

Dealing with Painful Memories and Violent Pasts

Towards a Framework for Contextual Understanding

Brandon Hamber

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The most authentic thing about us is our capacity to create, to overcome, to endure, to transform, to love and to be greater than our suffering (Ben Okri).

1 Introduction

Some 20 years ago, in late 1994, shortly after completing my training as a clinical psychologist in South Africa, I met a friend and colleague for coffee. I recall asking him, as he worked at the time for the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV) in Johannesburg, if there were any interesting political or social developments on the horizon. He responded that within the Department of Justice of the newly elected South African government an idea had surfaced for a truth commission. I had never heard of a truth commission. I questioned him on the proposal and he gave a brief outline of the idea. I recall thinking it was foolish. Investigating the truth about the apartheid past as if such a thing existed, at least theoretically, was going to be impossible – the idea, I felt, was ambitious and ill founded.

Having said that, I was fascinated and began to read about other truth commissions, particularly about victim experiences, mainly in Latin America. From there, one event led to another, and soon I found myself working for CSV with victims testifying before the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (SATRC) (see Hamber 2009). At the time, I had little concept of how significant the truth commission process in South Africa was to become. Over the coming years, I was immersed in the debates, developments and processes surrounding the commission, and over time my work moved to other countries. As it has developed over the years, one of my primary foci has become the relationship between how individual (largely victim) processes of coming to terms with mass atrocity (a micro perspective) relates to the collective or political process of finding ways of dealing with the past (a macro perspective).

This is precisely the question I have been asked to reflect on in this volume. To put it another way: what is the role of different approaches for dealing with painful memories and violent pasts, and how do the different dimensions – interpersonal and intergroup relations, memories and identities at the individual and collective level – relate to one another? Can one constructively address victim identities and cultures of victimhood that may stem from painful or traumatic experiences? It is not easy to answer these questions, and I have written many thousands of words trying to do just that. Here I can only offer a modest contribution to this complex issue.

Before trying to answer the questions directly, I would like to contextualise the issues. I will first outline a way of understanding the impact of large-scale political violence and the needs this creates in *Section Two*. The different methods used to address the needs will then be discussed in *Section Three*. I will provide a framing comment to the debates that follow in *Section Four*. The essay will then highlight four approaches that can narrow the gap between individual healing processes and collective strategies (*Section Five*). In conclusion, I will return to the story above and briefly discuss the issue of managing complexity (*Section Six*).

2 The impact of mass violence: destruction of trust, relationships and belonging

Although I am increasingly uncomfortable with trying to categorise different contexts (“post-conflict”, “post-agreement”, “society in transition”), the assumption behind this essay is that we are talking about a certain type of context. While all contexts differ, this essay reflects on cases in which large-scale armed conflict has taken place that has seen not only the loss of life and a range of other human rights violations (for example, torture) but also the destruction of infrastructure and livelihoods. In short, the context can be described as one of extreme political traumatising (Becker 2004). Although normally applied to inter-state conflict, most of the remarks made in this essay concern intra-state conflict. Typically these conflicts result in the breakdown of inter-community relationships and social connections on top of other destructive impacts.

A world is created where nowhere is seen as safe and where the line between death and extreme suffering on the one hand and ordinary living on the other is obliterated. Not only does extreme political violence tell victims something about their place in society, but it also dehumanises them through words (for example through the labelling of Tutsis as “cockroaches” during the Rwandan genocide). Individual victims can become estranged from their families, communities and wider society. This undermines their sense of belonging to society (Hamber 2009; Becker 2004, 2006), and the estrangement is often exacerbated by social conditions such as poverty, racism, gender discrimination and exclusion.

The social fabric, structures and institutions are also damaged, and norms, values and principles are undercut (Summerfield 1996; Lykes/Mersky 2006). The extreme nature of the violence alters individual and social meaning systems, as well as social relations and ways of life (Martín-Baró 1996). This has been described as a process whereby the habitual (normative) order of a society is overturned, and social relations and meaning systems are profoundly altered (Humphrey 2002). At a social level, trust and a sense of connection between groups, normally a key part of well-being, are destroyed, and the concept of the negative “other” emerges or hardens (Beneduce et al. 2006; Williamson/Robinson 2006; Staub 2006).

These types of conflicts, at least on some levels, defy classification. Michael Humphrey (2002) argues that such contexts best match the post-modern disposition, in which notions of rupture, discontinuity and disconnection are commonplace. Dori Laub (2000, cited in Hamber 2009) talks about massive trauma of this kind as amorphous, ahistorical, not delimited by place, time or agency; it precludes its knowing, and not knowing is part of the cycle of destruction. The idea of extreme traumatising has also been used to describe such contexts, that is, social contexts characterised by individual and collective processes where authorities have the power to violate human rights regularly, causing successive and cumulative injuries (Becker 1995; Kornfeld 1995; Becker et al. 1989).

Thus, what one could call “extreme political traumatising” is essentially made up of five elements (see Hamber 2009, 22ff. for a full discussion):

1. structural violence cut through by race, gender, age and class;
2. direct violence inflicted through physical harm that is laden with social meaning;
3. psychological destruction and alteration of individual and community meaning systems through extreme violence and through dislocating (“uncanny”) acts such as targeting civilians, torture, killings or disappearance, among other things;

4. discursive distortion marked by a rhetoric of dehumanisation, deceptive public discourse and lies; exclusionary language aimed at creating a lack of social belonging and in some cases inflaming direct violence; and
5. destruction of social ties and relationships, not only between victims and their place in society (their country or citizenship), but also between individuals, groups and communities in that society.

3 Types of intervention: psychosocial initiatives and people-to-people peacebuilding

The impact of mass atrocity and armed conflict is extreme; it moves beyond the physical and psychological arguably into the existential, overlapping and interlinking with the social environment (for example, through poverty and poor infrastructure). What is happening at the social level, such as the destruction of social ties, is integrally connected to individual well-being, and vice versa.

There are attempts to categorise the impact of violence as a set of standard psychological responses. Some specific responses to direct (political) violence include self-blame, vivid re-experiencing of the event, relationship difficulties, anxiety, nightmares, feelings of helplessness, hypervigilance, depression, feelings of social disconnectedness, fear and even substance-abuse related difficulties. These are often grouped under the overarching term of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

That said, the diagnostic category of PTSD has been critiqued in terms of its scientific validity (Bracken/Petty 1998). My objection to the concept is simpler. PTSD and the word “trauma” have become shorthand that tells us little about the context of violence, its cultural specificities, and how dealing with violence is linked with the socio-economic, political and cultural context. The concept pathologises a social phenomenon (political violence), and “trauma” has begun to change the language of suffering. Victims end up expressing themselves in medical language (“I am suffering from PTSD”, “I am traumatised”), masking the detail of the full nature of interlocking suffering where direct harm from violence intersects with class (generally poverty and inequality) and other forms of social exclusion that are interconnected with gender, age or race, among other factors. Focusing on alleviating symptoms can also undermine resilience,¹ as well as local mechanisms and strategies for recovery.

As a concept, trauma, and PTSD specifically, drives thinking towards homogeneity, as if all experiences of violence have the same outcome or need the same treatment, whether caused by domestic violence, political acts or natural disasters. This strips away the meaning individuals attach to violence in different contexts. To one individual a nightmare might be immaterial, to another it might be a reason to seek medical help, and to yet another it might be the ancestors passing on a message or sign of spiritual discord (Palmary et al. 2014; Summerfield 1996). Much distress among communities of migrants in South Africa,

¹ Resilience has been defined in many diverse ways in a range of contexts and fields of study. A detailed discussion of the term is beyond the scope of this essay. However, the definition given by Norris et al. (2008, 130) is one of the clearest and most adaptable. Resilience is, in their words, “a process linking a set of adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation after a disturbance”. Adaptive capacities are resources with dynamic attributes, and Norris et al. believe that the specific elements of their definition can be operationalised differently for individuals, grassroots groups, larger human communities or entire ecologies. Importantly, resilience is not equated with the outcome but rather with the process linking resources (adaptive capacities) to outcomes (adaptation).

for example, has been found to emanate from their material existence with its poverty and joblessness, as well as ongoing forms of violence embedded in the community and home, and from the way this existence is interpreted through the metaphysical realm (e.g., as the result of ancestors, community disruption or the consequences of sin) (Palmary et al. 2014).

Extreme levels of political violence, therefore, disrupt meaning systems, ways of life and everyday existence. Different violent and political incidents have distinctive political, social and cultural meanings and, thus, specific impacts. Understanding the attributed meanings is integral to recovery (Hamber 2009).

At a practical level, four broad categories or types of interventions that could improve the psychosocial well-being of those in the midst of humanitarian and political emergencies have been identified. These can be thought of as a pyramid (see *Figure 1*). Needs listed at the bottom of the pyramid require the most intervention, and those identified thereafter need progressively less, although all layers are important and require implementation concurrently (IASC 2007). The most extensive task, according to the *IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings*, is to (re)establish security, adequate governance and services that address basic physical needs (food, water, basic health care, control of communicable diseases, etc.). Secondly, help needs to be offered in accessing key community and family support (family tracing and reunification, assisted mourning and communal healing ceremonies, etc.). Thirdly, non-specialised supports (these can include emotional and livelihood support) for the still smaller number of people who additionally require more focused individual, family or group interventions by trained and supervised workers should be ensured. Finally, the specialised services of psychologists, psychiatrists or other trained individuals should be offered to people with severe mental disorders whenever their needs exceed the capacities of existing primary/general health services (IASC 2007).

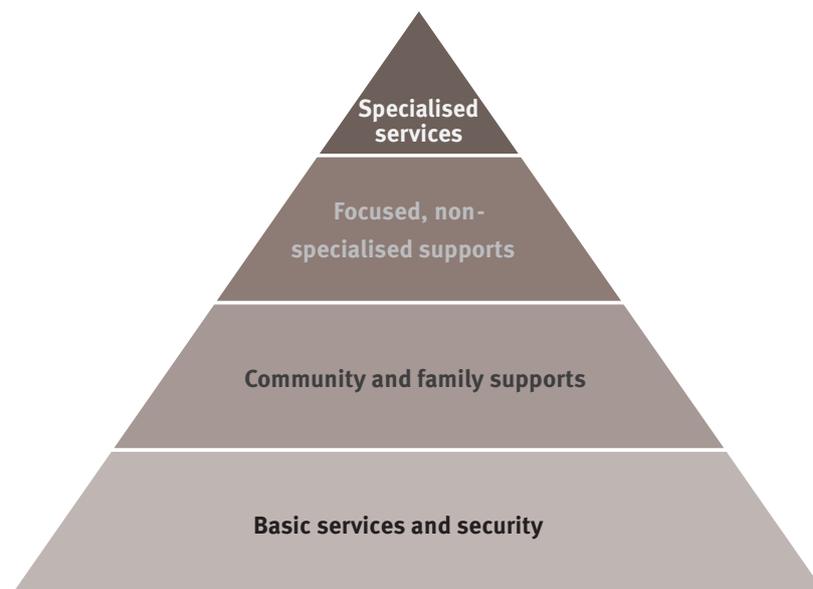


Figure 1: Intervention pyramid for mental health and psychosocial support in emergencies (IASC 2007, 12).

There are many different types of intervention implicit in the four levels outlined above. Less clinical and community-driven approaches include activities such as group sharing of problems, community dialogue, traditional healing rituals, art projects, theatre initiatives, interpersonal skills development, training on issues such as human rights and mediation, engagement in livelihood projects. The umbrella category of psychosocial interventions is often used to describe such approaches, although what specifically constitutes a psychosocial project is not always clear (Galappatti 2003). There is also a connection between

these types of psychosocial initiatives and what is called people-to-people peacebuilding, which involves, for instance, the promotion of co-operation, prejudice-reduction work, dialogue, and participation in common activities such as art and theatre (Gawerc 2006). These activities can help build relationships (Lederach 1997); they also provide valuable forums for reconstituting meaning and addressing the impact of extensive violence.

That said, there are debates about the efficacy of different approaches (Psychosocial Working Group 2003). For example, are individual interventions such as counselling effective in a context where structural injustice remains, or can group interventions that may be judged valuable by individuals (such as a drama programme with victims of violence) have a scalable impact on wider society? There are also difficulties concerning who drives such programmes, for example, “outsiders”, local NGOs and/or global NGOs. The psychosocial method also approaches well-being largely from the perspective of the individual and only minimally considers the impact of psychosocial approaches on peacebuilding and social change more broadly (Hamber/Gallagher 2014). More recently the term “psychosocial practices” has been used to capture strategies driven locally and within society that contribute to well-being, such as the use of rituals, religious ceremonies, mourning practices, processes that mix trauma language with different approaches (as in some religious counselling), familial support, and the support of friends and peer networks, among many other methods (ibid.). These are, in fact, the main ways individuals seek support, yet they receive little focus in the peacebuilding and psychosocial fields (Hamber/Gallagher 2014; Palmary et al. 2014).

Notwithstanding these debates, what is evident in the type of approaches outlined above is that the individual (psycho-) and collective (social) dimensions of well-being are clearly seen as important and interrelated. Some scholars argue they are not only interrelated but also indistinguishable (Williamson/Robinson 2006). In other words, a key relationship exists between individual healing processes and collective strategies. This is where macro interventions (such as truth commissions or trials) and the individual impacts of conflict interface. Truth commissions, for example, are no longer seen as narrow legal instruments, and it is now commonplace to consider their social and psychological utility (Hayner 2010). This does not mean we should think of truth commissions as a therapy but rather consider their potential for contributing to the psychological healing of victims and repairing social relationships.

Truth commissions are only one macro strategy. Although every context is different, we see some convergence between different so-called macro strategies designed to deal with a legacy of political violence. These can include the prosecution of perpetrators of human rights violations; the establishment of inquiries into specific atrocities; the undertaking of a truth commission to investigate patterns of abuse; the vetting of the major actors from a previous regime, or their dismissal; the use of hybrid processes such as the *gacaca* in Rwanda or the *Fambul Tok* process in Sierra Leone to mend community relationships (see *Box 1* and *Box 2* overleaf); and the development of reparations and compensation programmes to assist victims. Other processes, such as implementing security sector reform, transforming police and military institutions, addressing the issue of ex-combatants, memorialisation, opening archives, building museums, rewriting official histories, offering apologies and building the interrelationship between transitional justice and development, are all now considered part of the wider field of transitional justice (and what I consider collective or macro strategies and processes). The UN Security Council (2004) argues that transitional justice strategies must be holistic and incorporate an eclectic range of mechanisms in an integrated way. Implicit to such an approach is the assumption that transitional justice processes can be useful to society or the collective, as well as meeting some of the needs of victims, e.g. the need for acknowledgement, truth and justice.

Box 1: Gacaca – Rwanda

The genocide in Rwanda saw the death of some 800,000 Tutsi. As a result around 120,000 people suspected of sympathising with or supporting the *génocidaires*, most of them Hutu, were jailed in overcrowded, squalid conditions. To address this post-conflict justice problem, the community-based courts process of *gacaca* emerged, running from 2002 to 2012. *Gacaca*, which in Kinyarwanda translates as “grass”, refers to the system of 11,000 community-based courts that prosecuted hundreds of thousands of genocide cases in Rwanda. Initially, *gacaca* prosecuted only low-level cases, but over time its mandate expanded to include those of senior political and military suspects. It drew partly on a traditional conflict resolution system used since the precolonial period to resolve low-level disputes but was modified substantially and codified under the 2001 Gacaca Law to deal with genocide cases. Key features of *gacaca* included the hearing of cases by locally elected judges in open spaces such as courtyards and marketplaces, the widespread participation by local citizens as witnesses and observers, the barring of professionally trained lawyers and judges from the process, and the use of a plea-bargaining scheme that stressed community service as a key sentencing mechanism (Clark 2010). The process had both serious shortcomings and positive outcomes (for a full review of these see Clark 2010, 2012; Haberstock 2014).

Box 2: Fambul Tok – Sierra Leone

According to the website of the *Fambul Tok* (Krio for “family talk”) project, “*Fambul Tok* emerged in Sierra Leone as a face-to-face community-owned programme bringing together perpetrators and victims of the violence in Sierra Leone’s eleven-year civil war through ceremonies rooted in the local traditions of war-torn villages. It provides Sierra Leonean citizens with an opportunity to come to terms with what happened during the war, to talk, to heal, and to chart a new path forward, together. *Fambul Tok* is built upon Sierra Leone’s ‘family talk’ tradition of discussing and resolving issues within the security of a family circle. The program works at the village level to help communities organize ceremonies that include truth-telling bonfires and traditional cleansing ceremonies – practices that many communities have not employed since before the war. Through drawing on age-old traditions of confession, apology and forgiveness, *Fambul Tok* has revived Sierra Leoneans’ rightful pride in their culture.” A range of resources, including a film and teaching guides, are available at www.fambultok.com and more detail on the initiative at www.fambultok.org. Academic analysis and independent evaluation of the process is still emerging (see, for example, Cole 2012; Graybill 2010; Hoffman 2008 and Iliff 2012).

4 Framing comments and concepts

Before outlining how macro processes can impact on individuals and society, and in order to frame the debate in the rest of this essay, I would like to make some introductory points about the limits of various methods of dealing with the past and the political contexts in which they are employed.

Melanie Klein, the psychoanalytic theorist, says harm inflicted can never be *completely* “made good”. We need to accept that we cannot repair the irreparable (bring back those who were killed) and that the future is always going to be an ambiguous place haunted by the ghosts of the past, while we try to move forward. Coming to terms with the past, especially with relation to mass atrocity, is a life-long process that is context-dependent and changes over time.

For some individuals, for example, a peace process might start to open the collective space in which their individual needs can be met, but for others, new challenges might follow. During the conflict the explanatory and meaning systems for your suffering may have been fairly straightforward (“They are an

evil enemy”, “They are inhumane”), but after an armed conflict, as peace is made, these systems can be called into question by discourses that run counter to them (“We need to work with the enemy”, “They have their reasons for their actions”), creating a new set of psychological tensions and challenges.

Healing, therefore, is learning to live with situations of extreme suffering and integrating them into one’s life so that one can build relationships and engage productively, ensuring that loss does not dominate everyday experiences. We can think of healing as existing on a continuum (or perhaps as a pendulum), meaning that “living with” the suffering of the past will continually change relative to the social and political situation.

One way to think of this is to consider the individual’s process of coming to terms with the past as “moving” at a different pace from what might be happening at a political level. There will always be the juxtaposition of one and the other. In South Africa, individuals (mainly widows) were often treated as the social embodiment of “the nation” during the SATRC process, rather than as individuals who were still trying to come to terms with their suffering (Hamber/Wilson 2002). They were at times expected to advance psychologically at the same pace as the state institutions, even if these were pursuing a national political agenda (e.g. reconciliation) rather than an individual healing agenda that could be “out of step” with what victims might desire (revenge, justice in courts) (*ibid.*). Equally, I have seen the opposite, where victims can be exasperated by the fact that politicians want to keep fighting battles of the past in their name, when they want to attempt to reconcile with others.

But such phenomena are not only restricted to the level of national discourses. Without knowing it, some human rights groups can also “pressurise” victims into recasting their experience and suffering into the unfamiliar language of rights and violations. NGOs and psychosocial projects, too, can uncritically push the idea that “speaking out” and sharing stories is beneficial to victims. However, individuals might not feel they want to, or are ready to, do this (Palmary et al. 2014).

Separating out victims’ needs as if unrelated to the political context is another way of twisting the individual and collective relationship. Hiving off so-called victims’ needs as something that could be addressed like a set of symptoms through a series of interventions (e.g. counselling) would be an example of this. It is easy and tempting to latch uncritically onto supporting treatment methods that are multiple and diverse, ranging from cognitive behaviour therapy to various techniques such as eye movement therapy, to address the impact of political conflict. Those who “sell” such approaches offer them as curative, time-limited and cost-effective interventions and argue that they will apply to a range of population groups from refugees, victims of natural disasters to grieving mothers. Such techniques might help some individuals, but therapy for war-related trauma is a very small piece of what needs to be done and is at best complementary to other approaches.

Perhaps the area where we see the biggest imposition of an external desire to move processes forward at a different pace to that of how individuals might address their needs is in the language of “closure”. The words of a victim of the conflict in Northern Ireland capture this dilemma better than I could ever explain it:

What’s closure? What, you don’t talk about it anymore? No there’s no such thing as closure. Closure is a nice way of society saying, “for fuck sake dry your eyes and go on”, that’s what closure is. Closure is not about you, closure is about everybody else; that’s what closure is about. For you it’s about learning to live with a new situation and dreaming about the past. Closure is definitely someone else’s agenda because how can you close on something that’s in your head. How can you ever forget your brother or your mother or father or your sister? You can never forget about them and they will always be who they were and they will always be them...that’s not closure it’s learning to live with it and learning to live in a manner that’s good for your health rather than being unhealthy, always being depressed about what happened (cited in Lundy/McGovern 2005, 33).

The quote emphasises the pressure exerted through the “closure” agenda, but it also highlights a realistic view of healing as “learning to live” with what has happened, and that the past cannot *completely* be

“made good”. Yet in public bodies such as truth commissions and prosecution processes, and sometimes in the words of politicians and the general public, closure is advocated.

My own experience in South Africa revealed that victims who testified to the SATRC often felt that there was an expectation to forgive the perpetrators, even if this was not articulated. When one thinks about reconciliation in the political context, there is always the danger of what Michael Ignatieff calls “false reconciliation” (Ignatieff 1996). He defines this as where different groups “indulge in the illusion that they had put the past behind them”, with the party responsible for injustice trying to impose a “forgive and forget” mentality (Ignatieff 1996, 110). But “closure” is not going to be reached, and “forgetting” in an absolute sense is not possible.

Nonetheless, when concepts such as “closure” are introduced into public discourse or, for that matter, other tropes (“We need to turn the page but not close the book”, “We should forgive but not forget”, “We should prioritise the living victims not the dead ones”), we need to be aware that these are intertwined, depending on who is advocating them, with social and political power. In other words, there is often a struggle over who frames the debate about the past. This has ramifications for how we understand or assess what may or may not be going on for individuals. So when we ask how the individual processes of coming to terms with armed conflict and political violence relate to the collective process, we cannot analyse this outside of the macro framework in which it is being asked. The discourses of those in power can define the relationship between any individual process and a collective one.

So in theory we might say, as indeed my own work has done at times, that victims want truth, or justice is beneficial to mental health, but the reality of the delivery of these processes is always contested, incomplete, being negotiated and re-negotiated over long periods of time and through different political contexts. An example here would be Chile since the dictatorship, where the approach to justice has changed over time, moving from blanket amnesties to trials.

In other words, to properly answer the question of how dimensions such as interpersonal and intergroup relations, and memories and identities, relate to one another at the individual and collective level, we need to begin with two key issues in mind.

Firstly, we can never design a collective process or processes that can fully meet all individual needs because needs are psychologically complex (including discursive and psychological needs as well as direct impacts, as outlined above). Moreover, meeting all of them often requires profound social change such as in housing and employment, and the provision of livelihood, not to mention changing other embedded power structures such as gender relations and violent masculinities (Hamber 2007). The psychological impact of extreme human rights violations can therefore never be totally alleviated, and harm done cannot be reversed. Before we can meaningfully address the past, we need to acknowledge this reality, as to some degree it shapes all that follows and the different strategies we might need to adopt.

Secondly, when we discuss any strategy for dealing with the past, we are delving into the worlds of power, not only at the national level but also within and between groups. This is inevitable because we are talking about contexts of extreme suffering, which has a political dimension, but such situations can never be explained one-dimensionally. We are constrained by our language, our own assumptions and the context. An example in this essay is the term “victim”. It is a limiting term that conveys passivity when, in fact, many victims are very active in their environments and have transcended victimhood. The thin line between victims and perpetrators in some contexts can add an additional challenge. People also hold more than one identity.² Being a “victim” might be only one of the ways someone defines themselves.

² Identity is a very challenging concept to define. In its simplest form identity refers to a person’s chosen (and often ascribed) membership of a social group (Arthur 2011, 4). Identity groups can be thought of as large-scale groups (e.g. based on gender, ethnicity or religion) or as subgroups within groups (e.g. professional women, disabled men, Catholic nationalists). Such identity groups are infinite (Arthur 2011). Those that feel they belong to, or are thought to belong to, such groups are assumed to have a common set of characteristics, beliefs, values, practices, narratives and experiences (Brown forthcoming, who also draws on a range of sources and develops these ideas more fully). An individual can hold several identities, although some are more salient than others (Brewer 2001, cited in Brown forthcoming).

In this essay I do use the term “victim” (with all the caveats above), mainly because it communicates to the reader a position of diminished social power – a situation many of the arguments I put forward in this essay are trying to alter. I have chosen not to use the term “survivor”, although it is more positive; it can also be a politically correct way of trying to circumvent difficult debates. I seldom hear individuals refer to themselves as survivors. I hear professionals use it all the time.

Therefore, we need to spend time thinking about our own assumptions and language, not just for ourselves, but more importantly within the social and political space. We also need to problematise the power relationships at all levels of the debates about dealing with the past, not to mention the power dynamics and incentives implicit in championing different approaches (“reconciliation”, “justice”, “forgiveness”, “forgetting”).

5 Linking the levels: processes at the micro and the macro level

In this essay, I have tried to establish that individual processes and what is happening at the collective or political level are integrally linked. But what does this mean in practice? Below I identify *only* four broad approaches that can narrow the gap between the individual and the collective, but I also show how macro processes can impact on individuals and society more broadly.

5.1 Frameworks of meaning

It was argued above that creating a sense of meaning of what happened is a critical part of coming to terms with a legacy of political violence. This is both an individual and a social task. Mechanisms that seek to uncover what happened in the past by developing a coherent (though not necessarily agreed) set of narratives and processes that create a cognitive meaning of an event or events for victims and wider society can be useful. Methods of doing this are multiple. The most well-known is a truth commission, but, arguably, trials could serve this process, as could investigative processes carried out by NGOs. The establishment of collections in museums and archives, as well as the sharing of stories about the past in the form of testimony, books and films, are further methods. The shared strand in all these approaches is the desire to provide some context to what has happened. Often this needs to be an officially sanctioned context. In some countries this may be impossible, but it is why victims often have the desire for the court to validate their experience or for official bodies like truth commissions to investigate and document what happened.

To this end, for example, an officially authorised truth commission could provide a framework in which victims could begin to understand, integrate and create new meanings for themselves and the society. In the same vein, other collective strategies could have the same impact. Apology could enforce the idea that certain acts were wrong, indirectly providing those who suffered with a scaffold for understanding the context of their suffering. Collective mechanisms can provide rationalisations for their loss; these can be internalised and help answer the question, “Why did this happen?”. Making sense of the seemingly meaningless, and integrating what has happened into a collective life narrative, is critically important to victims and their recovery from mass atrocity (Sveaass/Castillo 2000).

But this is not an easy process because the “why” seldom has a straightforward answer or an answer that is free from different moral interpretations of violence (“It was a war”; “I had no choice but to resort

to violence, as all peaceful means were exhausted”; “You were collateral damage for the greater good”). Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect truth commissions, as just one example, to provide anything other than a new public space in which debate and discussion about the past can be “narrowed” rather than collectively agreed upon (Ignatieff 1996, 113). A framework for discussion can be anchored with new facts and information, but the differences in the interpretation of events will remain, possibly changing over time.

We cannot expect any process that seeks to understand the past to have miraculous powers of social transformation. The “never again” discourse is a case in point, with its tendency to imply a rather linear relationship between uncovering what happened and the lessons that might be learned from delving into the past. Just as the “truths” about the past require discussion and (re-)interpretation, perhaps endlessly, so too does what we learn from such investigations. We always interpret the past through the present, and although lessons may be learned (as the phrase goes), that does not mean we will apply them in the present. We seem to have a proclivity to perceive the present as a very different moral, social and political universe from the past. For example, in South Africa there is a tendency to disassociate police brutality against criminals and foreigners (a current problem) from police brutality against political dissidents in the past.

Expecting the full truth about the past to emerge is, therefore, overly optimistic, and even more unlikely is the hope that there will be collective acceptance of a shared narrative. That said, it does not preclude efforts to create, in whatever way is chosen, some framework of meaning at the collective level. The last two decades have seen a reliance on truth commissions as a primary vehicle for doing this. But I would maintain that a range of approaches create the landscape of meaning for societies emerging from conflict. In terms of transitional justice, prosecutions remain a key component and the preferred option of most victims (Shuman/McCall Smith 2000), but a range of other interconnecting processes are also now being used.

Recently we have seen the emergence of mixed and hybrid approaches to dealing with the past for practical, political and strategic reasons. Typically we see trials (to prosecute those most responsible), truth commissions (to uncover a wider truth about the past, sometimes with an amnesty), and so-called tradition-based approaches such as *gacaca* or community-based rituals. A combination of mechanisms (e.g. trials and amnesties; trials; truth commissions and amnesties) have been shown, using cross-country datasets, to be positive for democracy and human rights, something amnesties or trials cannot do on their own (Olsen et al. 2010). Justice, peace and democracy are now also seen as complementary objectives in societies coming out of conflict rather than being mutually exclusive (UN Security Council 2004). However, longitudinal studies of the relative effectiveness of different approaches, not just in terms of macro outcomes, but at the individual and group level as well, have not been conducted.

I am, therefore, not sure if a combination of mechanisms would show better results – in terms of creating social and individual frameworks of meaning – than one mechanism. But if we accept that there are multiple narratives and interpretations, and that creating meaning is an ongoing, messy process of negotiation and re-negotiation between the individual and society, it follows that multiple ways of delving into the past and trying to understand it will be necessary.

Outside of formal transitional justice, individuals and communities of individuals can also seek to create meaning in various spaces that are often more aligned with the everyday impact of political violence. They can do this, for example, by using museums (local and national) and archives; creating new history texts; writing books and memoirs; artistic endeavours; community storytelling and sharing; theatre, music and song; and cinema. Opening up these spaces is as important as thinking about the formal mechanisms of meaning-making.

It is common to hear people in Derry-Londonderry say that the two films released in 2002 on the thirtieth anniversary of the Bloody Sunday killings in Northern Ireland of 14 individuals by British paratroopers created a better framework for understanding and discussion within the society than the £190-million-pound Commission of Inquiry that began work in 1998 and reported in 2010. That said, if you speak with

many victims whose family members were vindicated by the commission as not being gunmen in the 1972 shooting, and taking into account the apology by the British Prime Minister, they will say that no price can be put on the truth.

5.2 Conditional factors

The official Bloody Sunday Inquiry is a good example of what I call a conditional factor in the process of trying to link individual processes with the collective. It is not merely the symbolic value of engaging in processes to understand the past or understanding it better (as through opening an archive or providing a memorial) that is important, but also the concrete outcomes that can flow from different approaches. In the case of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry, this is a new, officially sanctioned truth and apology.

In other words, conditional factors are the elements that contribute to individual healing through such processes as attaining the truth, administering justice in courts, receiving an apology, and granting reparations and compensation. I use the word “conditional” because victims of political conflict are unlikely to divorce the questions of truth, justice, responsibility for violations, compensation and official acknowledgement of what happened to them from their healing process in the complicated way outlined above.

The discovery of the bodies of “the disappeared”, such as through a truth commission or an ad hoc commission, is an example of this conditionality. In the case of disappearances the presence of a body allows rights to be respected and a proper burial – a key part of the grieving process – to take place. It potentially prompts the move toward healing. This could in some cases be complemented by psychosocial interventions (for instance, group sharing experiences and ways of documenting one’s story, from art through to video testimony), as well as individual work such as therapy or traditional healing rituals aimed at addressing the deep intra-psychic process of dealing with the extreme loss experienced by some. From the psychological perspective of victims the healing potential can also be bolstered by wider macro processes that might provide an explanatory framework for how and why the disappearance took place, and assurance that it will not re-occur. These processes would need to take place within a context in which basic security needs were met, social justice adequately guaranteed and inequality dealt with in a real material sense.

Reparations (including material and nominal measures such as compensation and memorials) are another example of a conditional process. If made in a timely fashion, reparations can more closely align political or national attempts to repair the past with the individual process of healing. Symbolic reparations, such as memorials and apology, can assist in bridging the gaps between the internal psychological world and the social world for victims and individuals in the society. Reparations, whether symbolic or monetary, send messages to the victims at a deep psychological level about their personal value and sense of belonging in society, which is very important, given how I defined the impact of violence earlier in this essay. In this way, reparations can lead to increased levels of civic trust (De Greiff 2006).

The process is important as well as the object (e.g. the amount of compensation, because money has a real meaning in society, or the type of memorial – whether it recognises individual and collective loss). The context in which reparations are granted needs to be one that demonstrates adequate levels of recognition, responsibility, social change and acknowledgement. Participation in such processes by those most affected, and those in the wider community who feel some affinity with the wrongs committed, is also critical.

For example, offering reparations without acknowledging the truth about a certain event or doing justice will inevitably result in the accusation that it is “blood money”. Instead of helping to convince victims and the communities they may represent that the society is a safe and caring place in which the victims have a part, reparations (money without justice) and those who supported their implementation can be experienced as persecutory in a psychological sense. There has to be, argues Pablo De Greiff (2006), external coherence in granting reparations; that is, reparations programmes need to have a close

relationship with other transitional-justice mechanisms and processes, such as criminal justice, truth-telling and institutional reform, to be effective. I would stretch the idea of external coherence further and say that offering anything in contexts where poverty and social problems persist will decrease the validity and usefulness of the process dramatically.

The language or discourse around the delivery is also important. For example, in South Africa the offering of (meagre) reparations was coupled with a speech by the then President Mbeki essentially reminding victims that “the struggle” was not about money, indirectly implying this is why victims had campaigned for reparations – which immediately resulted in many victims feeling insulted by the process and being given the impression that they had no place in society.

Apologies have the same challenge. The words are important. Questions that affect how apologies are received include: are victims portrayed as blameless? Does an apology fully grasp the harms caused? Is it partial? Does it come across as authentic, or does it indirectly provide a justification for the action? For example, the Japanese government has apologised repeatedly for the use of sex slaves during the Second World War, but this has not satisfied some victims because the wording in the apologies fails to signify the acceptance of full responsibility or acknowledgement of the specific harm and the wider context of the violations (imperialism).

Arguably, a range of approaches can have elements of the examples provided above. If any collective process (from a truth commission to a trial process; from reparations to establishing a museum about the past) is to have any meaning at the individual and inter-group level, it needs to be set up with what is seen at some level as the right intentions. This is important because as mentioned above, such processes tell victims about their value and place in society, which is the very thing extreme violence disrupts.

Like most of what is written above, this highlights how difficult achieving healing can be, or how hard it is to narrow the gap between the collective macro processes and the micro demands of individual healing. It is conditional on many factors. In short, most approaches will be *necessary* (e.g. truth recovery processes) to promote the psychological potential for the healing of victims, but they will seldom be *sufficient* to deal with all the needs of individuals or even groups of individuals. It is no wonder that my work has routinely shown that victims are ambivalent about the psychological outcomes of their participation in truth commissions and other transitional justice processes (see Hamber 2009).

5.3 Community mobilisation

One of the most difficult aspects of dealing with a legacy of mass atrocity and a politically violent past is not only managing individual and social needs as discussed above but also managing these in the public space. It is common, for example, for victims to use the public space to begin putting their demands for justice or accountability on the table. Examples of this abound around the world, the most well-known being the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina. In my work, perhaps controversially, I have argued that such public displays and engagement with the political arena *can* be beneficial for victims and society and are the inevitable outcome of violations caused in the political space.

Providing a sense of purpose and meaning following humanitarian crises of different types can be a powerful source of psychosocial support, and promoting community mobilisation processes is key to this (Psychosocial Working Group 2003). Social action and civic participation promote solidarity among victims, increasing their levels of empowerment and mastery over the environment. The meaning of a personal tragedy can be transformed by engaging in the wider world, helping to transcend suffering (Herman 1992).

Judith Herman, however, feels such actions are one of the later stages of trauma recovery (Herman 1992). The work I have done suggests that resolving trauma does not fit into a staged approach (Hamber 2009). For many victims of political violence, social action is the door they first open into the world of psychological recovery. My experience leads me to believe that those engaging in social action processes move up and down the healing continuum relative to what is happening in society. Practitioners, peacebuilders and

politicians need to ensure that they do not stymie social action by seeing it as either the outcome of a successful therapy process or a later stage in the evolution of coming to terms with distress.

This is not to say that the use of social action as a form of individual transformation is straightforward. Some individuals might choose other routes to address their suffering, such as therapy, traditional practices or local and community support. However, what have been termed “survivor missions” (Herman 1992) can also become diversionary tactics in a psychological sense; that is, ways of not dealing with unresolved grief or suffering by becoming overly involved in social action such as lobbying for compensation or social justice. In addition, if we accept that reconnection is one of the important components that engaging in social processes can bring, we also need to guard against victim support groups primarily becoming about reconnection with each other and not the wider society. I do not believe that contact with perpetrators is the pinnacle or principle aim of reconnection work for victims, but the danger always exists that victim groups become narrow interest groups in which their disconnection from society (their victimhood) is continually reinforced rather than overcome.

In summary, civic participation is one way in which victims can attempt to narrow the gap between the tempo of the individual healing process and the unfolding political context, or at least influence the pace of the political process to some degree. Victims as active and vocal citizens with a legitimate and ongoing social “voice” can also educate policymakers and the society at large about their real needs and the impact of extreme political traumatisation; perhaps they can even highlight what might be necessary to prevent future violence. They can also become connectors between previously estranged groups and communities.

5.4 The justice gap: the problematic consequences of amnesties and impunity

Mark Freeman (2006) has written that in contexts of mass abuse and violence there is a virtual guarantee of incomplete justice. This can be the product of many factors, such as there being too many cases to process, lack of evidence, corruption, destruction of evidence, a weak criminal justice system, and fear of coming forward (Freeman 2006). Often societies facing the past also have to make difficult decisions. For example, although there has been a global move towards preventing amnesties for war crimes and genocide, we also know that amnesties have not decreased over the last few decades, and they are used routinely in transition processes (Mallinder 2007). Between 1945 and 2011, 530 amnesties were enacted (The Belfast Guidelines on Amnesty and Accountability 2013).

Sometimes amnesties are enacted to avoid responsibility for violations, but at other times they can be used for strategic reasons (*ibid.*). For example, it is becoming common for truth commissions to be used for “lower level” perpetrators, while trials are used for the architects of mass violence or those seen as “most responsible” (Mallinder 2007; Robinson 2003). In Sierra Leone, for example, a truth commission that could offer amnesty for “lesser” crimes, and a special court process for trying war crimes and genocide ran alongside community-based initiatives.

Whatever approach is taken, incomplete justice can be the result, at least from some victims’ perspective. This highlights the difference between macro and micro understandings of justice (Lillie/Janoff-Bulman 2007). Victims or the general population might feel that a certain action (e.g. amnesty) may be justified for the greater good (macro), but this does not mean that they feel it is fair to them personally (micro). Thus, we can talk of a gap between the micro imperatives to do justice and the macro inevitability of incomplete justice in transitional societies.

Roy Baumeister (1997) talks of a “magnitude gap”, arguing that what the perpetrator gains by violence is always less than what the victim loses in value; for example, what a perpetrator gains from a murder can never equate with what the victim loses. Besides this, however, if we accept that most people see the denial of retributive or judicial justice to victims as unfair and that this is how victims experience it, the

micro–macro gap is characterised by an ethical gap; that is, a challenge to how we understand what is politically necessary and what is morally right or obligated. So how can this ethical gap be narrowed?

Firstly, the issue of victims' rights needs to become more central to transition processes. Most texts on transitional justice begin with a discussion of how to deal with the past from the question of constraint (for example, inadequate resources to prosecute or the threat of prosecutions to stability), rather than starting from a rights-based position. Notwithstanding the complexities and inconsistencies in legal debate about the right to truth and justice (see Freeman 2006; McEvoy 2006; Orentlicher 2005), victims' rights still need to be anchored in the transitional justice debate, despite the rhetoric that at times surrounds this. A rights-based approach to the needs of victims remains underdeveloped – morally, ethically, legally and, more critically, in practice. A paradigm shift is needed in which victims' rights start to determine the transitional justice agenda rather than victims' rights being seen as an obstacle to pragmatic political change.

Secondly, we need to see the denial of complete justice, no matter what the cause, as ethically and morally challenging. Wilhelm Verwoerd makes a sophisticated defence of amnesty in South Africa as he grapples with the existential meaning of amnesty beyond stock phrases such as “Amnesty was needed for peace”. He questions the victim–perpetrator dichotomy, beckons us to all recognise “the little perpetrator” in each of us, and calls for attempts to recognise the humanity of perpetrators without downplaying the horrific and without undermining the vindication of victims (Verwoerd 2007).

I share his perspective that creating a nuanced picture of the past, along with concepts such as amnesty in certain circumstances, does not necessarily run counter to fostering a common humanity and establishing a basic set of moral principles concerning human rights violations. Dealing with the past in complex ways that entail compromises does not automatically equate with foregoing accountability and justice, and such processes can take us to the core of complicated and intricate discussions about how we try to define who we see as perpetrators and who we see as victims, in a way that other approaches (such as trials and, of course, avoidance) might not.

I have been criticised for calling amnesty in South Africa “an evil compromise” (Graybill 2002, 178). I believe that my choice of words was perhaps not ideal because the word “evil” can limit a sense of the complexity of the issue. However, despite my support for the South African amnesty process at the time, I still believe it was a hugely problematic compromise, and that if not “evil” it was damaging and flawed in multiple ways. Amnesty in South Africa has been reshaped as a national founding myth, a morally correct decision, and those wanting justice are largely seen as anti-reconciliation. This has resulted in the closing down of parts of the debate around amnesty and how we do justice for past wrongs. There should have been a continuous process of exploring the ethical complexity of amnesty rather than a social and political process that tried to put it beyond question.

Thirdly, it is not the responsibility of victims to quietly accept peace processes, agree to political compromises or deliver the answer to the dilemmas of the ethical gap, as I called it. Victims should argue for a principled approach to justice, if justice is what they want. It is politicians and those in positions of power who have to find a way to build peace while delivering justice and dealing with the multifaceted demands of victims. Social space has to be created for anger to be expressed by victims (and the wider society for that matter) rather than individuals who oppose processes such as amnesty being expected to fall in line with so-called national priorities of peace. A peace fashioned out of short-term expediency could become a negative peace that fails to deal with the underlying causes of conflict and lays the ground for its re-emergence later on.

Finally, the ethical gap outlined above can be best narrowed by ensuring that there is accountability and that justice is continually sought to the highest possible degree. Attaining justice is not merely about meeting victims' needs; it is also about asking what the perpetrator or society owes (Bennett 2007). This requires perpetrators to acknowledge their wrongdoing (or at the very least, the consequences of their actions) and take responsibility for its effects. It also entails a rigorous and systematic pursuit of reparations and restitution. A minimalist view is that perpetrators should not benefit from their actions (Hamber 2009). An additional caveat, however, is that we also need to consider what we mean by “perpetrator”, as often it

is the beneficiaries of political systems, and not merely those who directly engaged in violence, who need to be part of the process of redress.

In addition, accountability and justice need to be framed as a wide and long-term process. Justice should be framed as a continuous process, not as a once-off endeavour defined or constrained by a specific historical moment. Diane Orentlicher (2007) uses the examples of Argentina and Chile, which show that although it was difficult to mount prosecutions or sustain them following transition in the 1980s and early 1990s respectively, since then greater political space and the passage of time have meant that new trials have begun.

In conclusion, none of the directions I outline above will entirely address the issue of the ethical gap between political necessity and moral obligation. But a more meticulous and multifaceted way of thinking about justice is needed, one that moves beyond reducing it to the limits of pragmatic politics. At a psychological level, victims need to feel their plight is taken seriously and that the society is not attempting to curb their desire for retributive justice for expedient reasons. Thus, any society grappling with mass injustice should seek to open as much social and psychological space as possible and set down as many clear moral markers as achievable. It is only through doing this that an adequate context can be created in which victims can undertake the difficult intra-psychic work of coming to terms with the injustices they suffered.

6 Conclusion: promoting a rights-based approach in transitional justice

It is difficult to believe that the conversation I related at the start of this essay took place 20 years ago. It is also somewhat awkward in retrospect to think that when we started the work on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa we thought, in our naivety, that we could find a mechanism that could address the past in a relatively short and compressed period. In fact, the process is still unfolding and has been collapsed into, overridden by, mixed with, changed and re-shaped by a range of different factors over the last two decades.

Since then I have extensively investigated how such macro bodies can assist victims or at least be set up to maximise their potential for contributing to healing and positive social change. But if I am honest, after years of reflection I feel that the scepticism of my much younger self still has value. I would also extend these early concerns beyond the notion of a truth commission to other processes of reckoning with a violent past. However, I have also learned that doubt and uncertainty can propel learning; they should not stymie action but rather encourage us to try to overcome our misgivings and learn from our insufficiencies. I struggle to understand the process of dealing with painful memories and violent pasts now more than ever, and I can never find the words to fully capture its complexity.

I have used the word “complexity” routinely in this essay. There is a part of me that dislikes the term, although reading this you might think the opposite. Using the word “complexity” can, particularly in the political realm, be a way of avoiding problems (“Dealing with the past is complex. We have to satisfy multiple needs, and that is why we are not having a truth commission”; or: “We will never satisfy the complex needs of victims, so why bother?”). But if we are to try and reconcile the gap between individual and social needs

and address decades, and sometimes centuries, of injustice, this is going to be an incredibly complex task, in the true meaning of the word. However, it is difficult to find the language to convey this.

For example, I have outlined in this essay the different approaches to addressing the past as if they were distinct, unconnected objects (truth commissions, traditional processes, etc.) and as if individuals engaged with these in isolated ways, meaning that we can delineate impact. In any society, processes will overlap and unfold. Binaries between, for example, what even in this essay have been labelled “traditional” and “mainstream” approaches will be shown to be indicative at best, rather than to exist as discrete entities. The same could be said about concepts such as political violence, which in reality is often indistinguishable from other structural forms of violence and ongoing, embedded violence and power imbalances in the home, the community and society.

Despite the fact that at some points in this essay my structural thinking dominates, my understanding is actually more closely aligned with a concept such as hybridity,³ to the degree that it offers a framework for a conceptual shift toward more fluid conceptualisations that defy fixed and rigid categorisation. It also challenges essentialism, inviting us to explore creative and liminal spaces (Law et al. 2014). These spaces are similar, at least to a degree, to what I understand John Paul Lederach (2010) means by the moral imagination, a place where we can simultaneously understand problems rooted in the real world but think of solutions that lie in a space that does not yet exist. To get there we need to engage a range of creative faculties.

The healing that victims of extreme violence need exists in an ambivalent space. Victims have to manage their everyday lives and try to recover, whilst recognising the irreparable loss they have to live with, continually re-negotiating it within the present, though the present will inevitably not fully meet their needs and will throw up new social challenges. And all the while they will need to simultaneously re-imagine a better future. Victims (as many other citizens), too, are invariably torn, as societies in transition are, between wanting to let go and wanting to remember simultaneously, dwelling in the past and dreaming of an unfettered future. This is a backward-looking and forward-looking space, a space that despite its challenges (and depressing realities) tends to bend towards hope, healing, reconstruction, survival, creativity and resilience.

To this end, we have to find the language and policy to – here I risk throwing in more jargon – “own” these ambivalent spaces and maximise the potential for recovery that exists within them. This is what is often asked of victims: that they live with ambivalence in a productive way. Similarly, societies emerging from conflict need to find collective social and political ways of living with the ambivalences of the past.

This type of thinking is difficult to reconcile with the approach of governments and policymakers, as it is hard to imagine how one can create policy for long-term (perhaps never-ending) processes for which there is no quick fix. Furthermore, we need to be acutely aware of the “(at times subtle) imbalances and inequality in power relations” (Mac Ginty/Sanghera 2012, 4) that exist between so-called top-down and bottom-up processes. For example, it is often in the interests of those in power to silence the voices of those whose rights have been violated in the past, both overtly (such as robbing victims of a social space to speak out by preventing an inquiry into the past or denying that violations even took place), but also

3 Although the concept of hybridity is used here, the intention is not to engage in a wider discussion about hybridity theory in terms of how it is used in different fields, e.g. post-structural cultural theories or theories of state-building – but rather to highlight it as a lens through which we might see processes for dealing with the past unfolding. In other words, “the picture that should emerge from considering hybridity is a messy, awkward one far removed from the neat silos one often finds in charts of the linkages between governments, donors and international NGOs. Instead, it is useful to conceptualise hybridity as a complex and constantly moving drama in which no actor is able to maintain a unilateral course. Actors are not necessarily consistent in their actions, and may be compliant and cooperative on one issue but offer resistance on another” (Mac Ginty/Sanghera 2012, 4). Although Mac Ginty and Sanghera’s conceptualisation has, broadly speaking, state-building at its core, I would like to add that this “messy” environment not only exists at the collective and political level but for individual victims too as they negotiate the past at an intra-psychic, spiritual, familial and community level. In other words, the “messy” lens I am applying relates to what could be termed the psychosocial (see Hamber/Gallagher 2014) as much as the political, albeit that such concepts are in themselves indistinguishable and simplifications of the real world, and by using them one becomes trapped in the very conceptual binaries and boundaries I wish to escape.

more subtly by using discourses such as the one surrounding reconciliation to force premature “closure”, as argued above.

It is challenging to think of crafting policy in such contexts, or specific policies aimed at uncertain outcomes (some victims might be helped by the establishment of a truth recovery process, some might not). One policy approach to the past might also lead to another: if we begin by investigating disappearances, this might lead to wider questions about torture. Multiple approaches, which will only ever partially address needs, will also have to run concurrently (e.g. urgent short-term reparations, truth commissions, long-term reparations, social reconstruction and poverty reduction). This will require an ongoing commitment at a political level to continuing to develop and work with the past and its individual and political demands far into the future.

This means that genuinely dealing with the past is as much about a principled governmental and institutional commitment as about practically offering a range of services and support mechanisms at the individual and social level over a protracted period of time. For illustrative purposes, perhaps the easiest way to understand this principled and practical approach is to think of the necessary ongoing commitments the German government must practically make (e.g. reparations, memorialisation) for their actions in World War II, as well as how this must be complemented continually by the public highlighting of accountability for the past. In 2013, for instance, Chancellor Angela Merkel spoke of an “everlasting responsibility for the crimes of National Socialism, for the victims of World War II and, above all, for the Holocaust” (cited in Buergin 2013).

But, of course, no matter how principled or long-term the approach, given the enormous challenges of issues such as truth, justice and reparations following mass violations, not every victim or every need can ever be fully satisfied, as noted above. The psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott (1971) uses the term “good enough” in relation to parenting, arguing that parents need not be perfect but simply good enough, and that the parent/s need to treat a child with a primary maternal (*sic*) preoccupation and create a holding environment. To this end, and given that what has been lost can never be fully replaced, psychological and social remedies for political violence – whether in the form of counselling, reparations, justice or other measures – can at best only ever be psychologically “good enough”; that is, the victim feels subjectively satisfied that sufficient actions have been taken to make amends for their suffering, and some emotional resolution concerning the past is reached.

This type of “good enough” resolution is closest to what we need to seek when developing collective mechanisms to address large-scale violation. However, given the complexity of the individual psychological healing process, the degree to which processes such as truth commissions or any macro political strategy to deal with the past can fully (or even should) converge with individual processes is always going to be ambiguous.

This all demands a reframing of what we think we are doing in societies that are emerging from politically violent pasts. Adopting a “good enough” approach is not a partial response to problems. On the contrary: like a parent who keeps on trying their best, irrespective of the challenges they face, to meet the multiple and sometimes impossible needs of their child, so too does a society emerging from a dark past need to keep striving – with positive, principled intent and language, with a healthy preoccupation and via a range of different mechanisms and actions (investigations into the past, psychosocial support, reparations, apology, memorialisation, development) – to address the numerous needs of victims and society as they arise, unfold and change. Healing and social reconstruction comes not just through what is done but also through the process and the authenticity (often evident in discourse and action) with which we try to address problems. In engaging constructively in the messy business of the past, the overriding task is therefore to create a holding or conducive environment that opens rather than closes social and political space so that different and often divergent voices and approaches to restoration can emerge.

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About the author

Professor Brandon Hamber is Director of the International Conflict Research Institute (INCORE) at Ulster University. He is also a member of the Transitional Justice Institute at the university. He was a Mellon Distinguished Visiting Scholar in the School of Human and Community Development and the African Centre for Migration and Society at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg (2010-2013). See www.brandonhamber.com and [@BrandonHamber](https://twitter.com/BrandonHamber) for more information.