report, it appears that the general public considers the violations committed by the police under the apartheid system to be fundamentally different from those taking place today. Political and criminal violence have been artificially severed in the process of transition; a distinction, which, in most cases, is impossible to sustain.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, chairperson of the TRC, believes that its amnesty provisions have not encouraged impunity in South Africa, because amnesty was only granted to those who pleaded guilty and accepted responsibility for what they had done. However, the

exact impact of amnesty on ongoing levels of impunity and the public's anti-human rights sentiment in South Africa is not yet fully understood. Amnesty always implies some level of social acceptance of the violation or at least some justification of it. In light of the current attitudes to human rights in South Africa it is difficult not to conclude that a subtle, but stubbornly residual air of impunity still lingers in South African society.

The granting of amnesty is also generally at odds with the feelings of most survivors of violence. Ideally, these want truth from the perpetrators, but they also want them prosecuted. Justice through the courts is the preferred way of dealing with perpetrators among most victims worldwide.

Further, when considering how best to deal with the past after civil conflict it is useful to make a distinction between what can broadly be termed "horizontal" and "vertical" types of violence. Vertical violence refers to the violence committed by the state against its citizens, and citizens' violence against the state. This kind of violence that truth commissions typically investigate and deal with. Horizontal violence refers to that between fellow citizens, and is sometimes called "community violence" or "intra/interorganizational violence." This kind typically occurs in the latter phases of states committing extensive forms of vertical violence.

The violence in South Africa during the period of negotiation from February 1990 and April 1994, typified by conflict between the African National Congress and the Inkatha Freedom Party (some of which was covertly sponsored by the state and its agents), is a good example of horizontal violence. This period in South African history accounted for the greatest number of fatalities. The South African Institute of Race Relations reported 14,807 deaths during the negotiation period, a time when South Africa was supposedly normalizing. This is in stark comparison to the previous five years, when the Institute reported only 5,387 deaths from political violence.

It is obviously important that institutions such as truth commissions come to terms with vertical violence; and this has been the main focus of the South African TRC. Nevertheless, in the long term it is often the micro-effects that ripple through communities destroying the social fabric and these require equal attention.

Relatively speaking, the horizontal violence that took place within South African communities was sorely neglected by the TRC. The Commission itself admits that it failed to make significant breakthroughs in relation to violence in the 1990s. It is vitally important to acknowledge that apartheid has left a legacy of violence and mistrust within communities themselves, and not merely between the state and its citizens. Many communities in South Africa remain internally subject to division and conflict. Reconciliation at the community

level remains vital to long-term stability and development; for it is within communities and at local levels that future violence is likely to manifest itself. More than likely it will erupt in power struggles for support of the poorer sections of the society who make up a sizeable percentage of the entire population. In this context, disaffected individuals whose structural conditions remain unchanged, and those who feel that their rights to justice were sacrificed for minimal return by the amnesty laws and other negotiated compromises, will become easy recruits of opportunistic politicians ready to exploit past resentments. In this context, it becomes clear that ongoing efforts to reconstruct and develop communities remain an urgent priority and necessary to entrench the gains made by the TRC.