

Rights and Reasons: Challenges for Truth Recovery in South Africa and Northern Ireland

Brandon Hamber^{*}

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^{*} Brandon Hamber is an Associate of Democratic Dialogue in Belfast and the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in South Africa. All correspondence to mail@brandonhamber.com. At the time of the presentation this working paper was under review for the Fordham International Law Journal. It was later published with minor changes in the Fordham International Law Journal, 26(4), pp. 1074-1094.

Introduction

The understanding of truth commissions—as one mechanism of transitional justice—has changed in the last few years.¹ In the past, truth commissions were largely understood as investigative mechanisms with the primary aim of publishing an authoritative and factual report on human rights violations committed in a country. The societal impact of gathering information was given little attention. However, currently, “the possibility of holding public hearings, advancing societal and individual healing, and taking part in or promoting a process of reconciliation (however defined) has opened wide the question of means, independent of the final end reached”.²

The social utility of truth commissions, and concepts such as healing and reconciliation, has become a core part of the critical discussion about the impact of such bodies. Whether transitional justice mechanisms—in this case, truth commissions—should be concerned with concepts such as healing is a point for debate. That said, the potential for truth recovery mechanisms to contribute to healing and reconciliation has been ubiquitously asserted. This is the case in societies as diverse as South Africa,³ Northern Ireland,⁴ Sierra Leone⁵ and East Timor.⁶

This is particularly interesting considering the degree to which truth commissions have proliferated. There have been over twenty truth commissions in the last two decades.⁷ To

¹ Priscilla B. Hayner, “Unspeakable Truths: confronting state terror and atrocity” (New York: Routledge, 2001).

² Hayner, *supra*, n. 1, at p.252.

³ Kader Asmal, Louise Asmal, and Ronald S. Roberts, “Reconciliation Through Truth: A Reckoning of Apartheid’s Criminal Governance” (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 1994); Alex Boraine, A. J. Levy and R. Scheffer, eds., “Dealing with the Past: Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa” (Cape Town: IDASA, 1994).

⁴ Healing Through Remembering, “Report of the Healing Through Remembering Project” (Belfast: Healing Through Remembering, 2002).

⁵ See, Section 6(1), Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act 2000, one of its objectives is “to promote healing and reconciliation”.

⁶ See, The United Nations Transitional Authority in East Timor, *Regulation 2000/10 on the Establishment of Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in East Timor*. Section (d) says the Commission is grounded in “the desire to promote national reconciliation and healing”.

⁷ Hayner, *supra*, n. 1.

locate the precise reason for the political popularity of such mechanisms is difficult. Does the trend for truth commissions as a primary transitional justice mechanism rest on their proven ability to play a role in uncovering the truth, promoting healing and fostering reconciliation?⁸ Or, from a more cynical perspective, is the notion of ‘reconciliation’ a complex modern foil used to market unfavourable compromises made during political negotiations?

This paper will argue that any transitional mechanism must be by its nature and temporal historical location a politically contested instrument. This can have differing political and social impacts, and impact on the human rights culture in the society in question. Based on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission experience, two rights-based issues—namely, human rights and victims’ rights—will be discussed. The implications of the points raised in that regard will be applied to the current debate in Northern Ireland about dealing with the past.

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission

The core justification (or perhaps rationalisation) for the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission is captured by Archbishop Desmond Tutu when he says that without the negotiations “we would have been overwhelmed by the bloodbath that virtually everyone predicted as the inevitable ending for South Africa”.⁹ From this perspective, the agreement at the negotiations to grant amnesty to perpetrators of *apartheid* violence was a pragmatic choice enshrined in the interim Constitution. Amnesty, especially for *apartheid* forces—or so the argument goes—was the cost (especially to victims’ seeking justice through the courts) of saving the innumerable lives that would have been lost had the conflict

⁸ For a discussion of the different ways reconciliation was defined in the South African TRC process, see Brandon Hamber *Ere their story die: truth, justice and reconciliation in South Africa* 44(1) Race and Class 61,79 (2002).

⁹ Report of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission Volume 1 Chapter 1, 22 (Juta: Cape Town, 1998).

continued. Using this argument, amnesty was about the advancement of “reconciliation and reconstruction”.¹⁰

However, amnesty in South Africa—unlike many other countries, particularly those in Latin America—was neither blanket nor automatic. Conditions applied to the amnesty. The TRC was the vehicle for amnesty assessing applications and adjudicating on them based on criteria set down in the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act.¹¹ Linking amnesty into the process was a unique development, and highly unusual for a truth commission.

To receive amnesty, perpetrators of political violence—from every side—had to disclose full details of each and every past crime for which they wanted amnesty. Amnesty had to be sought for each crime individually, and if successful only that crime was amnestied. Simply put, provided the perpetrators told the truth and confessed their involvement in a specific act that was found to be political in nature, based on criteria in the Act, justice would be overlooked. If granted amnesty, criminal and civil liability fell away for that crime.

Broadly speaking, although amnesty did not deliver justice through the courts, it was hoped it would at least produce truth. Truth was considered vital to understanding what had happened, assisting victims to come to terms with the past, and preventing its repetition. Truth was considered a basic building block of reconciliation.

Victims of political violence were also given the opportunity to divulge how they had suffered in the past, either publicly or through a statement to the TRC. Each case was to be documented, and if necessary investigated. The TRC then made proposals on how to prevent future human-rights violations, as well as recommendations regarding possible reparations for victims.

¹⁰ See, the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act No. 34, 1995 and the South African Interim-Constitution.

¹¹ For full mandate of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission see the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act No. 34, 1995. A detailed summary of the SA TRC’s mandate is also provided by *Hayner, supra*, n. 1 and Alex Boraine “A Country Unmasked: South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission” (New York, Oxford University Press, 2000).

The South African TRC process began in December 1995 and ended—at least in terms of documenting and receiving victim statements—when the commission handed its 3,500-page report to then President Mandela in October 1998. The amnesty hearings dragged into 2002. In total, about 20,000 people came forward and gave statements to the TRC, of which about 2,000 were heard in public. More than 7,000 people applied for amnesty, and it is anticipated—based on current figures—that roughly 10-15% of these individuals will receive amnesty for the crimes, which could include murder, attempted murder, abduction or “disappearance”, and torture.

The South African Case—a brief evaluation

Public acknowledgement, breaking the silence of the past, creating an unforgettable record of the atrocities committed, and voicing of past crimes were the TRC’s greatest successes.¹² Many of the horrors of *apartheid* were made public. Figures such as Tutu—and the TRC as a whole—humanised and individualised the impact of decades of *apartheid*. A new vision based on a reconciled future, arguably essential for that period of time, was created. Humanism and the possibilities of peace and even forgiveness, despite the legacy of brutality, became real, if not attainable in some cases.

For a minority of victims, suppressed truths about the past were also uncovered. Missing bodies, at least in some cases, were located, exhumed and respectfully buried. For others, the confessions of perpetrators brought answers to previously unsolved political crimes—crimes

¹² In research with some 25 organisations across South Africa it was felt that the process of unleashing the stories, revealing hidden traumas and uncovering latent tensions was the TRC's most positive contributions. See, Hugo van der Merwe, Polly Dewhirst & Brandon Hamber *Non-governmental organisations and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: an impact assessment* 26,1 *Politikon* 55,79 (1999). Similar evaluative comments are also made in Brandon Hamber *Does the Truth Heal: A psychological perspective on the political strategies for dealing with the legacy of political violence* in Nigel Biggar, ed., “Burying the Past : Making Peace and Doing Justice after Civil Conflict” (Washington, USA: George Town University Press, 2000); Mary Burton, *The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Looking Back, Moving Forward – Revisiting Conflicts, Striving for Peace* in Brandon Hamber, ed., "Past Imperfect: Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland and Societies in Transition", (Derry/Londonderry: INCORE /University of Ulster, 1998, 13,24).

which the courts, due to expense and inefficiency, might never have tried or dealt with. In many senses, the chain of command, especially in terms of State terror, was laid bare and it was made clear who held ultimate responsibility.¹³

That said, although the TRC has on the whole been seen as successful in revealing the broad and essential story of what happened in South Africa between 1960 and 1994, not all the truth about the past has emerged.¹⁴ This factor undermined the process of reconciliation as it was originally envisaged. The TRC began a process it was unable to complete. There is a huge amount of evidence yet to be uncovered, and many of the guilty remain in positions of considerable power.¹⁵

Many relatives of the missing and the murdered, including high profile cases such as Biko, Ribeiro, Mxenge, Slovo, Schoon, Asvat, and Madaka, are still seeking justice and fundamental elements of the truth.¹⁶ Scores of victims feel let down in that they did not get the whole truth through the TRC process.¹⁷ Although it would never have been feasible to investigate every case, many victims' high expectations were dashed and the commission's credibility consequently undermined in their eyes. On the psychological front, the process may have helped some with healing, but was hardly sufficient and the impact not necessarily psychologically beneficial.¹⁸

¹³ Terry Bell in collaboration with Dumisa Buhle Ntsebeza "Unfinished Business: South Africa Apartheid and Truth" (South Africa: RedWorks, 2001), 209.

¹⁴ Jonathan Klaaren and Howard Varney *A Second Bite at the Amnesty Cherry? Constitutional and Policy Around Legislation for a Second Amnesty* 117 *South African Law Journal* 572,593 (2000).

¹⁵ Terry Bell, *supra n. 13*, p. 286.

¹⁶ Terry Bell, *supra n. 13*, p. 286.

¹⁷ Brandon Hamber, Dineo Nageng and Gabriel O'Malley *Telling it like it is...: understanding the Truth and Reconciliation Commission from the perspective of survivors*, No.26 *Psychology in Society* (2000); Piers Pigou *False Promises and Wasted Opportunities? Inside South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* in Deborah Posel and Graeme Simpson, eds, "Commissioning the Past: Understanding South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission" (South Africa, Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2002), p.60.

¹⁸ Brandon Hamber *The Burdens of Truth: An Evaluation of the Psychological Support Services and Initiatives undertaken by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission* Vol. 55, No. 1 *American Imago* 9,28 (Spring 1998); Brandon Hamber *Does the Truth Heal: A psychological perspective on the political strategies for dealing with the legacy of political violence* in Nigel Biggar, ed., "Burying the Past : Making Peace and Doing Justice after Civil Conflict" (Washington, USA: George Town University Press, 2000).

Justice, in the retributive sense, remains a burning issue and the entire justification for amnesty was often unacceptable to many victims.¹⁹ Politicians may have been able to justify the exchange of formal justice for peace, but it has been difficult for victims to watch while the perpetrators have received amnesty. Justice is an important and sometimes essential component of a victim's recovery and psychological healing.²⁰ This is compounded by the fact that at the time of writing the ANC government of Thabo Mbeki had not acted on any of the TRC's recommendations regarding long-term reparations submitted to the government in October 1998.²¹ This has left victims groups feeling that they "have been unjustly treated by the TRC process and this still continues with the government seemingly looking for ways to avoid making final reparations".²²

Confusing Compromise and Human Rights

Transitional justice mechanisms such as truth commissions are by definition established during times of political instability or, colloquially stated, when new rules for the political game are being forged. This is inevitably characterised by a push toward political and social stability, particularly if a regime change is happening by negotiation and coupled with a cessation of hostilities that have dragged on for many years. This can, and generally does, involve compromise by all parties concerned.

¹⁹ Brandon Hamber, Dineo Nageng & Gabriel O'Malley, *supra n. 17*, pp.18-42. It has also been found in public opinion surveys that there was significant opposition to amnesty in South Africa, see James L. Gibson & Amanda Gouws *Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Attributions of blame and the struggle over apartheid* Paper presented at the American Political Science Association, Boston, 3-6 September 1998.

²⁰ Daniel W. Shuman and Alexander McCall Smith "Justice and the Prosecution of Old Crimes: balancing legal, psychological and moral concerns" (Washington, DC, American Psychological Association, 2000); D. Kaminer, D. J. Stein, I. Mbanga and N. Zungu-Dirwayi *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa: relation to psychiatric status and forgiveness among survivors of human rights abuses* 178 *British Journal of Psychiatry* 373,7 (2001);

²¹ The reparations debate, and the proposals of the TRC Report are beyond the scope of the present paper, see Brandon Hamber *Repairing the irreparable: dealing with the double-binds of making reparations for crimes of the past* Vol. 5, Nos. 3/4 *Ethnicity and Health* 215-26 (2000).

²² Duma Khulumo, Khulumani Victim Support Group, Report of the National Strategy Workshop on Reparations (Compiled by Simon Kimani), the Parktonian Hotel, Johannesburg, 31 October 2001, available at <<http://www.csvr.org.za/papers/papkim.htm#part2>> (last visited Jan 10, 2003).

In this context, it is legitimate to ask whether truth commissions are a fundamental part of peacemaking or peacebuilding, or perhaps something else altogether. Some argue they are, under certain circumstances, the best way of ensuring accountability for past crime²³ by investigating the past, acting on what is uncovered and through this facilitating a break with the past. Others see them as part of the machinery that ultimately legitimises a new political order.²⁴ The ANC's aspirations at the beginning of the South African TRC was to undertake the process "as quickly as possible so that we indeed let bygones be bygones and allow the nation to forgive a past it nevertheless dare not forget".²⁵ This sentiment is not uncommon among successor regimes and political parties moving through a political negotiation process, i.e. to address the past as quickly as possible maintaining some historical memory.

From a critical perspective, reconciliation—with the TRC as its champion—has become a euphemism for the so-called compromises made during the political negotiations, i.e. the maintenance of white control of the economy with some black elite economic advancement at the expense of radical structural change. From this perspective, racialised structural violence as the bedrock of *apartheid* oppression was sidelined in favour of an individualised violation-driven analysis.²⁶ Those who suffered from the socio-economic deprivations of the system as a whole were not defined as 'victims' as such. Taking this argument even further, a cynical view is that the rapprochement between the old and new governments was primarily about consolidating a new black elite under the banner of reconciliation. In reality, the 'truth' probably lies somewhere between (and about) these polemics. It is deeply embedded in an

²³ Alex Boraine "A Country Unmasked: South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission" (New York, Oxford University Press, 2000); Desmond Tutu "No Future without Forgiveness" (London, Rider, 1999).

²⁴ Richard Wilson "The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: legitimising the post-apartheid state" (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001).

²⁵ African National Congress, Statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Marshalltown: ANC Department of Information and Publicity, August 1997), 20.

²⁶ James M. Statman *Exorcising the Ghosts of Apartheid: Memory, Identity and Trauma in the "New" South Africa* paper presented at the 18th Annual Meeting of International Society of Political Psychology, Washington D.C (1995); Mahmood Mamdani *Reconciliation without Justice* 46 *Southern African Review of Books* 3,5 (1996).

intricate web of relationships and inter-dependencies more nuanced than the reductionist views expressed above.²⁷

Although the TRC can be theoretically criticised for not taking on the entire system in its mandate (a process which was practically impossible anyway), it is interesting to note that within a rapidly liberalising South Africa, dominated by a new authority seeking hegemony, the TRC did attempt—at least in its report—to push the boundaries of what was acceptable. Good examples include: arguing for an extended wealth tax to redress the imbalances created by apartheid; labelling beneficiaries of the system as responsible through acts of omission; and finding members of the ANC, now the party of government, responsible for some human rights violations.

A careful analysis of the TRC process reveals that from its inception it was plagued by competing visions of what the endeavour was all about. To state this plainly: Was the TRC a quasi-legal process of truth recovery and rigorous investigation? Or fundamentally a mechanism about the attainment of reconciliation and healing through emotional and moral catharsis?²⁸ From this perspective the TRC cannot be dismissed as a simple linear expression of the negotiations, but should in itself be considered a contested space.

Intrinsic to the TRC and the Act that defined its operations was sufficient power to make serious incisions into past impunity if the will was there. Individuals could be held to account publicly through hearings and subpoenaed. A good working relationship with the Attorney General's Office could have ensured more detailed questioning of amnesty applicants coming before the TRC.²⁹ By emphasising the imperative of finding the truth and doing as much

²⁷ For a more detailed discussion on these differing perspectives see Brandon Hamber, *Irreconcilable tensions: Transformation and Reconciliation in Post-apartheid South Africa* in Roger MacGinty & John Darby, eds, "Contemporary Peace Making" (Palgrave MacMillan: forthcoming, 2003). Also see Brandon Hamber *Ere their story die: truth, justice and reconciliation in South Africa* 44(1) *Race and Class* 61,79 (2002).

²⁸ Richard Wilson, *supra* n. 24

²⁹ For a more detailed discussion on the relationship between the Attorney General's Office and the TRC, see Piers Pigou *False Promises and Wasted Opportunities? Inside South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* in Deborah Posel and Graeme Simpson, eds, "Commissioning the Past: Understanding South

justice as possible in every case (even if beyond the TRC's life), the TRC could have lay a more solid foundation for prosecution of those who did not apply for amnesty after the Commission. However, the degree to which the TRC did this was, in the end, as much about the contested internal and external visions of its purpose, as about opposing and competing ideologies of reconciliation.

For example, the commission possessed extensive search, seize and subpoena powers, more so than other truth commissions.³⁰ However, although there were no limits to the number of times a person could be subpoenaed, no efforts were made to solicit information in this regard until the end of the first year of the TRC's two year life span.³¹ This was most evident in the TRC's admission of an "incorrect decision" when they failed to subpoena Chief Buthelezi, leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). The IFP was the party responsible for the highest percentage of non-state violations that came before the Commission. The TRC admits it ultimately succumbed "to the fears of those who argued that Buthelezi's appearance would give him a platform from which to oppose the Commission and would stoke the flames of violence in KwaZulu-Natal".³²

This is symptomatic of a larger issue that was present throughout the life of the TRC, that is the tension between those who favoured the voluntary participation of people before the commission and those who preferred the use of subpoena powers to demand testimony from alleged perpetrators. Views on this were often determined by individuals' conceptualisations of reconciliation and the role of the legal process in this. Terry Bell captures this when he writes that certain obvious investigations were not followed up because of:

Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission" (South Africa, Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2002), p.54-56.

³⁰ Report of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission Volume 1 Chapter 4, 26 (Juta: Cape Town, 1998).

³¹ *Piers Pigou, supra n. 29*, p.52.

³² Report of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission Volume 5 Chapter 6, 55 (Juta: Cape Town, 1998).

...time constraints and [with] a fundamentally religious attitude toward reconciliation. It was summed up in the phrase ‘we will have no witch hunts’. What this meant was the acceptance that the process concerned individual perpetrators and victims, with the perpetrators being given the opportunity of confession to clear their consciences.³³

For some, therefore, national unity was the priority and this could only be achieved through a voluntary admission of guilt, and hopefully remorse. This was in contrast to those influenced by a more human rights (or perhaps legalistic) ideology of reconciliation, which saw labelling those responsible and calling them to account as paramount to ending impunity.

To this end, the South African TRC demonstrates how the social and political context can define the way in which the law (in this case the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act) will ultimately be implemented or interpreted. Although this is not unique to the South African experience, or the Act in question, this situation is important because it can have significant consequences, particularly when dealing with a society in transition where new norms are attempting to be established, impunity crushed and a human rights culture ushered in.

Amnesty was ostensibly a political necessity for underpinning a new social order founded on human rights principles, or so the dominant South African political argument went. However, the linking of amnesty into the South African TRC process has meant that human rights as a concept has become associated with the language of pragmatic political compromise. The language of principle and accountability were undermined, and this association remains one of the obstacles to the popular acceptance of human rights as a new ideology in South Africa.³⁴

By placing amnesty with its bedfellow reconciliation at the core of the South African TRC the real benefits of the truth commission have been sidelined in South Africa, and in much

³³ *Terry Bell, supra n. 13*, p.205

³⁴ *Richard Wilson, supra n. 24*, p.228.

subsequent international debate. Arguably truth commissions are best at telling the story of the past from the perspective of victims, allowing victims to tell their stories in an uninhibited fashion, explaining conflicts in broad causal terms, and assigning responsibility and accountability while leaving justice to the courts

Victims' Rights—what agenda?

Although the South African TRC process was billed as a “victim-centered” Commission (and it was to a degree), victims’ rights, like human rights, were primarily dealt with through the prism of ‘political compromise’. Even in traditional legal thinking the phrase ‘victims’ rights’ hardly features.³⁵ Nonetheless, it is interesting to note the degree to which the criminal justice system as a whole has advanced—at least to some degree—the issue of victims’ rights compared to its scant mention in the field of transitional justice.

Most texts on transitional justice seem to begin with a discussion of how to deal with the past from the question of constraint (for example, does the society have the resources to prosecute past crime, or what would prosecutions mean for lasting stability?), rather than moving from a rights-based position. There is the well-known legal debate about the right to truth and justice,³⁶ but victims’ rights remain to be “centered” into the transitional justice debate. In fact, victims’ rights (particularly at the political level) are often seen as a stumbling block in the way of achieving pragmatic political change, rather than the other way around.

The South African case provides an example in this regard, most notably, the Constitutional Court challenge by the Azanian People’s Organisation and the survivors’ families of high-profile murder cases (Biko, Mxenge and Ribeiro)³⁷ to Section 20(7) of the National Unity and

³⁵ Brice Dickson *The Role of Victims’ Rights* paper presented the Democratic Dialogue Round Table on Victim Issues, Belfast (5 December 2002).

³⁶ See, Paul Seils’ recent argument for “intelligent justice” that is based on victims moral and legal right to justice, see Paul Seils *Reconciliation in Guatemala: the role of intelligent justice* 44(1) *Race and Class* 33,59 (2002).

³⁷ *Azanian Peoples Organisation (AZAPO) and Others v the President of the Republic of South Africa* [25 July 1996] CCT 17/96, South African Constitutional Court.

Reconciliation Act. The families argued the TRC's ability to grant amnesty denied the victim's right of access to courts and as such was inconsistent with the Constitution. The families' challenge was unsuccessful. The judgement argues that to ensure democracy in South Africa amnesty was a pragmatic necessity. It was part of the foundation for the new Constitution in the first place. Furthermore, it notes that domestic constitutional law is of greater significance than international law,³⁸ and large-scale prosecutions were not possible given the inefficiencies of the court system. The TRC, it is argued, could deliver peace and stability, and offer the potential for some truth and reparations to a greater number of survivors than could the courts. To put it bluntly, some of the rights of victims were thereby forfeited for the so-called greater good.

The details of the judgement are beyond the scope of this paper,³⁹ and for the purposes of this paper it is interesting to consider political reactions to the process. At the time, members of the African National Congress Youth League, a rival political party to AZAPO who brought the case, supported the families' call.⁴⁰ Nationally, however, the ANC came out with a very different view to its Youth League. They essentially labelled the families 'anti-reconciliation', "unconsciously working against the national interest" and largely colluding (albeit unconsciously they added) with the *apartheid* State. The TRC itself—a body which liked to portray itself as victim-centered—also reacted angrily. It deemed the families to be opposed to reconciliation. Archbishop Tutu himself said that he was "annoyed and very hurt for the

³⁸ In the opinion of legal scholar John Dugard, the judgement was brief and incomplete, though not necessarily incorrect (see Dugard, 1998 cited in Jonathan Klaaren *A Second Organisational Amnesty* paper presented at The TRC: Commissioning the Past Conference, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa (14 June, 1999).

³⁹ The intricacies of this debate are beyond the present scope, see John Dugard *Dealing with Crime of a Past Regime: Is Amnesty Still an Option?* 12 *Leiden Journal of International Law* 1001, 1105 (2000); Jonathan Klaaren *A Second Organisational Amnesty* paper presented at The TRC: Commissioning the Past Conference, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa (14 June, 1999); Naomi Roht-Arriaza & Lauren Gibson *The Developing Jurisprudence on Amnesty* 20(4) *Human Rights Quarterly* 843,885.

⁴⁰ South African Press Association Press Statement *Victims of apartheid need justice before reconciliation* (10 April 1996).

many people I know who want to tell their stories” and hoped the group bringing the case would “get their come-uppance”.⁴¹

These reactions are interesting as they highlight the degree to which the TRC process was tied into the notion of reconciliation. Individuals participating in the process were subject to far greater forces than simply exercising their rights to truth, justice or reparation. The demands of the transitional context took priority. In essence, attempts by victims to achieve what they saw as justice through the courts were seen as a hindrance to peace. They had to forego rights, such as the right to access courts, which are generally afforded to victims of ‘ordinary’ crime. In this sense, the debate becomes about how victims of political violence can receive a parity of rights to other victims, rather than whether they should be treated as a special case compared to say victims of domestic violence or car crashes.

That said, the TRC also mirrored one of the core weaknesses present in many criminal justice systems, i.e. there was not a clear understanding of the relationship between the TRC and victims. It was always unclear what the outcomes would be for victims. They *might* get truth, potentially justice (if the perpetrator did not apply for amnesty, of course), and potentially reparation (if the President chose to act on the TRC’s recommendations for reparation). Of course, it was also hoped that some healing might come from engaging in the process. In a word, outcomes for the amnesty applicants were much clearer, i.e. either they received amnesty or they did not.

To state the point polemically, just as the relationship between the offender and the State dominates most developments in the criminal justice system, in terms of prosecution, punishment and rehabilitation, so too did the legal relationship between amnesty-applicant and the State largely drive the South African TRC process. Granted, some victims found truths they would not have known without the TRC, and for some the process of testifying

⁴¹ South African Press Association Press Statement *Truth Commission not losing credibility, says Tutu* (11 April 1996).

could have been personally psychologically beneficial,⁴² but their relationship to the TRC was not as clearly defined in terms of outcome. In this sense, ambivalence around the outcome for victims could have fed into feelings of low levels of *subjective* procedural justice.⁴³

The relationship between the victim and the State in the transitional justice debate remains underdeveloped morally, ethically, legally and more critically in practice. A relationship between any body such as a truth commission, dealing with transitional justice issues, and the victims participating in it needs to be articulated and explored in greater detail than is currently the case. Such discussions could find expression in the form of a Charter of Victim Rights in truth commission processes. The UN Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power provides a good starting point for the discussion on victims' rights—but is seldom referred to, especially in the transitional justice literature.⁴⁴ New charters are of course not sufficient, rather it is the process around their development and the positioning of victims' rights at the core of the transitional justice debate, and enforcing rights through law, that is critical. This is particularly important if transitional justice mechanisms continue to be so heavily tied to the transitional context where individual participation in them is understood to have a larger social meaning (e.g. reconciliation) than simple individual participation.

Currently—and certainly in the South African case—victims' rights are often a yardstick of *post-hoc* rationalisation once certain rights had been negotiated away. When truth commissions are said to be victim-centered, this often means that victims are psychologically and socially supported, given adequate space to voice their opinions, and have their

⁴² Brandon Hamber *Does the Truth Heal: A psychological perspective on the political strategies for dealing with the legacy of political violence* in Nigel Biggar, ed., "Burying the Past : Making Peace and Doing Justice after Civil Conflict" (Washington, USA: George Town University Press, 2000).

⁴³ 'Subjective procedural justice' is a term used in psychological literature, see E. Allan Lind & Tom R. Tyler "The Social Psychology of Procedural Justice: Critical Issues in Social Justice" (New York: Plenum Press, 1988). In the psychological literature, compared to the legal literature, when reference is made to procedural justice being high or low, it is meant that those involved feel the process was fair or unfair. This is different to assessing, based on some normative understanding, whether the process was objectively fair or not.

⁴⁴ This declaration is not without its flaws: for example, victims are only defined as those directly affected and not their relatives or associates. The definitions also do not really take into account the potential long-term impacts of extreme violence.

experiences validated and acknowledged. Being truly victim-centered, however, requires *a paradigm shift* in which victims' rights start to influence the transitional justice agenda to a far greater degree. In many societies still, victims' rights are understood as an obstacle to compromised pragmatic political change, rather than the questions raised by pragmatic political change being seen as a real threat to entrenching the rights of victims.

Truth Recovery—some thoughts on Northern Ireland

In 1998 I undertook some research on whether Northern Ireland should have a truth commission or not. I came to the conclusion that, at that time, an official truth recovery process seemed unlikely.⁴⁵ Others made similar arguments, namely, that no moral or political authority existed to support an entity such as a truth commission.⁴⁶ I further argued that the balance of power between forces during transition generally determined government policy on issues,⁴⁷ and in Northern Ireland, at that stage, the forces were too evenly weighted and all sides were opting to leave *their* truths hidden for the time being. As such:

Most political players demand truth from those they perceive as the other side or sides, but seem unwilling to offer the truth from their side, or acknowledge and take responsibility for their actions. This is mostly due to fear that such acknowledgment (public or otherwise) will weaken their position as parties vie for power in the new dispensation and that the truth may be used against them within the context of the delicate peace that prevails. There are also those in Northern Ireland who refuse to accept that they did anything wrong or that their action (or inaction) was complicit in perpetuating the conflict.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Brandon Hamber, ed., "Past Imperfect: Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland and Societies in Transition", (Derry/Londonderry: INCORE /University of Ulster, 1998).

⁴⁶ NIACRO and Victim Support Northern Ireland "All Truth is Bitter: A Report of the Visit of Doctor Alex Boraine" (1999).

⁴⁷ Jamal Benomar *Confronting the Past: Justice in Transitions* 4(1) *Journal of Democracy* 13 (1993).

⁴⁸ *Brandon Hamber, supra n. 45*, p. 80,81.

Several years on, the endpoint has not shifted significantly, but the debate and the intricacies of dealing with the past have certainly gained political and public momentum. In addition, various mechanisms that one could call truth-recovery processes are underway. For example, the Bloody Sunday Inquiry was announced on 29 January 1998, a commission to investigate disappearances was also set up, and a number of ongoing legal matters have come before the European Court of Human Rights.⁴⁹ There are also many ongoing community initiatives working with memorials, oral history and commemoration. Ongoing projects have also documented the extent of the conflict in Northern Ireland in great detail.⁵⁰

The Healing Through Remembering consultation process heralded probably the most thorough public and civil society investigation to date of strategies for dealing with the past.⁵¹ The project recommended—there be a network of commemoration projects, a Day of Reflection, a collective storytelling process, a permanent memorial museum concerning the conflict in and about Northern Ireland, and that:

...all organisations and institutions that have been engaged in the conflict, including the British and Irish States, the political parties and Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries, should honestly and publicly acknowledge responsibility for past political violence due to their acts of omission and commission. We see this as the first and necessary step having the potentiality of a larger process of truth recovery. When acknowledgment is

⁴⁹ For example, the four joined cases of *Jordan, Kelly, McKerr and Shanaghan v. United Kingdom*, Application No. 24746/94; 30054/96; 28883/95; and 37715/97, respectively, judgement May 4, 2001. See, Fionnuala Ní Aoláin *Truth Telling Accountability and the Right to Life in Northern Ireland Issue 5* E.H.R.L.R. (2002).

⁵⁰ See, for example, the substantial documentation projects of those killed in the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. That is, amongst others, Ardoyne Commemoration Project, “Ardoyne: the untold truth” (Belfast: Beyond the Pale, 2002); David McKittrick, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney and Chris Thornton “Lost Lives: The stories of the men, women and children who died as a result of the Northern Ireland troubles” (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1999); Ardoyne Book; Marie-Therese Fay, Mike Morrissey and Marie Smyth “Mapping Troubles related deaths in Northern Ireland 1969-1998 (Belfast: INCORE, University of Ulster, 1998); The Cost of the Troubles Study *Final Report Belfast: The Cost of the Troubles Study* (Derry/Londonderry: INCORE, 1999).

⁵¹ *Healing Through Remembering*, *supra* n. 4 and see <http://www.healingthroughremembering.com> for more details. In sum, this project undertook an extensive national consultation process and published its findings on how the events concerning the conflict in and about Northern Ireland could be remembered.

forthcoming, we recommend that measured, inclusive and in-depth consideration be given to the establishment of an appropriate and unique truth recovery process.⁵²

Clearly, the use of the word truth recovery was deliberate. It was broader than the idea of recommending a truth commission as such. In the broadest sense, truth recovery could imply mechanisms such as truth commissions run domestically or internationally, commissions of enquiry, tribunals or special prosecutions, or perhaps historically-based truth recovery processes driven by victim narratives. Furthermore, the Report is at pains to point out that any such process should relate to and not replace other formal truth finding structures that exist, namely those within the existing criminal justice system and other associated mechanisms such as inquests, police investigations, prosecutions and inquiries. Much work remains to be done before an acceptable mechanism (that was also legally viable given other developments) could come into being.

However, by stressing multiple mechanisms (including those in its other recommendations) the Report perhaps draws its strongest distinction from the South African process. In South Africa, including amnesty in the TRC's remit meant that successful amnesty applicants effectively by passed the criminal justice system altogether. Perhaps, in this sense, the Healing Through Remembering Report's stress on complementarity may overcome some of the problems of the South African process—namely, the confusing of human rights discourse and truth with compromise and amnesty, thus undermining the potential of an undiluted human rights discourse associated with accountability and principles,⁵³ as was elucidated earlier in this paper. Or, as anthropologist Richard Wilson argues, the most successful truth commissions have been those that have abandoned the trappings of law and allowed courts to administer amnesty provisions *or perhaps prosecutions [author's addition]*, and concentrated more on truth finding and documenting historical lessons.⁵⁴ In this sense, these suggestions

⁵² *Healing Through Remembering*, *supra* n. 4, p.50.

⁵³ *Richard Wilson*, *supra* n. 24.

⁵⁴ *Richard Wilson*, *supra* n. 24, p.225.

and current developments in Northern Ireland start to paint a picture of a much more diffuse approach to truth-recovery.

In terms of the issue of victims' rights in Northern Ireland it may be useful to note that there is, as in many countries, an ongoing battle over degrees of suffering. That is, many victim groups qualify their victimhood. It has become common for some groups to refer to themselves as 'real' or 'innocent' victims.⁵⁵ Such qualifications indirectly imply that there might be 'guilty' victims. Many victims of Republican violence feel that their suffering is now seen as less important in light of the concessions to political (largely Republican) prisoners. Victims of State violence too feel they have always been secondary victims because the hegemony of the British State remains and only a handful of soldiers and police have been held to account for their actions. The phrase 'hierarchy of victims' has become commonplace.

Brice Dickson of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission provides some useful pointers in this regard.⁵⁶ He notes that it needs to be realised that the nature of victimhood differs according to the nature of the wrong that has been committed against the victim. The wrong has two aspects to it—the act itself (e.g. the killing, the assault, the threat) and the consequences of the act (e.g. the death, the injury, the fear). If we are to decide what rights victims should have, he argues, we should have regard to both aspects. The former aspect calls for rights such as recognition, acknowledgement and apology. The latter aspect calls for rights such as compensation and access to services. The former is more politically contentious, and usually acknowledgement and recognition are dealt with by truth commissions and other official processes. It is interesting to note that Northern Ireland has, at least to some degree and at this stage, tried to incorporate some rights-based views of victims' rights in the draft Bill of Rights. The draft Bill reads, under the heading of "Victims of Conflict":

⁵⁵ Mike Morrissey and Marie Smyth "Northern Ireland After the Good Friday Agreement: Victims, Grievance and Blame" (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p. 12.

⁵⁶ *Brice Dickson, supra n. 35.*

With a view to promoting the principles of truth and reconciliation in the aftermath of a lengthy period of conflict, the Government shall take legislative and other measures to ensure that the loss and suffering of all victims of that conflict and the responsibility of State and non-State participants are appropriately and independently established and/or acknowledged.⁵⁷

Rights in relation to service delivery are more straightforward. It would appear that law could underpin rights to compensation and adequate services—the draft Bill of Rights supports this. The difficulty, however, when dealing with the needs of victims in transitional societies is that the complexity of truth, justice and acknowledgement is often avoided. These issues are inevitably political and the core of understandings of the conflict. This was evident in the recent Victims Strategy Document developed by the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister, which exclusively focused on service delivery to so-called victims, choosing not at this stage to comment on truth and justice pending the launch of the Healing Through Remembering Project’s report—the report of an independent voluntary organisation not related to government.

The dominant focus on the psychological distress of victims of violence at the expense of other needs is interesting to consider in this regard. It could be argued that in many countries an exclusive emphasis on the psychological needs of victims, although necessary, is often used in the expectation it will meet other needs, such as victims’ needs for truth, acknowledgement and justice. The practical and political challenge of making policy on matters concerning those who have suffered means that the needs of victims are often relegated (or compartmentalised off) to the therapy room in the hope that victims’ psychosocial needs and their desire for justice and truth can be counselled away. This is compounded by the fact that governmental knowledge about the impact of conflict on

⁵⁷ Human Rights Commission of Northern Ireland *Proposed Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland* Clause 8 (a) 1 (September 2001).

individuals and how to address it is generally scant, and in many countries they are also responsible for some of the violence.

Trauma counselling⁵⁸ and community-based support work do not in themselves deal with the past. Healing, or attempts to assist victims of violence psychologically speaking, cannot be separated from the social and political process of dealing with the past, which by definition includes issues such as justice. Exactly how this process of acknowledgement could be operationalised is still unclear—but, what is clear is that more robust debate on truth, justice and acknowledgement is needed, and will continue.

Victims' rights in criminal justice studies, albeit somewhat developed, remain the poor relation to many other aspects of criminal justice. In transitional justice studies the concept is almost non-existent. This is the case, not only in Northern Ireland, but in the transitional justice field more broadly. A more rigorous engagement with the issue of victims' rights still needs to be developed and articulated. The legal underpinnings of victims' participation in truth recovery mechanisms require attention, as do the realisation of their rights.

Conclusion—learning lessons in reverse

Despite the criticisms raised of the South African process in this paper, it is important to acknowledge that the TRC was a bold and partially successful attempt to delve into a turbulent past created by decades of conflict. Some of the difficulties in the process—or so it has been argued in this paper—concerned the confusion of human and victims' rights with 'compromise', as well as the impact of concepts such as reconciliation on the TRC's final

⁵⁸ Trauma, and especially the notion of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), is itself a contested term in psychological literature—critiques of the concept of PTSD and especially its role in post-conflict societies are beyond the present scope. See, David Becker, *The Deficiency of the Concept of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder when Dealing with Victims of Human Rights Violations* in R.J. Kelber, C.R. Figley, and B.P.R. Gersons, eds., "Beyond Trauma: Cultural and Societal Dynamics" (New York: Plenum Press, 1995), 107; P. J. Bracken *Hidden Agendas: Deconstructing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* in P. J. Bracken and C. Petty, eds., "Rethinking the Trauma of War" (London: Free Association Books, 1998), 55; Alan Young "The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress-Disorder" (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

outcome. Oddly, however, perhaps it is these weaknesses in the South African context that may hold some lessons for Northern Ireland.

The mandate of the South African TRC compelled it to investigate the “causes, nature and extent” of the South African conflict. The TRC elucidated the broad causal and historical picture fairly well—obviously made easier by the fact that a widely accepted truth already existed, i.e. *apartheid* was a morally abhorrent system that brutalised many. But, on assessment, the TRC did not simply highlight the fact that *apartheid* was a crime against humanity and uncomfortable truths that challenged many of the dominant narratives about the South African conflict emerged in one way or another. It could be said to have achieved a measure of success in highlighting ‘the causes’ of the conflict and bringing a more unified understanding of the conflict to bear. That said, the TRC could have certainly ventured more boldly into the ‘nature and extent’ of the conflict. This paper has highlighted some of the problems with the TRC’s investigation process. In addition, the TRC could have fostered a greater recognition of the need for multiple and ongoing mechanisms over time to continue official truth finding in South Africa.

Contrary to this, the multitude of initiatives taking place in Northern Ireland, largely unofficial, mean that the ‘nature and extent’ of the conflict is—and will certainly be—well documented over the next decade. Unlike South Africa, and simplifying very complex arguments, agreeing on or at least having a broadly accepted narrative of the ‘causes’ of the Northern Ireland conflict, is one of the biggest challenges to building some form of reconciliation into the future. The fear—not to mention complexity—of exploring the ‘causes’ in an open, honest and inclusive way is the principal obstacle to engaging in a macro truth finding process. Such a process, if designed correctly and impartially, would mean for all parties involved—including the governments and public at large—potentially compromising on long-held beliefs about the nature of the conflict, or at least being prepared to allow their own perspectives to be scrutinised, and perhaps proved mistaken or misguided.

Despite the difficulties this paper has highlighted around too closely linking the reconciliation discourse to the amnesty process in South Africa, perhaps the notion of reconciliation (with all its multiple meanings) ironically holds the key for a more consensus driven attempt to elucidate aspects of the past in Northern Ireland. Conceivably a more significant official and national attempt to deal with the past in Northern Ireland will only take place—as optimistic or perhaps impossible as it sounds—once the hard-nosed desire to score political points from the past is replaced by a more reconciliatory discourse across the board. This would need to be built on the recognition that at some point laying the past bare will be needed, and that this is the greatest, albeit difficult, guarantee of a stable future in the decades to come. A delicate balance needs to be struck. On one level, a degree of reconciliation is needed for all to agree on any official truth recovery process. Yet, at the same time, such reconciliation cannot compromise the truth that should emerge. This will require political courage and, dare I say, a level of grace and generosity seldom seen in Northern Ireland’s conflicted history.