



Northern Ireland
Assembly

25 YEARS

A New Beginning

The Role of Information Recovery and Accountability in Advancing Reconciliation

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Reconciliation and the Good Friday Agreement

- Belfast/Good Friday Agreement 1998 expressly recognised the need to acknowledge and address the harms experienced by victims; stating it ‘was a necessary element of reconciliation’.
- The Agreement itself only sparsely addressed how that should be done
- Since then, numerous official and civil society initiatives have explored how to advance reconciliation within Northern Ireland
- But commentary frequently points to signs of reconciliation not stalling
- New legislative proposals link reconciliation and information recovery
- This presentation draws on transitional justice theory and practice to explore how the concept of reconciliation can be understood and it can be related to information recovery and accountability.

Theoretical Perspectives on Reconciliation

- Perspectives on reconciliation in transitional justice come from theology, political science, sociology, psychology and anthropology
- Seen as both backward and forward looking (linked to ‘never again’)
- Understood to be about improving relationships
 - Between victims and perpetrators
 - Between antagonistic communities
 - Between people and the state
 - Between states
- Ambiguity and contestation over
 - The forms of future relationships
 - The types of actions that are needed to achieve them

Transitional Justice and Reconciliation

- Transitional justice interventions are often intended to promote reconciliation, but no mechanism can achieve reconciliation itself
- Thinner forms of reconciliation are an absence of violence – but that is rarely enough to promote healing and stable governance
- Thicker forms seek to rebuild relationships and expose and transform structural causes of violence
- Reconciliation is a long-term *process*
- Can progress or regress in response to interventions and shifting political contexts

Reconciliation, Truth and Narrative

- Absent or weak reconciliation is often manifest in the existence of narrow, polarised and exclusionary narratives
 - Lack of agreed understanding of the causes of the violence
 - Lack of recognition of the suffering of the other
 - Lack of recognition of the responsibility within communities
- Measures to ensure partial or full denial impede reconciliation
- Never possible to create a fully inclusive and comprehensive narrative of the past
- However, reconciliation also requires more than a small set of *individualised* testimonies
- Aim for
 - Some overlapping dissensus in narrative
 - Ability to listen to and respect the narrative of the other group
 - Refraining from trying to ensure that one narrative dominates over others

Reconciliation as an Information Recovery Goal

- Should information recovery aim at reconciliation?
- If information recovery aims at reconciliation, what conceptualisation and operationalisation of the term underpins the process?
- Is information recovery intended to reconcile
 - Individuals?
 - Communities?
 - People to the state?
- How are these objectives incorporated into process design?
- Should the information generate individual testimonies, themes and patterns, and/or or collective narratives?
- Does the conceptualisation of reconciliation create expectations on victims and perpetrators?

How could an information recovery process contribute to reconciliation?

- What safeguards should be in place for participants?
 - Preventing re-traumatisation
 - Ensuring veracity of information
- Would information recovered be made public?
- How would individualised pieces of information be woven into collective narratives?
- How would contested collective narratives be handled?
- How would communities and the state respond to these narratives? (common moral norms, structural and institutional changes, moral leadership)

Reconciliation and Accountability

- Criminal accountability focuses on individualised justice (for serious violence)
- Criminal justice can counter denial in individual cases
- However, trials are rarely equipped to develop collective narratives necessary for reconciliation
- Violent pasts often entail physical violence and structural harms
- Viewing justice beyond criminal law can allow space to address structural injustices
- Measures to deliver broader conceptions of justice often flow from the findings of truth recovery projects

Application to Northern Ireland Legacy Proposals

- Reconciliation often seen as good relations or anti-sectarianism
- Emphasis on *individualised* information recovery
- Acknowledgments of responsibility would be individual and may not be public (cf 'statements of acknowledgement' in SHA)
- Weakening the links from information recovery and justice to 'themes and patterns'
- Recommendations on reconciliation linked to oral history and memorialisation only
- Limited space for building *overlapping* understandings of the causes of the violence, its impact on victims, and the ways it continues to shape NI society