

Overcoming Intractability: Transitional Justice and Intercommunal Reconciliation in South Africa and Northern Ireland

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The last two decades have witnessed a sudden increase in the number of transitional justice institutions – those legal, quasi-legal, or community based institutions set up to provide accountability for past conflict – predicated on the assumption that such mechanisms in fact help societies to come to terms with their violent pasts and are therefore crucial to processes of post-conflict peacebuilding and reconciliation among former enemies (Kritz 1995, Teitel 2002). However, recent studies have suggested that the exclusive focus on legal punishment traditionally employed in trials or international tribunals often fails to address the deeper social and cognitive divides that provoke and perpetuate intercommunal violence (Minow 1998, Mani 2002, Stover and Weinstein 2004). Accordingly, scholarship in both transitional justice and peace and conflict studies has highlighted the importance of more ‘restorative’ institutions which forgo retribution in favour of rebuilding relationships, restoring a sense of common humanity, and promoting a renewal of dialogue, trust, and communication across cultural divides (Lederach 1997, Kiss 2000, Amstutz 2005). Unfortunately, our understanding as to *how* these restorative institutions might be causally linked to increased reconciliation remains unspecified and under-theorized in existing scholarship, as does our knowledge of which ‘best practices’ in current restorative approaches might be adapted to guide policy in future transitional societies – seminal gaps which my dissertation seeks to address.

To investigate these questions, my research undertakes a comparative examination of the post-conflict peacebuilding processes in South Africa and Northern Ireland, two deeply divided societies in which predominantly restorative approaches have been used to address past legacies of protracted and seemingly intractable conflict, encourage intercommunal reconciliation, and prevent future returns to violence. The recent South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was distinct from previous truth commission processes as it provided a conditional amnesty provision to the perpetrators of apartheid-era violence in exchange for truthful testimony of their complicity in past events (Chapman and Ball 2001, Hayner 1994, 2002). Several scholars have suggested that by providing a public forum bringing together both victims and perpetrators to recount their personal experiences of past violence, the South African model uniquely seems, to some degree, to be associated with increased societal reconciliation and decreased levels

of ethnically-motivated conflict (Minow 1998, Boraine 2000, Gibson 2004). Conversely, while no comparable national-level process has been undertaken to date in Northern Ireland, the widespread community-based and grassroots initiatives undertaken by victims' groups, religious leaders, and NGOs designed to renew intercommunity contact and dialogue have been similarly linked to reconciliation and decreased support for sectarian violence (Hughes and Knox 1997, Hewstone et al 2005, Hughes et al 2007). Through a combination of archival research, empirical field work, and qualitative interviews, my dissertation project investigates the causal processes by which these two very different institutional approaches have been able to contribute to intercommunal reconciliation, and explores what successful components of these frameworks might be adapted to aid peacebuilding projects in similar transitional societies.

As a theoretical basis for my research, I've consulted works on 'social capital' that highlight the importance of psychosocial networks of trust and communication in forming the 'bridging' connections between groups that allow for multicomunal societies to function peacefully (Coleman 1990, Fukuyama 1995, Putnam 2000). Colletta and Cullen (2000), for example, examine the intractable nature of violence in divided societies, suggesting that such violence is both precipitated by, and itself precipitates, a dearth of social capital between communal groups. Further, the protracted duration of these conflicts can generate antagonistic belief systems that provide continued momentum for communal conflict by means of myth, propaganda, and discriminatory history (Azar 1991). Ultimately, these reinforced divisions enable a 'delegitimization' of the Other – processes by which members of opposing groups are labelled as sub-human, placed outside of the shared 'moral order' of society, and rendered acceptable targets for violence (Duster 1971, Northrup 1989, Staub 1989). My dissertation project, supervised by Dr. Richard Price, extends this stream of theoretical research by investigating the potential for restorative institutions of transitional justice – such as those employed in South Africa and Northern Ireland – to act as sites of critical 'social learning' where groups can challenge and overcome antagonistic Self/Other divisions that could otherwise incite future returns to violence. More specifically, I examine how the specific design of these institutions can impel a renewal of bridging relationships between former enemies, allowing for positive intercommunal contact, intergroup communication, dialogue, trust, and collective identification – all of which have been recognized as crucial conditions for intercommunal reconciliation and for building the foundation of a lasting, sustainable peace (Hewstone and Brown 1986, Bar-Tal, 2000, Ashmore et al 2001, Bar-Simian-Tov 2004).

Having defended my dissertation proposal and advanced to candidacy this winter, the final stage of my research requires me to supplement existing work at the theoretical level with fieldwork next year in both South Africa and Northern Ireland. For this purpose, building upon an existing base of contacts already established through the University of Ulster at the International Conflict Research project (INCORE), the Transitional Justice Institute, and the School of History and International Affairs, I plan to travel to Northern Ireland for a period of seven weeks beginning in November of 2007 to conduct a series of individual interviews and engage in archival research. My interviews will be designed to provide a qualitative measure of the effectiveness of community-level reconciliation initiatives for renewing meaningful levels of intercommunal trust, communication, and empathy among Catholic and Protestant participants living in divided 'border' communities in Derry and Belfast. Interviewees will be posed a series of questions designed to assess their perceptions regarding relative levels of trust/distrust, social connection/alienation, and empathy/hostility between communal groups both before and after participation in local community reconciliation projects. Further, interviewees will be asked to evaluate the relative impact, or lack thereof, of these grassroots initiatives in altering antagonistic perceptions and levels of social interaction between communal groups. If my findings reveal heightened levels of social connectedness, a decrease in prejudice

among communal groups, and a corresponding decline in support for a return to sectarian conflict, my hypothesis regarding the effectiveness of Northern Ireland's community reconciliation initiatives will be validated. Ultimately, taken in conjunction with my field work in South Africa (scheduled for January-February 2008), the goal of this research will be to draw lessons which might then be used to inform the ongoing peacebuilding processes in these countries: could reconciliation in Northern Ireland be aided by a more formal and nationalized institution like the South African TRC? Conversely, what might reconciliatory efforts in South Africa learn from the community-level approaches undertaken in Northern Ireland?

Currently, I'm a third year doctoral candidate in Political Science at the University of British Columbia, and under the sponsorship of Dr. Cecelia Lynch, I also hold a two-year appointment (9/1/06 through 8/31/08) as a Visiting Research Fellow with UCI's Center for Global Peace and Conflict Studies. My dissertation project's focus on reconciliation, conflict transformation, and sustainable peace in divided societies seems particularly suited to the ongoing mission of the Center for Citizen Peacebuilding. Further, my cross-disciplinary approach to post-conflict peacebuilding – drawing on literature from political science, sociology, and social psychology – also seems to closely align with the Center's multidisciplinary aims. While I will be able to secure a small amount of additional funding through my home university and through an ongoing award from the Canadian government, unfortunately these resources currently fall short of covering the basic expenses of my proposed field work in Northern Ireland. The Kugelman Research Fellowship offered by the Center for Citizen Peacebuilding would be a great asset in helping to make this important final stage of my research possible.

Appendix II: Select Bibliography

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