

Truth and Reconciliation: A Necessity for Trauma Healing in Post Conflict Restructuring

Author Details: Sam Olatunji Ajiye

Abstract

This paper contributes to the existing knowledge on the role played by truth, confession, and reconciliation as necessary ingredients for trauma healing in post-conflict restructuring. The article discussion shows to what extent these concepts are interconnected, and share a complex relationship with truth and reconciliation. It argues that the knowledge about past violence is hardly a canonical truth. It is at best a negotiated truth. This knowledge is inevitably a combination of facts and interpretations. This knowledge is sought and used for understanding past violence but also for paving the way toward the reconstruction of post-conflict societies. The article argues that confession offers a twofold opportunity; it provides knowledge of past violence, and acknowledgment of victims' pain through perpetrators' expression of remorse, although in a limited manner. Forgiveness is also discussed in relation to its essential meaning, the actors involved, and its purposes. Finally, reconciliation is built on two pillars, firstly, the proclamation of a seemingly achieved reconciliation; and secondly, the experiencing of reconciliation in everyday interaction between perpetrators and victims.

Keywords: Truth, Reconciliation, Trauma, Forgiveness, Post-conflict restructuring

Introduction

At the end of the Cold War, post-conflict reconstruction processes around the world focused on three main interrelated mechanisms. The first dealt with the promotion of peace. The second dealt with conflict. The third one has been formulated or articulated around what is called transitional justice, which includes legal justice and social justice. This third category also includes consideration of memory, truth, healing, human rights protection, reparation, and reconciliation, to name a few (Fisher et al. 2000; Oberschall 2007; Mason and Meernik 2006; Francis 2008; Malan 2008).

However, it has been established in the literature that truth and reconciliation are some of the ingredients for trauma healing and post-conflict reconciliation. Many of these concepts, such as justice, truth, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation have been explored by social scientists for academic and social benefits. But their formulations have always faced obstacles stemming from the impossibility of wholly capturing the object of study they are analyzing or the social reality they are trying to document and understand. On the one hand, these concepts are studied by social scientists of different disciplines, such as social science, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, history, and political science, who happen to use different methodologies and approaches. This produces multiple interpretations of those concepts and their theories. On the other hand, post-conflict countries where these transitional justice mechanisms are being implemented have different histories, and different violent backgrounds, and therefore, will have different ways of using those mechanisms in order to maximize success. This prompts me to reflect upon those concepts once again, with the view of using them in my fieldwork research on how testimonies about past violence contributed to the reconciliation process in Nigeria.

Moreover, in their study, Sánchez and Rognvik (2012) opined that reconciliation is seen as both a goal and a process. Also, four key elements to a successful reconciliation have been identified as inclusive national dialogue, political will, security, and freedom to speak and move; and, a national vision of the nation's end state as defined by its citizens. Transitional justice is necessary, but not sufficient in itself to achieve reconciliation. For instance, truth commissions that are not based on an inclusive national dialogue rarely serve their purpose beyond revealing facts and providing some criminal accountability (Sánchez and Rognvik, 2012). What needs to be discussed and focused on is a transformative transitional justice agenda. However, truth is important to prevent historical facts from being presented one-sidedly or linked to religious or ethnic adversaries. Truth and fact-finding are important to help people deal with the mythologies of the conflict. Neither traditional/customary nor Western/normative global systems of justice are flawless mechanisms to address

transitional justice. Synergies between the two systems need to be created in countries where they exist side by side to create a balanced arrangement tailored to the context and produce a more just society as the basis for reconciliation. Women should be viewed as an important asset to achieve reconciliation and not only as victims of the conflict. The dehumanization of men during conflict should be addressed to prevent the recurrence of conflict. A challenge in addressing the gender dimension of reconciliation is the wide gap between international standards and the actual political commitment and resources needed to implement them.

Furthermore, the concept of truth is experienced by or presented to, an individual also plays a critical role in the corresponding impact on trauma. This next theme is composed of two subcategories: the idea that learning the truth via a direct experience with a traumatic event versus learning the truth of what happened afterward significantly impacts trauma and the consequent healing process for an individual. An in-depth exploration of how various modes of truth recovery can also play a substantial role in the impact of trauma healing.

Deeply divided societies around the world are emerging from periods of war and political violence to face a multitude of challenges when transitioning from protracted armed conflicts to post-conflict states. In order for social reconstruction to transpire after years and, in some cases, decades of violent conflict steps must be taken to foster cross-communal reconciliation, which involves individuals regaining empathy for one another (Halpern & Weinstein, 2004). Ferguson, Burgess, and Hollywood (2010) establish two critical components necessary for the transition to a peaceful society when they assert: To bring about lasting peace in any post-conflict environment requires reconciliation (Ramsbottom, Woodhouse, & Miall in Ferguson et al., 2010), and a necessary step on this road to reconciliation is the need to recover from trauma and deal with the legacy of the past (Lederach in Ferguson et al., 2010).

The purpose of this paper is to expand the discourse on psychosocial assistance to refugees and displaced people beyond the trauma frame toward more holistic approaches that enable movement toward truth, reconciliation, and peace conceived systemically to include nonviolence and social justice at multiple levels. Drawing on work from the field, much of it conducted by U.N. agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), it argues that narrow, clinical approaches are less well suited than community-based approaches to the tasks of sustainable healing on a wide scale and of building peace. Examining community-based work in Nigeria, it illustrates the potential power of healing based on social mobilization that builds local capacities, uses local resources, and activates communities for economic development and social action on behalf of peace and the well-being of future generations.

Trauma, Healing, and Peace

To be effective, a psychosocial intervention must fit the situation. In post-conflict situations, the active phase of organized fighting may have subsided, but lines remain blurred between war and peace. Typically, there exists a system of violence in which families, communities, and society are saturated with violence, which is a normalized part of social reality (Wessells, 1998b). Following the signing of a ceasefire, strong tensions and cleavages divide rival ethnic and political groups, and the return home of displaced people often results in political instability, stigmatization, intolerance, polarization, and continued fighting. As evident in many of the conflicts in Southern Africa, the end of political violence often creates waves of criminal violence. In many cases, the perpetrators are youths who had been militarized, who have had little education or job training, and who view the power of the gun as their main means of meeting their needs.

Crime is often linked with poverty, which armed conflict amplifies. Large numbers of soldiers, including children, need to reintegrate into society, yet many have constructed military identities, feel stigmatized, and wonder whether they can find constructive roles as civilians (McCallin, 1998; Wessells & Jonah, in press). In the aftermath of war, systemic violence and rapid social change, some of which is promulgated by humanitarian efforts, erode patterns of culture and meaning that often provide a sense of continuity and well-being. In this context, healing must be social, culturally grounded, and oriented toward systemic, collective change for peace. Unfortunately, few roadmaps exist for how to affect social healing on the scale demanded by complex

emergencies. At present, a large, albeit unquantified, amount of psychosocial effort in post-conflict situations is guided by the trauma idiom, which provides the dominant approach to conceptualizing what happens psychologically to people in the context of life-threatening experiences and situations. As articulated by Herman (1992) and others, the trauma idiom has been very useful in identifying the range of normal responses to exceptional circumstances and to pointing the way toward appropriate clinical interventions to promote healing. Extensive research has documented that trauma and the more specific process of post-traumatic stress disorder occur in many different cultures and situations (cf. De Jong, 2002; Friedman & Marsella, 1996). Using this knowledge, many clinical psychologists have developed trauma interventions that they apply in situations such as Kosovo, Rwanda, Angola, and Sierra Leone (Green et al, 2003). Clinical psychologists may provide direct services, but many works through NGOs to train local professionals to conduct trauma counseling and related activities.

Following what has now become rather standard practice in the U.S. and other industrialized contexts, these interventions typically emphasize emotional expression, group or individual counseling, cultural rituals, social reconstruction, and emotional integration as key parts of the healing process (Green, 2003). Trauma-oriented interventions can be very useful, particularly in assisting the most severely affected people in crisis situations. As a dominant focus for assisting war-affected people, however, trauma-oriented interventions create a host of problems as difficult as those they intend to address. Universalized trauma interventions are ill-advised, although psychiatry has tended to overlook or downplay the importance of cultural and regional variations (Higginbotham & Marsella, 1988). In some situations, trauma-oriented programs do significant damage (Bracken & Petty, 1998). For example, in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, healing entails the conduct of rituals for purposes of spiritual cleansing. Talking about the situation or one's feelings following the conduct of the ritual is dangerous since local beliefs hold that it allows bad spirits to re-enter (Honwana, 1997).

Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation

In many post-conflict contexts, people talk about "truth and reconciliation" and often establish commissions of enquiry with exactly that title. Seeking for accuracy about the past is a vital step in the reconciliation process, according to our wide definition, as is allowing victims to tell their stories. But "truth" in itself will not bring reconciliation. Truth-seeking is a key ingredient, but only one ingredient, in reconciliation. In the same way, justice is a vital requirement for healing wounds, making offenders accountable, and re-establishing relations of equity and respect. But justice alone does not bring reconciliation (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2003).

Truth and justice are not separate from reconciliation: they are key parts of it. Many people, especially the victims of great hurt, are suspicious of reconciliation and see it as an excuse to belittle or ignore their suffering. It can indeed be misused in that way. But this is the result of thinking of reconciliation as only a goal, not a process. These people often, and rightly, suspect that a fast move to a state where everyone is apparently reconciled to the past and to each other is a way of short-cutting proper processes of justice, truth-telling, and punishment - that it means they must "forgive and forget". This is not the aim of this Handbook. That state of reconciliation is a very long-term objective, which can only be reached after all the important ingredients of justice, truth, healing, and so on have been addressed. And the overall process in which all these and other issues combine is the reconciliation process. Most of what follows in these pages are about examining the complex relationships between these issues as they make up the process.

The Collection of Truth

The findings of the collection of truth-by-truth commissions appear in the final reports that they produce at the end of their mandate. The collection phase brings together commission teams (commission leaders, researchers, technicians, and assistants) with the witnesses. In this regard, the commission team acts as the audience or mediator for the perpetrator who comes to testify. In other cases, the commission team meets with both perpetrators and victims who testify together in a group. In still other cases, a wider audience gathered from the

local population are also invited or even requested to participate. Certain gatherings are broadcast on television, such as the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). These sessions are called hearings. From such hearings, the reconciliation process is expected to begin (Schabas 2006).

The testimonies that truth commissions collect on violent events of the past are never full, complete or enough. Not all witnesses are contacted, sensitized, and prepared to give testimonies. Also, not all witnesses are approached by the commission, even when they want to (Hayner 2011). Moreover, 'truth' depends on the politics of its collection but also on the feasibility or the possibility of collecting it (Wilson 2001). This justifies the fact that after commissions' reports in different post-conflict countries, researchers must continue to collect more testimonies, analyze them, write their histories, and evaluate their usefulness in reconciliation or for other outcomes.

The Truth Telling

The reconstruction of the history of past violence helps delegitimize past violence and injustices. It does so by unpacking and deconstructing past ideologies of genocide and other violence, hence discouraging those who would support them again. Above all, it challenges denial and distortions of that past. It also stands as a justification for paying reparations to victims of past violence (Minow 1998; Hayner 2011). The collection of truth about past violence also preserves memories. Many authors advocate extreme caution in the collection and use of perpetrators' testimonies. For example, Christopher Browning who has analyzed the Holocaust has suggested that Adolf Eichmann's testimony be taken seriously. While several other authors rejected it as mere self-defense in Court, Browning focused on details provided by Eichmann which might not be known otherwise. He concluded that though we must remain skeptical about the content of perpetrators' testimonies, there can be something new to learn from them that is not available elsewhere (Browning 2003).

The survivors' testimonies are also criticized for the trauma imprint they carry. Since the memory of survivors is disturbed by the trauma of past violence, as it is posited, their recollection of the past events, actions and violence is not always congruent. Browning suggests again to look at this testimony differently: 'The "authenticity" of the survivor accounts is more important than their "factual accuracy"'. Indeed, to intrude upon the survivors' testimonies with such a banal or mundane concern seems irrelevant and even insensitive and disrespectful' (Browning 2003).

Confession

While truth-telling or the collection of accounts tends to come from all witnesses of past violence, confession is expected to come from perpetrators or those who were responsible for the violence. The perpetrators' accounts are important for the reconstruction of history or for healing as we saw above. They are also about the acknowledgment of guilt through providing information about one's crimes. There are a number of problems that are enumerated in the literature about the confession activity itself. Firstly, the language to describe past violence is heavy; so there is some tendency to soften it, hence reducing the veracity of the content of the confession itself. The complexity of naming violence by perpetrators has prompted some of them to use metaphors in order to veil their atrocious acts in the past. This happened in Northern Ireland's reconciliation confessions. The words and representation used by Pat Magee, the perpetrator, soften, and even conceal the violence of the bombing he was involved in (Cameron 2007:208–210). But is it possible to describe past violence in the exact words? And what words would be capable of depicting – i.e., resurrecting the exact image of – extreme violence, say of genocide or crime against humanity? Secondly, there can be a problem where a post-conflict state has put in place a confession framework such as truth commissions or the gacaca jurisdiction in Rwanda. When some perpetrators come forward to confess their crimes, their sincere apologies acknowledge victims' victimhood or suffering and at the same time paves the way for victims to see perpetrators once again as humans. But how can the sincerity of apology be assessed? (Barkan and Karn 2006).

Forgiveness So what is forgiveness, and how is it produced, manifested and used for reconciliation purposes? First, forgiveness is defined from a rational point of view. In this regard, forgiveness is an effort of redefinition of the perpetrator by the victim: ‘... the forgiving person [is the one who can] “see the offender in a more complex way”’ (Quoted in Worthington 2006:21). Forgiveness can also be defined as the antithesis of vengeance: ‘Reaching for a response far from vengeance, many people, from diverse religious traditions, call for forgiveness. The victim should not seek revenge and become a new victimizer but instead should forgive the offender and end the cycle of offense’ (Minow 1998). As far as rational choice is concerned, Minow argues that there are individual and social benefits to gain from forgiving. She rejects cheap forgiveness: ‘Perhaps forgiveness should be reserved, as a concept and a practice, to instances where there are good reasons to forgive. To forgive without a good reason is to accept the violation and devaluation of the self’ (Minow 1998:17). Secondly, since forgiveness is also a matter of the heart, it is defined from an emotional point of view: ‘Emotional forgiveness occurs due to replacing negative, unforgiving stressful emotions with positive, other-oriented emotions’ (Worthington 2006).

The Necessity of Reconciliation

There is nothing simple about the reconciliation process. Especially in the immediate aftermath of a negotiated settlement to a violent conflict, it can appear to be an impediment to more important. The Reconciliation Process. The process of reconciliation is not: an excuse for impunity; only an individual process; in opposition to/an alternative to truth or justice; a quick answer; a religious concept; perfect peace; an excuse to forget; nor a matter of merely forgiving.

The process of reconciliation is finding a way to live that permits a vision of the future; the (re)building of relationships; coming to terms with past acts and enemies; a society-wide, long-term process of deep change; a process of acknowledging, remembering, and learning from the past; and voluntary and cannot be imposed. Priorities (IDEA, 2003). With the urgent political pressures to establish the newly agreed democratic structures, resource pressure, and time pressure, it is in fact very tempting, especially to politicians, to concentrate on the political process. Indeed, they may genuinely not see how to include reconciliation in the mass of work ahead of them. Thus, reconciliation can be delayed until other priorities are completed, or can be reduced to a quick commission of inquiry that will acknowledge the painful past and rapidly move on.

Everyone wants to get on, to move fast, to get away from the past as quickly as possible. It can seem as if slowing things down, dwelling on the painful past and the unfinished thoughts and feelings around past violence would endanger the new political and social structures. The argument runs something like this: “How are we to expect our politicians to begin establishing the patterns of future cooperation in government if we spend time digging up and examining in public the very things that divided them in the past? That will surely just undermine the fragile cooperation that we are attempting, by holding on to the past instead of looking to the future.

Would it not be better to concentrate for the time being on our similarities and leave our differences to a later, less tense time?” This is understandable, but it is counterproductive. Such reflection on the past is as necessary as it is painful because a divided society can only build its shared future out of its divided past. It is not possible to forget the past and start completely fresh as if nothing had happened. Indeed, the motivation for building a future is precise to ensure that the past does not return - and so a clear understanding of, and a coming to terms with, that past is the very best way to guarantee it will not come back to haunt society. The past must be addressed in order to reach the future.

Reconciliation, if it is designed and implemented in a genuine and meaningful way, is the means to do that. Throughout this Handbook, tools are offered for such examination of the past, the use of which will generate a more cooperative present in order to begin to develop a safer future of coexistence. At the political level, failure to address the past through a reconciliation process – an easier option though it might appear - will almost guarantee the failure of the future. Politicians reach an agreement through negotiation over the issues in conflict.

They find compromises, bargains, or pragmatic ways to cooperate within the bounds of their self-interest. That is their job, and it is a vital part of transforming a situation of former conflict into one of future peace. But their best efforts will be totally undermined if they do not also address the broken relationship between the communities they represent, as well as the issues that broke it.

The very best democratic system in the world will not endure if sections of its population do not have a modestly cooperative relationship underlying their agreement to work with the new structures. This is the basic, pragmatic reason why every new post-conflict democracy has to reconcile. Where reconciliation, at first glance, may seem to be a hindrance to establishing working democracy, in fact, it is a necessary requirement for the long-term survival of that democracy. This is not the easy answer, but it is the reality. Meaningful reconciliation is a difficult, painful, and complex process, but it must be grasped because ignoring it sows the seeds of later, greater failure (IDEA, 2003). On the other hand, effectively reconciling the divided elements of society will, with time, permit the development of truly cooperative patterns of working and envisioning the future, which will be among the strongest guarantors of successful democratization.

Conclusion

This article discussed around the concepts of truth, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation after a conflict has shown to what extent these concepts are interconnected. We saw that those who seek the truth have to pass through a negotiation process or something that looks like a negotiation. Those who narrate this truth, recall past events but also interpret and even reinterpret them. This whole exercise can be seen as an attempt to contextualize the collection of truth but also to problematize it. Truth in most cases is plural, not singular. Again, the fact that the whole truth is ever rare may be disappointing, but actors may hope to get more truth with time. Our above discussion of confession also points to a number of other problems. First, the form and the substance of confessions matter. Second, the techniques used by perpetrators in their confession language tend to conceal or reduce their responsibility for past violence.

More so, forgiveness by victims is evoked from confession by perpetrators, but it can also be given unconditionally. Reconciliation is presented as the outcome of truth, confession, and forgiveness. But it also goes beyond these, to mean the process itself. Finally, reconciliation firstly manifests as a proclamation by the victims, perpetrators, and other actors that have reconciled, and secondly manifests in their experience of living together harmoniously. As we explained above, these two requirements need more time than is mandated for truth and reconciliation commissions.

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