

## Dealing with the Past and the Psychology of Reconciliation: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, A Psychological Perspective

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A Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is to be established in South Africa with the express purpose of facilitating a truth recovery process aimed at reconciling with the past. According to the objectives of the latest draft of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Bill this process of reconciliation is to occur through the establishing of as complete a picture as possible of the causes, nature and extent of past abuses. The so-called "victims" of these abuses will be located and allowed to relate their stories so as to restore 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 and by compiling a comprehensive report of past abuses. The report will make recommendations on how such events can be prevented from occurring again.

On the legal and political front it is envisaged that this will contribute to the re-establishing of the rule of law and to the creation of institutional apparatus which can contribute to the building of a human rights culture. 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.

My address, however, is not concerned with these issues. My focus will be the potentially numerous traumatised individuals who will come in contact with the TRC. I will be focusing exclusively on the psychological implications of the TRC and the process of truth recovery. I will begin by briefly addressing how the TRC *could* operate as a rehabilitative and psychologically healing process. Thereafter, I will argue that despite the potential for the TRC to operate as a psychologically healing mechanism it is not a sufficient process in itself to promote psychological rehabilitation. It is argued that a range of psychological structures

and strategies will be needed to run parallel to the TRC. Finally, some of the challenges ahead will be outlined before some conclusions are drawn.

### **The Victims and Survivors of Past Human Rights Abuses**

South African society has been marked by extreme levels of violence. The enormity of the impact of this violence, and the resultant psychological impact on individuals, has been fairly extensively documented. This brief address does not require revisiting these statistics and suffice to say that there are thousands of direct and indirect survivors who may be suffering and have suffered from a range of psychological sequelae. The direct survivors may include those exposed directly to experiences of violence like torture survivors, witnesses and survivors of assault and attempted killings. Indirect survivors could include the families and relatives whose loved ones have "disappeared", been victimised or murdered. The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Bill includes both these groups of survivors in its definition of "victims". The bill adds that the so-called "victims" are 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 TRC as a Psychologically Healing Process**

The process of TRC could be a psychologically healing one. The resultant individual and collective emotional responses to political violence, like responses to trauma generally, can be understood as a cognitive process. 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 picture of society and humanity.

However, the TRC, by creating an accurate picture of the past could liberate individuals and broader society from a 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, it could also absolve the feelings of guilt and personal causal responsibility that survivors often experience after traumatic events.

In addition, one of the results of political violence and turmoil has been the development of what can be termed a culture of silence. Silence, misinformation and the so-called "official

story" are often the hallmark of past repressive societies. Furthermore, 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. This silence can be individually destructive in the long-run and results in individuals being excluded from social 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.

The TRC could also contribute to psychological rehabilitation through the actual re-telling of traumatic events themselves. 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 the question, in my opinion, should rather be, do sleeping dogs lie? The primary essence of psychology suggests that the answer to this question is *no*. Past traumas do not simply pass or disappear with the passage of time. 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. The TRC can, in its ideal form, facilitate this process of recounting human rights violations. Through giving testimony the process of re-living and building a context of meaning for survivors can be facilitated. Thus, on an individual and collective level the importance of the event and the enormity of its impact can be acknowledged, allowing the survivor to reclaim their past.

Furthermore, rituals, symbols, commemoration and reparations can play an important role in this process. The TRC allows for rehabilitative and reparative steps to be taken to redress the past abuses. Clearly, monetary values cannot be assigned or replace the suffering experienced. In terms of reparation the TRC will probably not make monetary awards, rather the TRC is going to be focusing on rehabilitative strategies or measures like free schooling and medical aid to make amends. This is a complex and difficult task but could serve the psychological process of concretising the event and symbolically acknowledging the individuals suffering. In other words, I am of the opinion, that 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 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* refused to accept monetary reparation.<sup>2</sup> They felt that the state was buying their silence rather than social and historical recognition.

### The Need for Psychological Support

The TRC could be a psychologically healing process by aiding 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 process of a truth commission in itself is not sufficient to meet these psychological needs. Furthermore, it is my view that the TRC runs the danger of being overly involved in the legal, logistic and political aspects of the commission 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.

This contribution can take several forms. 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 potentially 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 these 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.

To facilitate this form of support an audit of existing psychological support services will be necessary so as to establish what services are available and where additional services may be necessary. This should be done in order to avoid duplication and facilitate the rational delivery of services. Furthermore, a network of mental health care providers who are informed about the work and objectives of the TRC should be established in order to manage the optimal provision of support.

A further area of involvement includes the training of the TRC staff (fieldworkers, investigators and commissioners), 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 have to undergo training to teach them to deal with survivors in a psychologically sensitive manner. If those who listen to the testimony of survivors do not approach the process in a sufficiently sensitive manner then the hearings will not restore the dignity of survivors nor make them feel resolved or reconciled.

Psychological support also needs to be rendered to those giving testimony before the TRC. Pre-testimony briefing or counselling, especially for public hearings, will be necessary so as to ensure that the individuals giving testimony feel psychologically strong enough to re-count potentially traumatic events. Similarly, a debriefing may be necessary to deal with feelings about how the testimony was received by the TRC and what feelings may have been evoked in the process. For example, 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 key area in the providing of psychological support can also be the facilitation of the development of "survivor groups" of families and relatives of persons lost and victimised during political struggle. In Argentina, still today the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* march once a week to demand information about the "30000 disappeared" and their missing loved ones. Clearly, 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. This, however, is dependent upon their demands being heard and acted upon.

The development of survivor groups is underway in South Africa. As the process of the TRC has gained prominence so too has the initially informal process of the development of survivor groups. In 3 short months the *Centre for the Study of Violence & Reconciliation* and several dedicated survivors have made contact with almost 70 survivors and begun the development of survivor groups. The so-called Khulumani or Speak-out Group has held several big meetings, become increasingly formalised over the period and served as a form of informal psychological support for those involved. In each emotional meeting the survivors retell their stories and discuss key issues in relation to the TRC.

Although the numbers contacted thus far are minimal in comparison to the thousands of affected individuals, it begins to point to the need for informal psychological support mechanisms and that many survivors have a vested interest in the process of TRC. Importantly, the groups are also organising *before* the TRC begins. This can ensure that the group processes run parallel to the TRC and their impact on the process can be maximised.

### The Psychology of Reconciliation: The challenges ahead

It has been argued that the TRC can be a psychologically healing process provided that sufficient psychological services are provided. However, in conclusion, it may be useful to contextualise these and highlight some of the challenges that lay ahead:

- 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.
- The conflicts of the past cannot be viewed as unitary in their nature. The roots and context of conflict in South Africa are complex and in specific areas is still continuing.

In particular areas the clear division between political and criminal violence and the delineation between perpetrators and victims, that a process like the TRC needs to make, have long been obscured. Further, the re-telling of stories, irrespective of enormous psychological backup, cannot substitute for addressing the causes and nature of the violence and the development of mechanisms for preventing its re-occurrence. Moreover, we cannot simply compare social processes and individuals. Individuals have a finite beginning and end, history however continues and the "psychological" process of social healing and reconstruction in South Africa is merely beginning. Society is continually changing, conflict can be ongoing and it will be intersected by political changes, economic challenges and a range of other forces. It is these forces that could profoundly shape the structure and function of the TRC.

- It is important to assist and support individuals as I have motivated. However, a continued focus on psychological rehabilitation and the TRC runs the risk of over-medicalising social phenomenon. By focusing on the psychological needs of the survivors who may testify before the TRC the psychological profession has to be aware of possibly medicalising the social problem of confronting our past. The social process of reconciliation is not about diagnosing and treating pathology. These views can prompt mental health care workers to want to "repair" individuals rather than becoming part of the process of reconciliation or healing.

Over the next two years during the life of the TRC, a range of people will be working with survivors of South Africa's abusive past. This will include mental health care workers, lawyers and the TRC staff. Issues of vicarious traumatising which often seem minimal in the face of the extensive trauma in South African society, should not be ignored and mechanisms for dealing with this should be set in place. On a macro level the TRC will publicise the traumas of the past and will expose an entire society to the gross human rights violations that have been shrouded in secrecy over the years. It is important to consider how this may effect people in our society who will be exposed to the real suffering of the past.

- The issue of reparation and particularly the concern of raising individual expectations are paramount. Discussions about expectations and reparations have often been the

most fruitful in the *Khulumani Survivor Group* meetings. Expectations and wishes vary a great deal; some people in the group would like financial compensation, others a proper funeral for their "missing" loved ones, some simply want the truth and for some the greatest compensation would be to see the perpetrators brought to justice. The ultimate form of compensation would be to meet these needs, and conversely, the greatest disappointment and frustration would be to fail to do so. Expectations will need to be mediated, and while this occurs to some extent in the *Khulumani Survivor Group*, a broad process of addressing expectations will also be necessary. In addition, at no point should any survivor have to justify their trauma to "qualify" for compensation. 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 mastering the traumatic incident.

- The final concluding point, once again, reinforces the need for a comprehensive approach to addressing psychological concerns, however, from a more political angle. In the political realm, psychologists need to be aware that often pragmatic political processes run counter to psychological processes. The process of not remembering and re-visiting the past, although in favour presently with some politicians, is in the long-run counter to political rationality that often demands forgiveness, forgetting and the need for political consensus. I am of the opinion that 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 re-gain ownership and understanding of their difficult experiences, rather than their pasts being stolen away from them by impersonal statistics, legal battles, the media and politic posturing. Thus, in conclusion, it is necessary to argue for a comprehensive mental health care programme for survivors of past abuses whether the TRC occurs or not. However, the TRC will occur and it can provide for a unique opportunity to develop,

provide and sustain much needed psychological services whilst contributing more broadly to the process of reconciliation in South Africa.

**Notes:**

1 The ideas of cognitive shattering are distilled from the work of Janoff-Bulman, R. (1985). *The aftermath of victimisation: Rebuilding shattered assumptions*. In C.R.Figley (ed.), *Trauma and its Wake*. New York: Brunner Mazel Publishers.

2 Information on the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* was taken from the work of Danieli, Y. (1992). Preliminary reflections from a psychological perspective. Seminar on the Right to Restitution, Compensation and Rehabilitation for Victims of Gross Violations of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. Maastricht, 11-15 March and articles written by Valentine, S. (1995) on her recent visit to Argentina (see Valentine, S. 1995. No memorial to 30 000 "disappeared". *Democracy in Action*, 9(3), 1 June. Institute for Democracy in South Africa).

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