

SLEEPING DOGS DO NOT LIE

BRANDON HAMBER, of the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, argues that while the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) could be a rehabilitative and psychologically healing process, it is not sufficient in itself.

The TRC has been established to fulfil a number of functions, but I am concerned here only with whether it will be able to 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.

That past has been marked by extreme levels of violence. There are thousands of direct and indirect survivors who, as a result, have suffered, and are suffering, from a range of psychological-related conditions. In all cases of human rights violations, some trauma and an emotional reaction can be expected.

The most well-researched individual consequence of 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 responses can be experienced by direct victims - for example torture survivors - at different times after the exposure to a traumatic or violent event. Similar emotional reactions can also be experienced by

indirect survivors - the families and relatives of victims, but could also include bereavement-related issues.

Survivors of traumatic events are often urged to let sleeping dogs lie or to let bygones be bygones.

Psychologically, however, sleeping dogs do not lie: traumas do not simply pass or disappear with the passage of time; the past can never just be ignored and past traumas can always be expected to have emotional consequences for the individual. Repressed pain and trauma generally block emotional life, have psychologically adverse consequences and can even lead to physical symptoms. Psychological restoration and healing can only occur through providing the space for survivors to feel they have been heard and for every detail of the traumatic event to be re-experienced in a safe environment. Testifying, telling their stories, to the TRC could help to meet this need, to some degree.

Many survivors have been left feeling vulnerable, helpless, without any explanation of events, and with a distorted understanding 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. Further, by creating a realistic perspective on past human rights abuses, individual and collective recovery could be aided, by allowing survivors to accept what happened to them and deal with their resultant emotional responses; it could also serve to absolve the feelings of guilt that survivors often experience.

It is also important that it is not demanded, covertly or overtly, that survivors should forgive perpetrators who are granted amnesty.

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

In addition, one of the results of political violence and turmoil has been the development of a 'culture of silence'. Silence, misinformation, and the 'official story' are often the hallmarks of repressive societies. Further, particularly in the strife-torn areas of South Africa, individuals are generally reluctant to talk for fear of reprisal. Moreover, it is an elementary tenet of psychology that the wish to expose the truth and deal with past trauma can be counteracted by internal desires for it to be left untouched.

This silence can be individually destructive in the long-run and results in individuals being excluded from social and political life. This leads to survivors of violence feeling that they are misunderstood and nobody is willing to listen to their story. The truth recovery process of the TRC can contribute to psychological rehabilitation by breaking this culture of silence.

Rituals, symbols, commemorations, and reparations can also play an important part in allowing survivors to reclaim their past. The TRC does make provision for reparations; though this will probably not be in the form of monetary awards. Rather, the government is likely to institute a reparations policy based on recommendations of the TRC that rehabilitative strategies should focus on measures like free schooling and medical aid to make amends.

This is a complex and difficult task; but it could serve the psychological process of concretising the event and symbolically recognising the individuals' suffering. In other words, it is not the physical reparation but the process of amending, recognising, and acknowledging that serves the most restorative psychological function. For example, a group of women - known as the Madres de Plaza de Mayo - relatives of those who 'disappeared' during the period of military rule in Argentina, refused to accept monetary compensation. They felt that the State

was trying to buy their silence rather than give social and historical recognition.

Although symbolic acknowledgement and recognition can be useful, they can never be enough. For some, receiving financial compensation, however minimal, may be favoured over long-term reparation measures. Whatever the form of compensation, however, at no point should any survivor have to justify their trauma and prove that they have been damaged in order to 'qualify'. 'Proving' that damage was done or that the scars are permanent runs counter to psychological healing and mastery of the traumatic incident. It is also important that it is not demanded, either covertly or overtly, that survivors should forgive the perpetrators who are granted amnesty. Anger or other emotional responses by survivors to the granting of amnesty 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 TRC could, therefore, be a psychologically healing process; by aiding much-needed truth recovery; by giving survivors space to recount past abuses; by providing some form of reparation. By itself, however, it is not sufficient to meet these psychological needs. There is also a danger of the TRC being overly involved in the legal, logistic, and political aspects at the expense of the psychological aspects of the process of reconciliation. For this reason, a concerted effort to develop social services to run parallel to the TRC will be necessary. This will require a powerful mental health contribution from NGOs.

This contribution can take many forms. The process as a whole may well re-evolve difficult and traumatic experiences for many survivors. Specifically, the TRC will make contact with many traumatised

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survivors: during the testifying process, in statement taking, through fieldworkers, and in the course of the work of the investigative teams. It is imperative that the TRC does not unearth painful memories or cause people to re-live difficult times without ensuring that appropriate counselling and adequate support services exist for these people. Otherwise, the process will lead to feelings of revenge, bitterness, and anger.

To facilitate this form of support, an audit of psychological support services will be necessary so as to establish what services are available and where additional services may be needed. Further, a network of mental health care providers, who are informed about the work and objectives of the TRC, should be established.

NGOs could also contribute to the training of the TRC staff, who must be equipped to identify signs of trauma in

order to refer people in need to appropriate support services. The TRC staff should also be trained to deal with survivors in a psychologically sensitive manner. If those who listen to the testimony of survivors do not do so in a sufficiently sensitive manner, the hearings will not restore the dignity of the survivors nor make them feel resolved or reconciled.

Psychological support also needs to be given to those testifying before the TRC. Pre-testimony briefing or counselling, especially for public hearings, will be necessary to ensure that those testifying feel psychologically strong enough. Similarly, a debriefing may be necessary to deal with feelings about how the testimony was received by the TRC and what feelings have been evoked in the process. For individuals, to feel, for example, that their testimony was not believed, despite their personal feelings of traumatised, could be a psychologically damaging experience.

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SURVIVING TOGETHER

A key area in the providing of psychological support can be the development of 'survivor groups' of relatives of people lost or victimised during the political struggle. Such groups could make a significant contribution to the success of TRC initiatives, shape the focus of investigation, and provide informal psychological support. This, however, is dependent on their demands being heard and acted upon.

The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, together with several dedicated survivors, has already started the development of survivor groups, (known as the Khulumani Support Group) where survivors retell their stories and discuss key issues in relation to the TRC.

Some of the challenges that face all those working to bring about reconciliation are outlined opposite.

The challenges ahead

- The battle for additional mental health care services, as part of a comprehensive health care system, is a continuing one. Thus, any resources made available for providing psychological services require that such services are sustainable and used to build mental health care services well after the life of the TRC.
 - The roots and context of conflict in South Africa are complex. The re-telling of stories, irrespective of enormous psychological back-up, cannot substitute for addressing the causes and nature of the violence and the development of mechanisms for preventing its re-occurrence.
 - Important as it is to assist and support individuals, a continued focus on psychological rehabilitation runs the risk of over medicalising social phenomena. The social process of reconciliation is not about diagnosing and treating pathology. Mental health care workers must be part of the process of reconciliation and healing, not simply 'repair' individuals.
 - Over the next two years a range of people - health care workers, lawyers, TRC staff - will be working with survivors of South Africa's abusive past. The possibility of vicarious traumatisation should not be ignored: mechanisms for dealing with it should be put in place. The TRC will publicise the traumas of the past and expose to the whole of society the gross human rights violations that have been shrouded in secrecy. It is important to consider how this may affect people.
 - The issues of reparation and the concern about raising individual expectations are paramount. Experience with survivor groups shows that expectations vary a great deal: some would like financial compensation, others a proper funeral for their 'missing' loved ones, some simply want the truth; for others the greatest compensation would be to see the perpetrators brought to justice. Expectations will have to be mediated. While this can to some extent be done through survivor groups, a broad process of addressing expectations will also be necessary.
 - Finally, there is a need for a comprehensive approach to addressing psychological concerns, both in terms of a health care system and from a political angle. Psychologists need to be aware that often pragmatic political processes run counter to psychological processes: Peace is not brokered on paper, stability is not ensured through new national symbols or anthems but rather through constructive engagement with the difficulties of the past. This requires that mental health care workers develop an active stance and engage in the political debates. Active mental health care workers advocating a psychological focus for the TRC will ensure that South Africans regain ownership and understanding of their experiences, rather than their past being stolen by impersonal statistics, legal battles, the media, and political posturing.
- The TRC can provide a unique opportunity to develop and sustain much needed psychological services while contributing more broadly to the process of reconciliation in South Africa.

This article is an edited and conflated version of two of the author's papers. The original papers drew on an extensive bibliography which it is not possible to reproduce here; references have, therefore, been omitted.