Exploring the link between trauma and truth in post conflict societies: comparing post conflict Northern Ireland and post apartheid South Africa

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While much has been written in academia about trauma and truth as singular subjects in post conflict societies, there is a lack of research that investigates the relationship between these foci. This project investigated this underexplored link and uncovered themes that emerged through a rigorous literature review of existing research coupled with semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with professionals working in the fields of trauma and truth across Northern Ireland and South Africa. Two important thematic findings were revealed, which include the necessity of expanding the discussion of experiences with trauma in post conflict societies and how the ways in which truth is experienced by, or presented to, an individual may impact how one recovers from trauma. Both themes suggest important considerations that should be recognised in future discussions on the extent to which truth may dissipate trauma in societies attempting to move forward in the aftermath of violent conflict.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, post apartheid, post conflict, reconciliation, South Africa, trauma, truth recovery

Key implications for practice
- Addressing psychosocial consequences of violent conflict is a critical component in attempting to rebuild and reconcile post conflict societies
- Deciding whether to implement formal truth commissions is a complex and contested matter requiring full discussion with all actors
- More extensive research is needed examining the complex relationship between trauma and truth in post conflict societies

Introduction
Deeply divided societies around the world are emerging from periods of war and political violence to face a multitude of challenges when transitioning from protracted armed conflicts to post conflict states. In order for social reconstruction to transpire after years and, in some cases, decades of violent conflict steps must be taken to foster cross communal reconciliation, which involves individuals regaining empathy for one another (Halpern & Weinstein, 2004). Ferguson, Burgess, and Hollywood (2010) establish two critical components necessary for the transition to a peaceful society when they assert:

To bring about lasting peace in any post-conflict environment requires reconciliation (Ramsbottom, Woodhouse, & Miall in Ferguson et al., 2010), and a necessary step on this road to reconciliation is the need to recover from trauma and deal with the legacy of the past (Lederach in Ferguson et al., 2010, p. 882)
While much has been written in academia about truth recovery and trauma as singular subjects in societies recovering from the aftermath of violent conflict, there is a lack of research that investigates the complex relationship between these two variables. This study therefore sought to investigate whether uncovering the truth of events from the violent past increases or decreases trauma for victims and survivors in post-conflict regions. It aimed to look beyond the parochial vision of a single post-conflict context and broadened the scope and applicability of this research and its findings through a comparative analysis conducted between post-conflict Northern Ireland and post-apartheid South Africa. These two regions were chosen due to their inverted experiences and histories with truth commissions. Northern Ireland, for example, has to date not commissioned a formal truth recovery body after the signing of the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (GFA), which formally marked an end to the violent years known as the ‘Troubles’ that lasted from 1968 until 1998. Meanwhile, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is a global model for truth recovery processes in deeply divided societies emerging from prolonged violent conflicts around the world.

This article is comprised of selected excerpts from the author’s Master of Philosophy dissertation submitted to Trinity College Dublin in Dublin, Ireland, on 22 August 2016 (Hass, unpublished). The full dissertation comprises a more detailed, in-depth analysis of the findings and themes presented within this publication. The purpose of this dissertation was to research the aforementioned topic, which is presently underexplored, and to provide thought provoking ideas to consider moving forward when looking at the connection between truth and trauma in post-conflict societies. Therefore, there are some noted conclusions based on the author’s independent research and analysis throughout that ought to be further researched for greater validity moving forward.

**Methodology**

First, a thorough investigation of published literature and reports was conducted to analyse existing information about trauma and truth in post-conflict societies as singular subjects. This initial research revealed a gap in existing academia regarding the relationship between these foci. Findings were next coupled with semi-structured qualitative interviews with a total of seven professionals working in the fields of trauma and truth in Northern Ireland and South Africa in order to explore what, if any, relationship might exist between these two variables (see Annex I for details). The probability that these professionals could have also been personally impacted by past events in the post-conflict societies where interviews took place was acknowledged prior to engaging in dialogue with them. It is with great hope that the two key themes, which materialised as a result of this project, can provide a deeper insight into the complex relationship between trauma and truth when examining peace-building processes for societies emerging from violent pasts. It is also recognised, however, that the research provided here only begins to scratch the surface of a very complicated and multifaceted question around which this study was based and findings clearly suggest a need for further research.

**Understanding and acknowledging nuance: multiple manifestations of trauma**

One profound theme that proliferated across the contexts of both Northern Ireland and South Africa rests upon the notion that victims and survivors of protracted armed conflicts have frequently experienced more than just one, singular traumatic event. Oftentimes, these individuals continue living in conditions that remain heavily afflicted by violence and potentially harmful
incidents, despite a society’s shift to a ‘post conflict’ state. Thus, there are several factors that should be considered when looking at the healing process in these environments. There are three subcategories within this theme: the idea that multiple layers of trauma often exist due to numerous interactions with traumatic events; the prevalence of complex posttraumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD) in post conflict societies; and the concept of continuous traumatic stress (CTS) in regions heavily scarred by past acts of violence, systemic injustice and internal war.

Multiple layers of trauma/multiple past traumas
While attempting to determine how truth may affect trauma with victims and survivors of violence and war, it quickly became clear that the majority of individuals who suffer from the effects of exposure to traumatic events in post conflict societies have not undergone just one traumatic experience, but multiple events. This was a theme that was echoed within the contexts of both Northern Ireland and South Africa. A study by the Northern Ireland Study of Health and Stress (NISHS), for example, revealed that the mean number of occurrences of traumatic events for individuals in Northern Ireland was 4.1 (Ferry, Bunting, Murphy, O’Neill, Stein, & Koenen, 2013), which may include experiences with riots, knee cappings, shootings, murders, bombs and a constant threat of raids (NI IP2, see Appendix I for explanations of abbreviations used). This theme was also present in the South African context where high levels of violence and crime remain a chronic problem, even in the post apartheid era. Findings extracted from a study conducted by the South African Stress and Health Study (SASH) reported that the majority (53.6%) of South Africans who were surveyed had experienced multiple traumatic events in their lifetime (Williams, Williams, Stein, Seedat, Jackson, & Moomal, 2007).

Hence, while learning the truth pertaining to a past event could potentially begin a healing process for individuals working through a trauma associated with that particular incident, this healing process does not necessarily apply to the burdens of any other traumatic experiences or associated traumas that may also be impacting an individual. This became even more evident through a response elicited from NI IP1, when asked how the healing process might differ for victims and survivors who are still seeking the truth from past events versus those who have already learned the truth. NI IP1 responded:

‘I think it differs quite a bit... because those that are seeking the truth would imply that... the truth hasn’t been forthcoming to them and that it’s been hidden almost in some sense, and sometimes it has, of course. ... For those that already know the truth, I suppose they’re at an advantage where they’re able to, well, consider what the next step is, or get on with their lives, because it’s out there and... whilst there might be things that I don’t know about [an event], I know when it happened, I know who carried it out, I know who died and the people [who] were caught... I still have that sense of, you know, it has allowed me to get on with my life... If I didn’t know all of the answers to all of those questions I would find it very, very difficult to get on with my life.’

This particular question can also be applied to a single individual who has had multiple traumatic experiences. With the answer provided by NI IP1 above in mind, the healing process becomes very complicated and complex when multiple traumas from various traumatic experiences are involved, especially when an individual may have difficulty discerning between these various traumatic events over time. SA IP3 addressed this by stating:

‘... there are often layers to the pain, to the trauma and to the woundedness. You know, and the nature of trauma is such that it doesn’t
separate out, I was traumatised by this act of political violence, I was traumatised in a traffic accident, I was traumatised when I was held up at gunpoint in my home. Trauma doesn’t separate those out. It reiterates the impact and deepens the impact.

Thus, one should not assume that once truth has been provided to a victim or survivor who is suffering from a mental health illness related to violent events from the past, that this individual will inevitably find the experience to be cathartic and/or wholly healing.

**Complex posttraumatic stress disorder**

A second subcategory that materialised within this theme pertains to the concept of C-PTSD, which refers to prolonged exposure to potentially traumatic events, particularly during an individual’s developmental years. NI IP2 explained that when this happens, these traumas are almost engrained into your personality. SA IP2 commented on the effect that decades of traumatic and systematic racial oppression have had on millions of black South Africans, emphasising: ‘it’s a really complex and deep seated issue... it’s not just one incident that happened, it’s entire persons who’ve been shaped by decades of their parents and their families, and everybody identifying as lesser... people grew up with these deep seated beliefs, now try and undo that, that’s hard, you know?’

SA IP1 further discussed the systemic effects of racial oppression by stating: ‘the way black people were made to feel inferior, a deep sense of the inferiority complex persists’, further noting: ‘it still persists in the society today, it plays out in politics, the work place, in society, schools. But the racism, the white, the privileging of a certain, the white group essentially, over the other colours, created also a sense of superiority, the superiority complex, which is in fact a damaging mental state of mind. And that also persists and that’s very much alive in South Africa, and it’s deep.’

SA IP1 and SA IP2 demonstrate the difficulty that exists in changing these deep seated beliefs, which psychoanalysts assert have been engrained into people’s internal worlds due to these early traumatic experiences in life. When asked about the effect of truth on individuals who suffer from C-PTSD, NI IP2 commented:

‘...I think that gaining the truth and bringing them justice has a positive impact on someone’s mental health, but that does not necessarily mean that their PTSD symptoms will abate... those types of PTSD symptoms won’t just go away because you’ve got the truth. You’re still going to need therapy. Because basically what’s happened is your body is holding a memory, and it’s fragmented, and it’s popping up, that’s what PTSD is... having said that, I think that someone is much more able to engage in therapy about their PTSD if they’re able to have closure on what happened.’

As exemplified by the interview participants (IPs) above, bringing truth to individuals with C-PTSD may help them to begin a healing process to work through these past traumatic experiences that have contributed to the onset of C-PTSD and the intrusive, fragmented memories that continue to burden a person’s psyche years later. However, it is important to emphasise once again that the deeply embedded long-term traumatic effects, which have been engrained into their minds, are more difficult to change or dissipate through a singular cathartic experience.

**Continuous traumatic stress**

A final subcategory that presented itself within this theme is the prevalence of CTS in post conflict societies. CTS is a relatively new concept within mental health studies that accounts for situations where traumatic and
psychologically stressful experiences are ongoing and unpredictable in settings that are continuously entrenched by chronic violence, despite a society’s formal transition to a post conflict state. This concept asserts that persons in such situations likely suffer from constant conditions of potential trauma exposure, rather than solely suffering from past traumas. SA IP4 explained how South Africans aren’t only dealing with the idea of PTSD, but that they’re also dealing with CTS *as a societal condition*. SA IP4 further alluded:

‘we have people who have historical experiences of trauma... but then there are layers of ongoing community violence, domestic violence, plus poverty disempowerment, inequality. These are all layers that people are dealing with all the time, so we can’t talk about healing from one trauma, because it’s all ongoing, and people have to navigate living in an ongoing threatening situation in their lives all the time.’

This was also echoed in the context of Northern Ireland where, for example, paramilitaries still exhibit a significant presence and amount of control across many neighbourhoods and parts of the region. NI IP1 commented:

‘one of the things that definitely impacts victims and their ability to heal is the fact that they are sometimes not living in a post conflict society. . . . we still have paramilitary activity on the streets, we still have a lot of recruitment, a lot of targeting, a lot of control being exercised in communities. And I think if you’re living in a community like that and you’ve been through the Troubles, . . . and you’re still living in a war zone... well then, I think it’s much more difficult to heal.’

When asked about the healing process for individuals in post conflict contexts who experience CTS, SA IP4 responded:

‘we need to think a little bit differently about... what does healing mean in that context and how can we expect individuals to heal.

They’re having to navigate this threat and danger all the time, and that’s a reality, it not just an illness that they have because they’ve experienced trauma.’

The psychoanalytic approach to healing traumatic wounds asserts that early childhood experiences with others go on to influence the nature of how severe psychic wounding may be received in future encounters with traumatic experiences. Garland (2002, p.4) states that this partially happens by ‘determining through those same internal structures the extent and nature of the recovery that is possible’. Therefore, if, for example in the South African context, children of colour were raised to believe that they were inferior to their white counterparts, healing from traumatic experiences becomes much more complicated and complex in their adult lives. This is especially true if they continue living in contexts marked by CTS, where these mind sets are still deeply engrained in society due to ongoing systemic injustices that prevail years after apartheid has ended. This could also be exemplified in the case of Northern Ireland, where Catholics and Protestants still largely live in segregated areas, go to segregated schools and oftentimes have no voluntary contact with the other side of the community throughout their entire lives. In situations such as these, a person may determine through their own internal structures that recovery from traumatic events is not possible if these past events were influenced by the systemic and unjust structures that are still in place today. This specific theory may also assist with explaining why it often takes many people who suffer from the long-term effects of trauma so long to acknowledge the depth of their suffering and seek help from mental health practitioners.

While certain physiological and psychological interventions may be utilised to address the intrusions of past events that affect the human psyche as a result of PTSD, alternative interventions tailored to addressing the
conditions of current and future trauma exposure must also be employed to assist persons who are additionally affected by CTS (Eagle & Kaminer, 2013). SA IP4 noted that these interventions need to entail specific attention given to social justice issues. Without addressing and changing these continuously dangerous and threatening circumstances in one’s living environment, which are largely the result of years of oppression and systemic injustices, CTS will continue to burden and affect millions of people living in post conflict regions across the world.

Facing the truth and its impact on trauma

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

Direct versus indirect experiences with truth and consequent impact on trauma

After speaking with many professionals who work directly in the fields of trauma and truth in Northern Ireland and South Africa, data revealed that how an individual experiences truth can have a significant impact on the severity of the trauma that ensues. Consequently, this may have a tremendous effect on the subsequent healing process for that person. Regarding the mode of presentation of truth, SA IP4 commented, ‘I would generally see that people who have direct experience [with traumatic events] are worse affected, in terms of distress and symptoms that they might have and their functioning would probably be worse’. NI IP2 further proclaimed:

‘I think there’s a big difference between... a victim who has witnessed the trauma versus someone who has had a trauma [where] they weren’t actually there... our ideas of justice and... the impact that that will have on our trauma is very different... what I’ve found is that those who have been there to actually witness the trauma find that process of justice, of truth, very, very difficult. Because it retraumatises them, they find it really difficult. Whereas, families where they maybe haven’t actually physically been there are eager to, are much more eager to find out these types of things.’

NI IP2’s statement uncovers yet another complex issue around the impact of trauma and trauma healing for victims and survivors of violent experiences and how this may slightly differ for those who have been directly exposed to traumatic events versus others who have learned the truth after the events transpired. Perceptions of, and the desire for, justice are integral components of the healing process for persons who are working through trauma in areas heavily wounded by conflict. How an individual experiences truth may affect how that person may view or perceive justice. It is likely to be much more difficult for persons who have directly experienced traumatic events to receive details from truth recovery mechanisms due to personal connections to the event, which leads to a higher likelihood of retraumatisation after receiving truth in later years. Additionally, it is possible that these individuals may also desire a different form of justice than persons who have not had direct involvement with traumatic events. Further research ought to be conducted to determine how much more likely, if at all, a direct witness may be to seek retributive justice over restorative processes due to the individual’s first-hand experience with a traumatic event.
Modes of truth recovery and corresponding impact on trauma healing

Additionally, the mode of truth recovery that is used to investigate and provide truth to victims and survivors may also have a significant impact on trauma and the healing process for individuals. Grassroots mechanisms have been the predominant form of truth recovery in Northern Ireland due to the fact that there has still been no plan to implement a formal truth commission nearly two decades after the formal end to the violent years of the Troubles. Meanwhile, the TRC in South Africa is known throughout the world for the public nature of its hearings, which attempted to bring truth into the public arena in order to create a societal climate where reconciliation would be possible after years of violence, hatred and enforced racial separation. The processes that have taken place in each of these settings have looked significantly different from one another, and it is suggested that grassroots truth recovery mechanisms and formal truth commissions offer victims and survivors different aspects for trauma healing.

Grassroots and local approaches to truth recovery

There are various grassroots truth recovery initiatives that have taken place in Northern Ireland through local organisations that provide opportunities for the truth from violent acts of the past to surface in a safe space. Oftentimes, this allows the truth to emerge about traumatic events that has long been sought by persons who were traumatically affected by former incidents. In these spaces, this occurs without the risks of legal repercussions for perpetrators that frequently prevent such voluntary and detailed dialogue from transpiring in legal proceedings and courtrooms. NI IP1 asserted: 'certainly, the informal process can quite often reveal more, if that's what it's about, getting to the bottom of something, getting to the truth of something'.

Here, victims and survivors frequently have more opportunities to speak and ask questions that have haunted them for years, and perpetrators of past events are likely to be more lucid and forthcoming with their answers. While this process will inevitably be difficult for participants from all backgrounds, it fosters an opportunity for empathy to develop between former adversaries and can be a therapeutic experience for those who share arduous information from the past in a safe and more private environment. At the same time, this can also become burdensome for the persons receiving the answers, as more answers can consequently lead to more questions, and there may not be opportunities to ask these later. In more intimate situations such as these, victims and survivors are also at risk for learning that while perpetrators are willing to share detailed information about events that transpired, they may not have remorse for their actions, claiming that they were justified. This may cause individuals on the receiving end of this information to be thrown back into a state of anger, confusion and hostility, negatively impacting their trauma and further complicating their healing process.

Formal truth commissions

While formal truth commissions don't usually offer the same deeply personal and private experience that grassroots and more culturally attuned truth recovery mechanisms do, they do have the capacity to offer public acknowledgement, which is yet another important factor known to assist with trauma healing. SA IP3 explains how the public nature of the South African TRC hearings, which were broadcast live on radio and television across the region, 'were to some extent a useful catharsis and shattering of the illusions of “we did not know” for the minority of white South Africans'.

While this public recognition can positively contribute to the healing process for victims and survivors, the amnesty provisions of the TRC were more controversial. Amnesty provisions implemented by the TRC allowed perpetrators to apply for amnesty if they agreed to publicly acknowledge their
wrongdoings and prove that they had only committed such acts because they were following orders and would otherwise not have done so (Simonton, 2015). These amnesties meant that perpetrators were more willing to provide truth about past atrocities to persons whose lives had been deeply affected by not knowing these details. However, the granting of amnesties also meant that perpetrators were not legally held accountable for actions that they had admitted to, and this also impacted the healing process for many individuals who were seeking justice in order to help dissipate their trauma. SA IP4, who has experience with research around victims’ and survivors’ experiences with the TRC, explained:

‘what they spoke about a lot... was needing to see I guess what you would call social justice. . . . They felt that they wanted to see people held accountable for what they’d done and they were not seeing that. And often the people who had been the perpetrators of the, for example family members that had been murdered and were still in the community, and just walking around living their lives, and they were seeing this every day and it was really painful. . . . That truth part was all very nice but that wasn’t actually what they so much were needing. You know the justice part, and the social justice, dealing with the inequality.’

It is clear, therefore, that formal truth recovery processes have great potential to help contribute to the healing process for individuals who suffer from conflict related trauma. However, the impact that formal truth commissions may have on one’s healing process strongly depends on a multitude of factors related to how a traumatic event was originally experienced by victims and survivors and what kind of justice may be sought, keeping in mind that this may change throughout one’s journey in the process of healing.

Trust in truth recovery As demonstrated, there are many differences that can be discussed between formal and grassroots truth recovery mechanisms. However, IPs across both settings also alluded that, regardless of the type of mechanism that is employed, it is critically important to establish trust in the process, for without this, victims and survivors are at a high risk for feeling disappointed or unsatisfied with the results. SA IP2 proclaimed: ‘I think that trust is really big. If you don’t have any level of trust in one another, . . . it makes any conversation about the future, and talking about dealing with the past very, very difficult’. NI IP2 echoed this point about trust, commenting: ‘I think that it’s not just about how the information is delivered. I think it is about the atmosphere, I think it’s about the sense of trust that they felt with the organisation beforehand.’

This issue with trust, therefore, is perhaps why a formal truth commission in Northern Ireland has been widely contested. Because of the history of collusion on behalf of the British government during the Troubles, many members in the community have no trust in a formal truth commission sponsored and led by the state. In situations such as this, victims and survivors are likely to be mistrustful of the government prior to receiving ‘truth’ from an investigation led by a body with a history of collusion and participation in the very acts that still impact these individuals. Meanwhile, in the very different context of the South African conflict, the government led TRC was perceived to be trustworthy by South Africans across diverse backgrounds, and was largely successful in its attempt to bring the truth from past events to public knowledge. SA IP3 summed up the importance of trust by stating: ‘I think the key thing for me is whether communication of this truth is done respectfully and honourably. . . . So, for me, the public-private is less important than the how’. This highlights the importance of recognising that there is no one-size-fits-all model of truth recovery for societies emerging from a violent past and that unique factors from each setting must be accounted for prior to determining the best truth recovery model for a ‘post conflict’ state to proceed.
Final conclusions

Ultimately, working through traumatic experiences in settings recovering from high levels of violent conflict is a very subjective process that cannot be generalised nor predicted. There is therefore no universal prescription for how to dissipate trauma in transitioning and post conflict societies. Rather, it is critically important to recognise that healing from trauma is a very individual process, and what works for one person or society may not address nor suit the needs for another. SA IPI addressed the complexities involved with trauma healing, proclaiming:

‘It’s . . . a very complicated question of whether trauma is ultimately dissipated. It’s actually a huge assumption that trauma can be dissipated. I don’t think we have scientific proof beyond reasonable doubt that this is the case, so the premise itself can be questioned, but necessary because then that means we have to study it to actually figure out precisely what the impact is.’

This is not to say, however, that the complex relationship between trauma and truth should not be further researched or explored due to the lack of clear answers. Rather, the ambiguity and complexity of this subject area demonstrate the need to investigate several considerations: what has been done, what has worked and what could be done differently to provide victims and survivors with the resources potentially needed for their personal healing processes. Since trauma will inevitably continue to affect persons in regions scarred by conflict, societal inaction with regards to truth recovery is unacceptable. Truth must be available for those whom believe their personalised recovery will benefit from such transparency.

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References


1 The terms victims and survivors were both used throughout this manuscript in order to be sensitive as to how persons affected by violent conflict wish to identify themselves.

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Annex 1 Coded interview details

**Northern Ireland (NI IP #: Northern Ireland Interview Participant #)**

Code: NI IP1: Organisation: WA VE Trauma Centre, Date of Interview: 08 June 2016, Location of Interview: Belfast, Northern Ireland

Code: NI IP2: Organisation: Relatives for Justice (RFJ), Date of Interview: 09 June 2016, Location of Interview: Antrim, Northern Ireland

Code: NI IP3: Organisation: Initiative for Conflict-Related Trauma, Date of Interview: 14 June 2016, Location of Interview: Phone interview, Belfast and Fermanagh, Northern Ireland

**South Africa (SA IP #: South Africa Interview Participant #)**

Code: SA IP1: Organisation: Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR), Date of Interview: 24 June 2016, Location of Interview: Cape Town, South Africa

Code: SA IP2: Organisation: Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR), Date of Interview: 24 June 2016, Location of Interview: Cape Town, South Africa

Code: SA IP3: Organisation: Post-Doctoral Fellow, University of South Africa, Date of Interview: 28 June 2016, Location of Interview: Cape Town, South Africa

Code: SA IP4: Organisation: Associate Professor, University of Cape Town Psychology Department, Date of Interview: 30 June 2016, Location of Interview: Cape Town, South Africa