

Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs): An International Human Rights Intervention and Its Connection to Social Work

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Abstract

Over the last quarter of a century, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) have grown in prevalence as a primary human rights intervention for post-conflict reconstruction. Building upon restorative justice theory, TRCs investigate past abuses, listen to the experiences of victims and perpetrators, and seek to repair the social fabric damaged by violence. TRCs constitute an unrecognised opportunity for social work to contribute to the welfare of communities recovering from violence. This paper introduces TRCs to social workers, highlights the relevance of TRCs to social work, identifies how social workers have engaged with TRCs in the past, sketches the history and core elements of TRCs, and addresses how social worker can improve TRCs. Social workers can contribute to TRCs by facilitating interviews and eliciting testimonials from victims of violence, lending their ethical commitments of self-determination and social justice, advocating at various levels of governmental and community groups, working in legal settings and with courts, practising cultural competence, promoting the work of reconciliation through dialogue and mediation, conducting social work research and emphasising the material welfare of victims by encouraging TRCs to address structural inequalities and include social development programs.

Keywords: Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, human rights, international social work, restorative justice

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Introduction

Responding to recent evidence of the USA's use of torture during the 'war on terror', critics of US foreign policy and US lawmakers have called for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate the abuses (CNN, 2009). Yet, what exactly is a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and what, if any, is its relevance to social work? As little has been written on the subject of TRCs in the social work literature, or from a social work perspective, this paper highlights the relevance of TRCs to social work. With the aim of introducing social workers to TRCs, this paper presents TRCs as a particular response to human rights violations, including political repression, and mass violence. After identifying how social workers have engaged with TRCs in the past, sketching the history and core elements of the intervention, this paper concludes with implications for how social work can contribute to this intervention in the future.

The post-conflict problem and the need for TRCs

The destructive forces of ethnic conflict, religious strife, civil war, genocide and political repression exact a massive toll on the social welfare of peoples everywhere (Amnesty International, 2009). The impact of violence extends beyond the tragic loss of life and includes economic losses, displaced peoples, the spread of disease and profound social and psychological disruptions. The international community has struggled to find acceptable, affordable and sustainable ways to help societies recover from violent conflicts. Post-conflict efforts range from maintaining security, providing humanitarian relief, promoting development and seeking justice, although much remains unknown about which interventions are most effective at rebuilding societies. However, the retributive approach of prosecuting political crimes has many limitations for both individuals and societies. Trials do not attend to the psychological needs of individuals, nor seek to promote direct reconciliation of social groups. Victims testifying to the violence of perpetrators are subject to harsh cross-examination. The adversarial design of courts counters consensus. Evidentiary rules limit the scope of the investigation (Minow, 1998).

Additionally, trials can be unfeasible, given the varying political realities of post-conflict situations and the often underdeveloped rule of law. In South Africa, war crimes trials were politically implausible as they were not a part of the negotiated transition from Apartheid, and after the independence of Timor-Leste, the government lacked legal jurisdiction over the perpetrators in Indonesia. The problems of weak judiciaries, political compromises, lack of jurisdiction and insufficient attention to victims have resulted in the promotion of alternative mechanisms of transitional

justice and social recovery following violence. For societies emerging from the depths of war, repression and terror, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) offer an alternative for damaged societies struggling to rebuild themselves.

The social work connection

Social work, a profession with a historic mission to fight oppression, injustice and to meet the needs of human suffering, has an important role to play in the resolution of conflict and recovery from violence. As world systems become increasingly integrated through economic and cultural globalisation, so the profession of social work has become increasingly interested in the problems facing the global community (Healy, 2001; Hokenstad and Midgley, 2004; Lyons, 2006) and in providing social services to people and communities affected by violent conflict (Ramon *et al.*, 2006; Baum, 2007). With greater attention paid to human rights (Ife, 2001; Reichert, 2003; Rogers, 2008), social work is poised to address the question of what interventions promote the health and welfare of communities suffering from mass violence and political repression.

This question fits within social work's ethical imperatives. Professional social workers, long interested in social justice (Clark, 2000; Reisch, 2002), have an ethical duty to address the needs of such victims. Concepts such as distributive justice have informed social workers' views of social justice. Distributive justice, as developed by Rawls (1971), has been used to support social work's commitment to vulnerable populations (Reisch, 2002). Contained within Rawls's distributive justice theory is the difference principle, which states that society's resources should be prioritised towards the least advantaged, or those with the greatest need. TRCs are concerned with meeting victims' needs for justice and fairness and, as such, fall within social work's ethical obligations by challenging the past abuses of power and pursuing human rights (Clark, 2000). However, there has been little attention paid to the role that social work can play in TRCs. With a few exceptions, discussed below, the social work literature is silent on this issue, devoid of discussion of TRCs. TRCs constitute an unrecognised opportunity for social work to make significant contributions to the well-being of people and communities recovering from violence.

There is a growing literature on TRCs, most of which has been written from a legal perspective, as lawyers are predominant in the human rights field. Scholarship on TRCs from the fields of theology, political science and social psychology has also emerged. While many of these fields overlap with social work, several factors, such as the ethical and value commitments of the social work profession, social work's skill and experience working with victims of violence, within judicial systems and for the

welfare of oppressed and vulnerable populations, constitute a unique perspective that stands to enrich these efforts. Distinctly social work concepts, such as the person-in-environment perspective and the strengths perspective, and social work values, such as self-determination and social justice, have been absent from discussions and debates on TRCs.

This paper places TRCs in a social work framework and assesses where the profession has and can contribute social work practice experience, ethics and skills to support and improve this intervention. In a few cases, social workers have contributed to the work of TRCs, through delivering clinical services, professional advocacy and policy making. Social workers have delivered direct services to the victims of violence that participate in TRCs. In South Africa, social workers provided counselling and therapeutic support services to those suffering from trauma and psychological problems resulting from the violent regime of Apartheid (Sacco and Hoffman, 2004).

In South Africa, social work professional organisations engaged in professional advocacy by submitting official statements to the TRC denouncing their previous support for Apartheid policies of discrimination and oppression. A coalition of professional social work organisations issued a formal apology detailing their failure to prevent human rights abuses and to fulfil their social service mission (Loffell, 2000; Lombard, 2000). The South African social workers were inspired by the Australian Association of Social Workers, which acknowledged and apologised for their role in the social exclusion of Aborigines (Dodds, 1997). Additionally, social work educators at the University of Witwatersrand submitted an official statement to the South African TRC describing their university's complicity with Apartheid policies (Sacco and Hoffman, 2002/03).

Social workers have also contributed to policy making. For example, in Timor-Leste, psychologists and social workers from Australia designed a mental health service delivery system to meet the needs of Timorese suffering psychological disorders. TRCs undertake extensive investigations and documentation of past abuses, which can be extended as a form of social needs assessment useful in selecting programmes and policies for rebuilding communities. Housing, food, health, education and employment could be assessed in light of the conflict and targeted by social work interventions.

These few examples provide evidence that social work can contribute to the work of TRCs. As illustrative cases in which social workers have participated in TRCs, they deserve further study in future research. However, social work has not been centrally involved in the implementation of TRCs and therefore social work ethics, skills and practice interventions have not been systematically incorporated. The following analysis is meant to familiarise social workers with the broader field of post-conflict reconstruction and transitional justice, TRCs and highlight where social workers can contribute to TRCs.

Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs): history and definition

Over the last quarter of a century, TRCs have become a primary post-conflict response to mass human rights violations and are growing in prevalence in conjunction with war crimes trials and tribunals. TRCs seek to repair the social and community fabric damaged by violence. TRCs are institutional investigations into past human rights abuses that offer both victims and perpetrators opportunities to give an account of their experiences. These testimonials are analysed and presented as a historical picture in the spirit that an official engagement with the violent past can help social recovery. TRCs contribute to the rebuilding of damaged societies through the narrative process of creating a macro-historical record (truth-seeking) and repairing the social relationships between perpetrators and victims (reconciliation).

History

Since the 1945 Nuremberg war crimes tribunals, trials have been the preferred response to human rights violations, this preference being reinforced by the perceived failure of early TRCs. The first TRCs were in Latin America and Africa during the 1980s, and were widely criticised for obfuscating truth and justice while repressive regimes remained in power (Hayner, 2001). This changed after the 1990s, when the most famous TRC in South Africa assisted the nonviolent transition from Apartheid to democracy. Following the success of South Africa, TRCs were launched in Sierra Leone (2000), Peru (2001), Timor-Leste (2002), Morocco (2004) and Liberia (2005). The most recent TRC was begun in the Solomon Islands (2009).

The Greensboro TRC in North Carolina (2004) was the first in North America. However, historical commissions have been implemented in the USA, at the federal level to examine the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, and others at the state level to examine race riots in Oklahoma and North Carolina. Canada and Australia have also employed historical investigations to address their histories of forced schooling and abuse of indigenous populations.

Future TRCs are being considered around the world. There are ongoing discussions about implementing TRCs in Northern Ireland and the Balkans. Several communities in the USA have begun organising TRC efforts, in Louisiana and New Orleans, Mississippi and eastern North Carolina (Magarrell and Gutierrez, 2006). Although usually implemented by victims or on their behalf, one group of descendants from a family of pre-eminent slave profiteers has called for a TRC to grapple with their role

in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the USA's legacy of enslavement (DeWolf, 2008). Critics of US foreign policy have called for a TRC to deal with the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq and around the use of torture of detainees. Social workers have been active in these areas, organising for social justice; they are well situated to participate in future truth and reconciliation activities.

Definition

TRCs entail the investigation of past human rights abuses whose findings are recorded in a report produced by a temporary official body (Bronkhorst, 2003). Hayner (2001) identifies five common characteristics constituting a TRC: they focus on the past, they investigate abuse, they are temporary, they have official sanction or mandate, and they are usually created during a period of political transition. Although a TRC may be generally defined this way, there is no one model for a TRC. The unique cultural, historical and social contexts of each TRC are divergent; they defy strict universal claims about their structure and function. Rather, TRCs are adaptable processes, malleable to local circumstance.

Most importantly, TRCs attempt to prevent future violence. Through truth seeking, TRCs aim to clarify the details of violence and oppression. TRCs' findings outline institutional responsibility for violations, and their final reports recommend reforms, contributing to justice and accountability. By listening to their stories, validating their harm, and sometimes providing social services and reparations, TRCs respond to the needs of victims. By promoting dialogue in divided communities, TRCs work towards reconciliation.

Social workers address similar problems to those that TRCs address: the sequelae of violence and oppression. TRCs emphasise victims' rights and historical injustice; social work labours on behalf of oppressed populations. Social work shares a commitment to working at a personal and social level, as TRCs do. TRCs operate as vehicles of social change, just as social work is invested in the reduction of inequality and rectification of injustice.

Elements of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs)

Recent literature on TRCs focuses primarily upon descriptive accounts and assessments of legal and political impact (Mendeloff, 2004). In addition to limited attention to TRCs' social impact, the nature of their variation across cases has not been sufficiently explored. This discussion synthesises the literature, highlighting how TRCs vary in multiple settings and identifying opportunities for social work. TRCs' core elements include truth, justice

and reconciliation. TRCs vary along external, contextual factors and internal, structural factors.

Truth

Establishing knowledge of the extent of human rights violations is a key function of TRCs. The public testimony of victims, perpetrators and community members affords opportunities for individual and social recovery from the trauma of violence by allowing people to receive public acknowledgment for telling their story. The documentation of past abuses creates a macro-historical record that can provide evidence for prosecutions and serve as a reminder of the violence in the social conscience (Chapman and Ball, 2001). Truth seeking also counters propaganda that perpetrators often use to create climates of intimidation. The collection and dissemination of these testimonials into a final report supports a framework for social healing and outlines specific recommendations to perpetrators, victims and institutions for dealing with the causes and consequence of the violence.

Social work has much to offer TRCs in this area. Social workers are well equipped to facilitate and contextualise these testimonials within cultural frameworks. The professional sensitivity with which social workers must practise with oppressed populations would benefit those testifying before a TRC (Laird, 2008). Interviewing clients, eliciting personal information in a respectful and constructive manner, is a central feature of social work practice across multiple spheres. Social work's person-in-environment perspective would benefit TRCs by relating individual testimonials to a larger, macro-historical picture. Truth seeking shares similarities to narrative interventions, including traumatic debriefing. The testimonial process gives the previously voiceless a voice, as oppressed and disadvantaged people relate their experiences and tell their stories before an official panel, and is an expression of social work's indispensable ethical value: self-determination.

Justice

Justice is inherent to post-conflict reconstruction and is expected to right previous wrongs, contribute to reconciliation and prevent future violence. Transitional justice refers to justice-oriented interventions occurring in post-conflict situations to address the violence and enable the society to move forward. Although TRCs are primarily restorative justice interventions, they incorporate multiple types of justice. Several areas of social work ethics and practice also overlap with TRC's emphasis upon justice, as social workers seek social justice and practice within multiple criminal justice settings.

Retributive justice seeks punishment through criminal prosecutions. The prosecution of human rights violations can strengthen the rule of law, deter perpetrators, promote individual accountability and address victims' desire for revenge. Truth-seeking investigations may uncover evidence that can be used to support prosecutions (Chapman and Ball, 2001). Exposing the realities of violence and oppression can lead to institutional and political reform and the elimination of corruption. While retributive justice has been posited as a precursor to reconciliation, Stover and Weinstein (2004) found no direct link between trials and reconciliation in population-based surveys of the Balkans and Rwanda. The survivors of mass violence linked reconciliation to interpersonal experiences, unconnected to retributive justice measures such as trials or tribunals.

TRCs build upon restorative justice, which emphasises relationships and resolving conflicts by repairing the social fabric. This perspective pays greater attention to victims than retributive justice's focus on perpetrators (Braithwaite and Strang, 2000). Victims' testimony before TRCs, without the interruption or scepticism of cross-examination, can provide a sense of public validation and may lead to cathartic experiences. When perpetrators participate, the dialogue allows for the acknowledgement of harms caused and suffered. Social workers are involved in a variety of restorative justice interventions, including family group conferencing, victim-offender mediation and community circles (Umbreit *et al.*, 2003). Van Wormer (2009) posits that restorative justice interventions are central to social work's social justice mission.

Distributive justice, concerned with equitable distribution of resources in a society, calls for structural adjustments to reduce inequalities. Inequalities in resources often contribute to violent conflict, thus distributive justice may be necessary to resolve exploitative social divisions in post-conflict settings. Though TRCs have not directly addressed the redistribution of resources, restitution and reparations have been a feature of various TRCs. Penalising perpetrators with fines or requiring them to perform community service to repair physical damages are powerful ways of contributing to reconciliation. Reparations can be a sanction stemming from reconciliation activities, as in reconciliation ceremonies in Timor-Leste, or a part of the official TRC in South Africa and Peru (Minow, 1998; Laplante and Theidon, 2007; Androff, 2008b).

Who starts a TRC?

The generative actors of TRCs vary from the local to the international. In South Africa, a peace deal between the Apartheid government and the mainly black opposition party created the TRC. The white Apartheid leaders negotiated amnesty as a condition of the transition, while the opposition wanted an official investigation into human rights violations.

The South African TRC was a solution short of legal trials born of compromise (Minow, 1998). The Commission on the Truth for El Salvador was the result of United Nation (UN) negotiations and peace accords (Zamora, 2005), as the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a product of the Lomé peace agreement (Schabas, 2004). The National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons in Argentina was the result of a presidential decree (Skaar, 2005). International organisations such as the UN can be primary actors, as in the case of Timor-Leste (Androff, 2008*b*). Alternatively, non-government organisations can play a role, as in the cases of Sri Lanka, the African National Congress in 1992 and in Greensboro, North Carolina (Magarrell and Wesley, 2008). Religious organisations such as the Catholic Church in Brazil can also be primary actors (Hayner, 2001).

Social workers are engaged at multiple levels of society and can contribute to the creation of TRCs at all of these levels. As social workers increasingly work for non-profit and non-governmental agencies, this can be a promising way to work for the creation of TRCs. Social workers engaged in political advocacy can pressure governments to employ TRCs. Through community organising, social workers can mobilise stakeholders, advocate for TRC processes and employ community practice skills to develop, implement and lead TRCs.

Centralisation

TRCs have been organised with different levels of centralisation. Some TRCs are concentrated mainly at the national level, such as the South African and Latin American cases. Other TRCs work at a decentralised local level, such as the Timor-Leste TRC did in rural villages and the Greensboro TRC that operated in one city (Androff, 2008*b*; Magarrell and Wesley, 2008). When TRCs are organised around local communities, social workers have an opportunity to ensure the self-determination of communities through the design and implementation of reconciliation activities.

Relationship with courts

In the past, TRCs have had limited connection with national and international courts. Bronkhorst (2003) argues that the findings and recommendations of TRCs will have greater weight if they are supported or enforced by judicial bodies. This depends upon the relative strength of the rule of law and judiciary systems of particular post-conflict societies. Social workers have an extensive history of working in judicial settings (Roberts and Springer, 2007), including juvenile justice, family court, probation, criminal courts (including capital cases in the USA) and restorative justice-based

settings like drug courts. Social work legal expertise can be used to facilitate the connection between courts and TRCs, while attending to the needs of victims and perpetrators.

The South African TRC referred perpetrators that were denied amnesty to the courts for prosecution. In Sierra Leone, a prior decision determined which crimes would be addressed before the courts or the TRC. Similar to Sierra Leone, Timor-Leste processed 'serious crimes' (killings and rape) through the UN and the TRC addressed lesser offences (property crimes and minor assaults). Not all TRCs have relationships with courts. The TRC in Greensboro, North Carolina, was community-based and the Greensboro city government actively resisted the TRC. Lacking any connection with government, the Greensboro TRC did not have subpoena power to compel witnesses to testify (Magarrell and Wesley, 2008).

Background of the conflict and political context

TRCs operate in the context of a variety of conflicts and political situations, which often dictate the details of their work. The nature of a conflict can vary from violence against selective targets to repression and harassment of the public, to genocide, to failed states, insurgencies, and rebel opposition groups. Social workers operate in conflict zones around the globe, and their professional assessments in specific geographical and political contexts can inform TRC efforts. The time elapsed since the cessation of violence also varies. Some TRCs begin soon after the conflict has ended, other times not until decades later. Teitel (2000) has posited that there is a 'transitional moment' briefly after the violence has ended in which a society is particularly open to addressing its past. In other cases, the passage of time may allow a fuller confrontation with a painful past.

Besides variations in the nature and duration of human rights abuses, post-conflict settings vary according to the degree of co-existence that victims must have with perpetrators. This affects how former perpetrators are held accountable and integrated into communities. After the Nazi defeat in Germany, the military and political leaders were captured, held and prosecuted: there was no need to co-exist with the Nazi party (Minow, 1998). In South Africa, there are high levels of interracial co-existence between formerly antagonistic groups (Gibson, 2004). In Timor-Leste, the majority of perpetrators were Indonesian military; however, the Timorese militias do have to co-exist with the Timorese people (Androff, 2008b).

TRCs and self-imposed limitations

TRCs limit their activities through amnesty, excluding violations from their investigation and focusing on specific timeframes. TRCs are frequently

criticised for these limitations; however, it is important to note that these reflect decisions that are often borne of compromise and practical considerations. TRCs are limited interventions by design and despite their broad aims, they should not be regarded as a silver bullet for related reconstruction efforts. Social workers can address these limitations by working with individuals and communities in tandem with TRCs, and through supplementary social recovery projects, including health and mental health programmes, economic development, and education and legal reforms.

Amnesty, the pardoning of perpetrators who co-operate with a TRC process, has been derided as a measure of impunity and recognised as a valuable bargaining tool for negotiating peaceful transitions. The South African political situation necessitated a compromise, and the TRC settled on what has been called conditional amnesty (Minow, 1998). Amnesty was granted to perpetrators on the condition that they fully disclose the truth behind politically motivated crimes. The incentive of amnesty can have the positive effect of increasing the participation of perpetrators in truth-telling, which can be helpful for family members of victims who wish to know details about how their loved one died. This is similar to social work interventions focused on restorative justice and victim–offender mediation in the USA (Umbreit *et al.*, 2003). Detailed accounts of crimes can clarify the nature and extent of the crimes committed during periods of violence, as in the case of South Africa. Granting amnesty may also encourage perpetrators to participate in reconciliation activities, where they can engage the people and communities they victimised. They may offer apologies and restitution to their victims, as in the case of Timorese militia members in Timor-Leste (Androff, 2008b) and an Apartheid death squad commander in South Africa (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003). The problem with amnesty is that it often bleeds into impunity—as in the case of Brazil, where armed forces generously granted themselves blanket amnesty before ceding rule to civilian forces, and Uruguay, where the civilian government secretly granted amnesty to military leaders (Hayner, 2001). These examples reveal how amnesty can be viewed as a corruption of justice, especially when it precludes the prosecution of criminal offenders.

Which specific violations to include?

Another area of variation between TRCs is which human rights violations they cover. For example, the South African TRC would only consider amnesty for crimes that were ‘politically motivated’, spurring debate on how to interpret that definition. The TRC in Liberia included ‘economic crimes’ in its mandate. Another way that commissions will limit the nature of actions under consideration is to distinguish between ‘serious’ and ‘less serious’ acts. This is often done in conjunction with a court that

prosecutes the serious offences, and reflects an awareness of a TRC's limitations in seeking justice.

The naming of perpetrators can be a contentious issue for TRCs. Often, there is pressure for TRCs to name individual perpetrators and other times there is pressure to suppress these names in order to prevent potential disorder and violence (Hayner, 2001). The Moroccan TRC chose not to release the names of individual perpetrators (Hazan, 2006), and the release of the Timor-Leste TRC final report was delayed for fear of repercussions from naming individual Indonesian perpetrators (Daly and Sarkin, 2007).

What timeframe to cover?

Another critical decision that affects the scope of a TRC's work is determining the reference period. The reference period is the span of time delimiting the truth-seeking investigation. This can range from a specific date, as in the case of the Greensboro TRC that focused on the single day of a race-related massacre—3 November 1979—to decades of military occupation, as in the case of Timor-Leste, where the reference period of the commission's mandate was 1974–99. Both the South African TRC and the TRC in Nepal also had reference periods spanning the decades from the 1960s to the 1990s. The Canadian historical truth commission had an exceptionally long reference period, spanning several centuries.

Culture

TRCs are extremely adaptable interventions, and incorporate local culture, religion and conflict resolution techniques into their processes. This parallels social work's emphasis upon cultural competence, especially in community-based interventions (Laird, 2008). Designing and implementing culturally sensitive and competent interventions are social work priorities. Recent attention has been given to the promotion of indigenous social work (Gray *et al.*, 2008). The South African TRC emphasised the African cultural concept of collectivity, or *ubuntu*, which was essential to the creation and popular acceptance of the TRC (Minow, 1998). The Timor-Leste TRC incorporated animist shamans into local reconciliation ceremonies (Androff, 2008b). The Greensboro TRC worked with Christian churches in the American South, and included members from such civil society groups as labour and civil rights (Magarrell and Wesley, 2008). In this way, each TRC reflects local cultural beliefs and practices in its work. Social work's priority and expertise at delivering culturally competent services, especially with indigenous populations, can inform TRC processes and ensure that TRCs are embedded within the appropriate cultural framework of the post-conflict setting.

Reconciliation

Reconciliation is difficult to define; most concepts of reconciliation include communication and dialogue between opposing groups, and mutual tolerance of formerly antagonistic groups (Minow, 1998). Increased co-operation through dialogue is related to the social contact hypothesis of intergroup relations (Gibson, 2004). Reconciliation can be incorporated into TRCs through public hearings, community mediation ceremonies, victim-offender mediation, and reparations and restitution. These strategies often depend on local systems of justice, including traditional or indigenous models of community reconciliation and restoration. Social workers, in the field of conflict resolution, have extensive experience serving offenders and victims, and mediating conflicts between disputant parties (Umbreit *et al.*, 2003). Social workers have an appreciation for the dynamics of oppression, which contributes to an understanding of minority group relations with dominant groups (Laird, 2008). Social work also has a rich history of peace-making, and being involved with peace efforts (Allen, 2008).

For the most part, TRCs promote reconciliation by bringing together perpetrators, victims and community members at large who may have been witnesses, sympathisers or supporters of certain sides. All three populations are allowed the opportunity to present their side, sharing their experiences, and engage in dialogue. This dialogue is the primary means by which TRCs engage in reconciliation. This has led to perpetrators apologising and asking for forgiveness, and, in a few cases, victims have granted forgiveness (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003; Androff, 2008a).

TRCs may also address reconciliation through reparation programmes. The South African TRC made therapeutic and social services as well as material reparations available to the victims of Apartheid. The Peruvian TRC added symbolic and community-wide reparations to social services and individual economic reparations in the most ambitious reparations recommendation from a TRC to date (Laplante and Theidon, 2007). The Timor-Leste TRC combined reparations with a focus upon reintegrating low-level offenders into their communities at village community reconciliation ceremonies (Androff, 2008b). Local reconciliation programmes can be effective where victims and perpetrators must co-exist in same small communities. This was the condition of many of the Timorese militias—bands of young impoverished male youth armed by Indonesian military—who had largely been in hiding since the cessation of violence. Across the decentralised, small and rural Timorese villages, these ceremonies allowed for a discussion of the crime, a public acknowledgement of wrong-doing and an apology from the perpetrator to the victims and community. After sanctions or reparations were made in the community reconciliation ceremonies and informal sentence delivered, the formal courts were not allowed to prosecute the same offence. This process facilitated the integration of many perpetrators into their communities.

Evaluating success

A major concern is the lack of empirical evidence of TRCs' effectiveness at achieving its purposes (Mendeloff, 2004). The main assumption is that the TRC process contributes to the individual healing of the survivors of the mass violence as well as to the overall welfare of the groups affected by the violence. This fits within the social work 'person-in-environment' perspective. Whether there is a return to violence is the most obvious sign of a TRC's effectiveness. In these terms, the South African case is a success. However, several societies have seen a return to violence and political repression after a TRC, including Chile, Sri Lanka and Uganda (Hayner, 2001). The full impact of a TRC upon the stability and peace of a society is revealed over the passage of time.

Social work scholars can bring a unique perspective to the research and evaluation of TRCs by holding the well-being of people as the central concern. Gibson (2004) has conducted the only large-scale study to date, using focus groups and survey research to evaluate the South African TRC. A survey of a national representative sample of South Africa ($N = 3,727$) measured levels of reconciliation among people and generally found high levels of reconciliation, but more so among South African whites than blacks, the main victims of Apartheid's legacy. However, this study conceptualised reconciliation from a political science perspective, with the legitimisation of the new state as the main outcome. This fails to address the core questions of health, well-being and welfare of individuals and communities struggling to recover from the violence. Research conducted by social workers that examines that impact of TRCs upon the welfare of those affected by violence from a person-in-environment perspective could fill a serious gap in the evaluation literature.

More research into the effectiveness of TRCs is necessary. Additional qualitative and ethnographic research would contribute to understanding the lived experience of participants, and of how particular TRCs operate in their unique political and cultural contexts. Public opinion surveys could measure inter-group attitudes and address questions of reconciliation. Institutional impact assessments could reveal levels of reform in police departments, health services and legal systems.

Social welfare and development

Social workers can work to ensure that TRCs address the material needs and social welfare of victims. As noted above, some TRCs have reparations components, offering material compensation to victims. However, the reparation activities of TRCs have had mixed success, due to varying levels of institutional support. In Chile and Argentina, the TRC reparations

unit provided a year's pension to family members of victims, scholarships for their children and free social services (Daly and Sarkin, 2007). These benefits came as general amnesty was granted to the military forces responsible for much of the violence and thus the compromise was widely criticised as buying off the victims by trading prosecutions for reparations. Other TRCs, as in the cases of El Salvador, Guatemala and Sierra Leone, have recommended restitution and reparation measures that governments have not enacted (Daly and Sarkin, 2007). South Africa included a reparations wing to its TRC, which suffered from a lack of resources (Minow, 1998). The failure of the Peruvian government to fund reparations has led to widespread disappointment with the TRC process by participants who expected to be immediately compensated after testifying (Laplante and Theidon, 2007).

TRCs have also been criticised for not addressing structural inequalities (Daly and Sarkin, 2007). This was especially the case in South Africa, as the TRC was unable to change the material inequalities resulting from Apartheid policies. The failure of TRCs to change the structural inequalities, poverty and material deprivation of communities is a real limit to their potential for social development. 'You can't eat reconciliation' is a common criticism of this limitation of TRCs and reflects the necessity meeting people's basic needs in post-conflict situations. There is evidence that increased economic growth contributes to reconciliation, as inter-group relations are improved through economic transactions (Stover and Weinstein, 2004). This suggests that people's recovery from violence is associated with their ability to be productive and to provide for their families. Secure employment in a multi-ethnic workplace assists in forming positive relationships and this, in turn, facilitates reconciliation.

The material and welfare needs of post-conflict communities are great. Social work has a role to play in reconciliation efforts by promoting participation, reparations and development. TRCs do not go far enough to promote the social welfare of victims and communities struggling to overcome violence. With social work's ethical commitment to social justice and concern for the material welfare of vulnerable populations, the profession is situated to connect issues of poverty and deprivation to the work of TRCs. Social development (Midgley, 1995) provides a useful framework. Development activities and economic reforms can contribute to reconciliation and improve the social welfare of people recovering from violence. With greater attention to the basic material needs of victimised communities, TRCs can play a larger role in social development (Duthie, 2008).

Conclusion and implications

The problems facing societies emerging from repression and violence are manifold. TRCs are an important complement to justice and accountability

measures such as prosecutions when they are feasible and a viable alternative when they are not. In addition to their contributions to justice, TRCs produce a coherent, complex, historical narrative about the trauma of the violence and provide victims with the opportunity to participate in the process of post-conflict reconstruction. TRCs also promote reconciliation by encouraging dialogue between victims, perpetrators and community members. Ensuring local ownership of social recovery efforts will increase their cultural competence (Stover and Weinstein, 2004).

Social workers can play a vital role in supporting and improving TRC interventions. Through this analysis, many ways in which social work can supplement TRCs have been demonstrated. Social work shares many of TRC's goals, including the nature of the problems they address and their intervention at the individual and community levels. Social workers can contribute to TRCs by facilitating interviews and eliciting testimonials from victims of violence, lending their ethical commitments to self-determination and social justice, advocating at various levels of governmental and community groups, working in legal settings and with the courts, practising cultural competence, promoting the work of reconciliation through dialogue and mediation, conducting social work research and emphasising the material welfare of victims by encouraging TRCs to address structural inequalities.

Repairing a society from the damage of violence requires multiple interventions on a broad scale that address political, social, economic and cultural processes. TRCs are not a panacea. In order for them to be successful, they are best used in tandem with other social recovery tools, as part of a larger framework of social change. Social work has much to offer the project of rebuilding healthy communities that have been ravaged by war and oppression. With an increased understanding and greater appreciation for TRCs, social workers can better assess opportunities to contribute to people's recovery from trauma and violence, protect their human rights and help to improve their social welfare.

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