

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

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

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

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.¹ 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 1 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 1 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 (55.6%) 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 IPI, 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 IPI 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 IPI 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

