

Do Sleeping Dogs Lie? The Psychological Implications of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa

by
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The *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Bill* has been signed into law which allows for the establishment of a *Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)* in South Africa. The purpose of the TRC is to facilitate a truth recovery process that is aimed at reconciling with the past. It is envisaged that this process of reconciliation will occur through establishing as complete a picture as possible of the causes, nature and extent of past human rights abuses. The so-called “victims” of these abuses will be located and allowed to relate their stories so as to restore their human and civil dignity. Thereafter, the TRC aims to make amends to these individuals through the granting of reparations and rehabilitative measures. Furthermore, the TRC intends to enhance reconciliation by granting amnesty to perpetrators of human rights abuses who fully disclose the political crimes they committed. The TRC will also compile a comprehensive report of past abuses and the report will make recommendations on how such events can be prevented from occurring again.

The TRC process is intended to serve numerous social and legal functions like the re-establishment of the rule of law, the building of faith in institutions that have been discredited in the past and the restoration of a human rights culture in South Africa. This, however, will largely depend upon factors like political legitimacy, dealing with the controversial issues of granting amnesty, an efficient documentation system and the competent running of the process. Most of the papers and debates thus far have emphasised these factors and compared the South African process to international commissions, primarily from a legal perspective. However, on a psychological level the impact of the TRC on individuals and the society as whole has only been explored in a limited way (Hamber, 1995). In several papers (Asmal, 1992; Boraine, Levy & Scheffer, 1994; Simpson, 1994; Simpson & van Zyl, 1995) the truth recovery process and its ability to contribute to reconciliation with the past has been highlighted, however, a more detailed account of how this process may operate on a psychological level has not been explored.

This paper, therefore, explores how the process of a TRC could operate as psychologically rehabilitative mechanism. It focuses on the potentially numerous traumatised individuals who will come into contact with the TRC and their likely experience of the process. The core argument is that the TRC is not a sufficient

process in itself to promote individual and collective psychological rehabilitation and that a range of psychological structures and strategies will be needed to run parallel to the TRC. Types of structures are suggested and the psychological implications of truth and reconciliation process highlighted throughout.

The Psychological Consequences of the Conflicts of the Past

South African society has been marked by extreme levels of violence. There have been thousands of direct and indirect survivors who have suffered and are suffering and from a range of psychological related conditions due to the conflicts of the past. The direct survivors include those exposed directly to experiences of violence like torture survivors, witnesses and survivors of assault and attempted killings. The indirect survivors include the families and relatives whose loved ones have “disappeared”, been victimised or murdered. The *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act* includes both these groups of survivors in its definition of “victims”. The act defines the so-called “victims” as all those who have “suffered physical or mental injury, emotional suffering or a substantial impairment of human rights due to gross violation of human rights associated with the political conflicts of the past”.

The enormity of the impact this violence, and the resultant psychological consequences on these individuals, has been fairly extensively documented and a range of psychological sequelae isolated. Although space does not permit a thorough review of these psychological consequences and the exact individual costs of psychological damage are difficult to assess (Lauer, 1989 cited in M^cKendrick & Hoffman, 1990) in all cases of human rights violations some trauma and an emotional reaction can always be expected. The most well researched individual consequence to an exposure to violence is the so-called post-traumatic stress syndrome. The syndrome can include a range of immediate and sometimes delayed emotional responses, including self-blame, vivid re-experiencing of the event, fear, nightmares, feelings of helplessness, depression, relationship difficulties, anxiety and even substance abuse related difficulties. Some or all of these can be experienced by direct victims at differing times after the exposure to a traumatic or violent event. Similar emotional reactions can also be experienced by indirect survivors or family members, and bereavement related issues can be assumed to be common for those who have lost relatives during the conflicts of the past.

Further, for South African society as a whole a culture of violence has developed in which violence has often been sanctioned at the interpersonal, intergroup and institutional levels. The multiple causal factors for this are explored elsewhere (Simpson, 1993) but suffice to say the pervasive nature of the violence has undermined the moral, interpersonal and social fabric of the society. As has been noted, the TRC could result in the building of a human rights culture through creating institutional change. However, this paper is more concerned as to whether the TRC could address the collective and individual psychological impact of the

past on individuals and if a truth recovery process can in fact lead to psychological restoration.

The TRC as a Psychologically Healing Process

Survivors of traumatic events, and more broadly governments in transformation from past political conflict like South Africa, are often urged to *let sleeping dogs lie* or to *let bygones be bygones*. However, psychologically *sleeping dogs do not lie*; past traumas do not simply pass or disappear with the passage of time. Psychologically the past can never just be ignored and past traumas can always be expected to have emotional consequences for an individual. Repressed pain and trauma generally block emotional life, have psychologically adverse consequences and can even lead to physical symptoms (Miller, 1991). Psychological restoration and healing can only occur through providing the space for survivors to feel heard and for every detail of the traumatic event to be re-experienced in a safe environment.

Further, the resultant individual and collective emotional responses to political violence, like responses to trauma generally, can be understood to have a significant cognitive impact (*cf.* Epstein, 1989 cited in Prout & Schwarz, 1991; Janoff-Bulman, 1985; Scott & Stradling, 1993). Janoff-Bulman (1985) argues that trauma and violence shatters individual cognitive assumptions about the self and the world. The cognitive assumptions of personal invulnerability, viewing oneself positively and that the world is a meaningful and comprehensible place can be profoundly altered by severe forms of trauma. It is these distortions that can result in the post-traumatic stress phenomenon. It is the cognitive appraisal of the event that for victim is of primary importance (Ramsay, Gorst-unsworth & Turner, 1993) as extreme forms of trauma can destroy individual and social trust, and transform survivors into emotional strangers alien to the story they cannot recognise as their own (Kaes, 1991 cited in Jelin, 1994). Extrapolating this to South African society one could argue that many survivors have been left feeling vulnerable, helpless, without explanation of events and with a distorted cognitive picture of society and humanity.

The TRC, by creating an accurate picture of the past, could liberate individuals and broader society from this skewed view of humanity constructed solely around the inhuman legacy of South African society. Furthermore, by creating a realistic perspective of past human rights abuses, individual and collective cognitive recovery could be aided by allowing survivors to accept what happened to them and deal with their resultant emotional responses. Importantly, through acknowledgement and uncovering the roots of the traumatic incident it could also serve to absolve the feelings of guilt and personal causal responsibility (Danieli, 1992; Miller, 1991; Scott & Stradling, 1993) that survivors often experience after traumatic events.

On an individual level one can only forget what one has lived through and this requires every detail of the traumatic event to be experienced (Jelin, 1994;

Miller, 1991). The TRC can facilitate this process, albeit in a limited way, through the testimony giving process. Through giving testimony the process of re-living and building a context of meaning for survivors can be facilitated. This can serve the cognitive function of re-shaping the event for the survivor but also allow for the individual's feelings to be dealt with and for the essentially abnormal event to be integrated into the cognitive and emotional matrix of the survivors' life. Furthermore, giving testimony, unlike traditional psychotherapy that privatises social trauma, can affirm the locus of control as lying outside the individual and thus providing means for regaining status as a social actor (Lykes & Liem, 1990).

An additional consequence of political violence and turmoil has been the development of what can be termed a culture of silence or what Danieli (1981; 1992) terms a conspiracy of silence. Silence, misinformation and the so-called "official story" are often the hallmark of past repressive societies. The difficulty of distinguishing between the true and the untrue is the exact result of state repression (Lykes & Liem, 1990). In addition, the experience of mental health care workers in South Africa, particularly those working in strife torn areas, is that individuals are generally reluctant to talk for fear of reprisal. Moreover, the elementary tenants of psychology teach us that the wish to expose the truth and deal with past trauma can be counteracted by internal desires for it to be left untouched or the "need to ignore it" (DePres, 1976). This silence can be individually destructive in the long-run and results in individuals being excluded from social, emotional and political life. This leaves most survivors feeling misunderstood and that nobody is willing to hear their story. The process of truth recovery can be instrumental in contributing to psychological rehabilitation by breaking this culture of silence.

Furthermore, rituals, symbols, commemoration and reparations can play an important role in any process of healing, bereavement and addressing trauma. They can help grieving by allowing the individual to focus exclusively on the grief and to share their feelings with others. Clearly, universal experiences after any social catastrophe or trauma (and even with more positive social experiences) point to the need for high levels of recognition, commemoration, memorial activities and rituals (Danieli, 1992). Symbolic representation of trauma, particularly if the symbols are personalised, can serve a psychologically restorative function and the reparations granting process can facilitate a process of coming to terms with the traumatic event and symbolise an individual's mastery over it.

More specifically, the TRC can serve some of the functions of a healing ritual. Healing rituals normally contain a process of specifying the trauma, reliving it's effects, developing personalised symbols of the trauma, performing symbolic acts of parting with the past and the performance of symbolic acts of becoming something new¹. The TRC can do this, first, by specifying the trauma and reliving it's effects through a structured truth recovery process and by survivors giving testimony. Second, the TRC in itself, can symbolically represent a collective willingness to deal with and part from the past. And finally, the TRC by making recommendations, and hopefully implementing and developing institutional

apparatus for preventing the re-occurrence of human rights violations, can symbolically and concretely represent the process of “becoming something new”.

Furthermore, the reparations process implicit in the TRC can add a further rehabilitative function. Through the *Committee on Reparation and Rehabilitation* dependants of victims and survivors will be able apply for reparation or compensation. Monetary values cannot be assigned or replace the suffering experienced, and a monetary value can never address the social and moral breach caused by extreme levels of trauma and abuse (Danieli, 1992). However, the TRC will probably not make monetary awards, but will rather focus on rehabilitative strategies or measures like free schooling and medical aids to make amends. This raises some complex issues but could serve the psychological process of concretising the event and symbolically acknowledging the individuals suffering.

Symbolically it is not the physical reparation but the process of amending, recognising and acknowledging that could serve the most restorative psychological function. An example that supports this view is the group of women who are the relatives of family members who “disappeared” during the period of military rule in Argentina known as the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*. They refused to accept monetary reparation as they felt that the state was buying their silence rather than social and historical recognition (Danieli, 1992). Argentinean society remains immersed in the phenomenon of social disappearances because the social processes of acknowledgement and recognition have not occurred (Jelin, 1994). This is further supported by a recent article that surprisingly emphasises that of the many monuments scattered about Buenos Aires there is still not one to the “30000” who disappeared (Valentine, 1995).

However, the issues is a double-edged sword because although symbolic acknowledgement and recognition can be useful, at the same time symbolic compensation can never be enough (Danieli, 1992). Furthermore, in South Africa the levels of impoverishment cannot be underestimated. For some the idea of receiving any financial compensation no matter how minimal may be favoured over long-term reparative measures like developing a network of trauma centres or compensation such as free education for their children, the benefits of which would only materialise in a number of years. In addition, the process of compensating individuals always requires some form of quantification of social experiences. Nevertheless, at no point should any survivor have to justify their trauma to “qualify” for compensation. The situation cannot develop in which survivors have to prove they have been damaged. This can be demeaning and lead survivors to feel that their experiences are being treated with suspicion and scepticism. Moreover, “proving” that damage was done or that the scars are permanent runs counter to psychological healing and mastery of the traumatic incident.

A further difficult issue in relation to reparation is the possibility of raising individual expectations in relation to receiving compensation. Expectations and wishes can vary a great deal. Some survivors and families of victims want financial compensation, others a proper funeral for their “missing” loved ones, some simply want the truth and still for others the greatest compensation would be to see the

perpetrators brought to justice. Ideal forms of compensation would meet these individualised needs and conversely, the greatest disappointment and frustration would be to fail to do so. Realistically all expectations will never be met and therefore a broad process of addressing expectations will be necessary. Expectations will need to be mediated through sophisticated media campaigns and through survivor support structures.

In terms of amnesty related issues expectations of those who wish for prosecution may never be realised. Although the granting of amnesty will not occur immediately and the perpetrators of particularly brutal and heinous crimes will not qualify for amnesty² many survivors will undoubtedly be left feeling that justice has not been served. This may result in anger, resentment and even revenge in extreme cases. Importantly, however, amnesty will be granted only on the grounds of full disclosure, therefore, the truth will always be known in the cases where amnesty is granted. This may satisfy some survivors as the demand for the truth is sometimes stronger than the need for retribution (Weschler, 1989 cited in Lykes & Liem, 1990). Nevertheless, in cases where the truth is already known the process of granting amnesty may seem futile.³ To deal with these feelings, and more broadly individuals feelings towards the perpetrator particularly if amnesty is granted, it is important that it is not demanded, either covertly or overtly, that survivors are expected to forgive the perpetrators. Anger or other emotional responses by survivors to the granting of amnesty to perpetrators has to be legitimised and space provided for survivors to openly express their feelings. Survivors will feel great resentment and may desire to take revenge if they feel that their emotions and voices are not accepted by society.

The Need for Psychological Support

The TRC could be a psychologically healing process by aiding a much needed truth recovery, giving survivors space to recount past abuses and through providing some form of reparation. Nevertheless, lessons particularly from Latin America, teach us that the establishment of a truth commission in itself is not sufficient to meet these psychological needs. The TRC runs the danger of being overly involved in the legal, logistic and political issues at the expense of the key psychological aspects of the process of reconciliation. For this reason a concerted effort by the architects of the TRC to develop social services to run parallel to the TRC will be necessary. Furthermore, given the relative strength of many non-government organisations in South Africa, a powerful mental health contribution from civil society will necessary.

The process as a whole may well re-evoked difficult and traumatic experiences for many survivors. Specifically, the TRC will access and make contact with many traumatised survivors of past abuses. Direct contact with people who have suffered terrible abuses will occur during the testifying process, statement taking, through fieldworkers and the course of the work of investigative teams working for the TRC. It is imperative that the TRC does not unearth painful memories or cause people to

re-live difficult times without ensuring that appropriate support services exist for such people. It is far more likely that the TRC will lead to feelings of revenge, bitterness and anger if people who come into contact with it do not receive appropriate counselling and adequate support and service.

This form of support will be dependant upon and need the following:

- **An audit of existing psychological support services**

An audit of existing services will be necessary so as to establish what services are available and where additional services may be necessary. This can prevent duplication and facilitate the rational delivery of services. Importantly, South Africa is a country marked by limited resources and mental health care services are particularly under-resourced. The battle for mental health care services to be seen as a vital and integral part of a comprehensive health care system is on-going. Thus, any resources made available for providing psychological services requires that such services are sustainable and used to build mental health care services well after the life of the TRC.

- **Network and training for mental health care providers**

The testimony giving process cannot be expected to be sufficient to address all the psychological processes necessary for complete psychological rehabilitation. Services like counselling may be desired by some survivors and will be necessary. These services will best be provided by a network of mental health care providers at local levels identified during the audit. The audit should be used to establish if the already limited number and overstretched mental health care providers can deliver such services, and if not, what additional resources the TRC could supply be used to develop these services. Furthermore, if certain service providers can provide counselling and support they will have to be informed and trained concerning the objectives of the TRC, its functioning and the process as a whole so as to ensure that survivors can be serviced adequately.

- **Training for the TRC staff**

The TRC staff (fieldworkers, investigators and commissioners) will need to be equipped with the skills to identify signs of trauma in order to refer people in need to appropriate support services. The TRC staff should have to undergo training to train them with these skills and to teach them to deal with survivors in a psychologically sensitive manner. Such training could ensure that the hearings process and all the dealings survivors and families of victims have with the TRC will restore dignity and make individuals feel resolved and reconciled. It is crucial that statement takers be given additional training so that they can use their time with the survivors as constructively as possible. For many survivors their only contact

with the TRC will be through the statement taking process. This process needs to be as psychologically restorative as possible and it cannot be a simple once off process which leaves the individual feeling depleted rather than restored.

- **Pre-testimony briefing and de-briefing**

Psychological support needs to be rendered to those giving testimony before the TRC, particularly for those partaking in the public hearings process. It has to be ensured that individuals giving testimony feel psychologically strong enough to recount potentially traumatic events. Similarly, a debriefing may be necessary so as to deal with feelings about how the testimony was received by the TRC and what feelings may have been evoked in the process. For the individual giving testimony to feel that their testimony was not believed, despite their personal feelings of traumatisation, can be a potentially psychologically damaging experience. A briefing and de-briefing process has to accompany all public hearings.

- **Developing informal support structures**

A key area in the providing of psychological support for survivors should be the facilitation of the development of “survivor groups” of direct survivors and the relatives of persons lost and victimised during political struggle. In Argentina, today the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* still march once a week to demand information about the “30000 disappeared” and their missing loved ones (Valentine, 1995). Organised groups like this can make a significant contribution to the success of truth commission initiatives, shape the focus of investigation and provide forms of informal psychological support. It is important for these groups to develop a proactive programme so that they can feed into it and shape the outcome on the TRC. In Latin America, such groups often developed in reaction to their needs or interests not being met. Although this is often necessary, a process running parallel to the TRC could significantly alter the outcome of the TRC process in South Africa.⁴

Conclusion

It has been argued that the TRC could operate as a psychologically healing mechanism provided that additional psychological services are developed and sustained throughout the life of the TRC. However, when analysing the TRC one needs to be aware that the conflicts of the past have a long deep-rooted history and that violence has not been uniform in nature. The conflicts of the past have been pervasive and affected all spheres of social, political and community life. In some areas the conflict is ongoing and the clear division that the TRC has to make between political and criminal violence, and the delineation between perpetrators and victims, has long been obscured. Thus, to argue for a

simple prosecution process or solely an extensive counselling network or any uniform mechanism for dealing with past is insufficient.

In this sense, the TRC needs to be viewed as one of the mechanisms for addressing the conflicts of the past. However, it is needs to be borne in mind that it is an artificially constructed phenomenon which may well be profoundly different to more individualised or personalised ways of coping with adversity. This reinforces the need for the process to be individualised throughout and that substantial psychological input at the individual level is made. This needs to occur simultaneously with the development of broader processes for addressing the conflicts of the past.

This requires that mental health care workers develop an active stance, and engage in service delivery as well as the crucial political debates surrounding the TRC. Mental health care workers and human rights activists also have to be aware that political expedience often demands forgiveness, forgetting and the need for political consensus at the expense of adequately dealing with the past.

Furthermore, it needs to be understood that political posturing and a range of other social and economic factors could profoundly shift the focus of the TRC away from the survivors of past human rights violations. Thus, mental health care workers will have to continually advocate a survivor centred approach to the TRC as well as the need for a comprehensive mental health care approach to the TRC. If this can be achieved, the TRC could provide a unique opportunity to develop mental health care services, address the traumas of the past and lay the foundations for a human rights culture in South Africa.

Notes

♦ Paper presented at *Seminar No.5 of 1995 at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation*, Johannesburg, South Africa, 26 July 1995. Brandon Hamber was previously the Co-ordinator of the Transition and Reconciliation Unit at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, Johannesburg, South Africa, and was a visiting Tip O'Neill Fellow at the Initiative on Conflict Resolution and Ethnicity (INCORE) in Derry, Northern Ireland. Email: mail@brandonhamber.com or see www.brandonhamber.com.

¹ The ideas on the nature of healing rituals are extracted from the chapter *Healing Rituals* from a book entitled *Back from the Brink* (author and date unknown).

² For a complete explanation of the political development of the amnesty related issues and the actual process of granting amnesty see Simpson & van Zyl (1995).

³ A case in point is the murder of Griffiths Mxenge in which her brother through a group known as the *Association of Victims of Unsolved Apartheid Atrocities* is demanding that justice be done as former policeman Dirk Coetzee has admitted to being implicated in the killing of Mxenge (Sowetan, June 14, 1995).

⁴ The development of survivor groups is partly underway in South Africa. Known groups include the development of the so-called *Khulumani Support Group or Speak-out Group* which is briefly described in Hamber (1995) and the *Association of Victims of Unsolved Apartheid Atrocities* in the Eastern Cape which has been particularly vocal with regards to the amnesty granting process and their wish for "justice to be done" (Sowetan, June 14, 1995).

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