Measuring the impacts of truth and reconciliation commissions: Placing the global ‘success’ of TRCs in local perspective

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Abstract
Truth and reconciliation commissions (TRCs) have emerged as an international norm and are assumed to be an essential element of national reconciliation, democratization, and post-conflict development. Despite the increase in the number of TRCs being initiated around the globe and the international consensus regarding their positive effects, there is little understanding of the long-term effects and consequences of TRCs. Specifically, currently there are no established methods or mechanisms for measuring the impacts of TRCs; furthermore, the few examples of efforts to measure these impacts have serious limitations. This article explores both the rise in TRCs as an international norm and the contradictions and inadequacies in existing efforts to measure the impacts and successes of commissions. Through this examination, we aim to demonstrate the need for more critical, interactive, and inclusive mechanisms of assessment for understanding the effects of TRCs. The objective is neither to promote nor to criticize a specific TRC or TRCs in general; however, this article emphasizes the need to think rigorously about how we assess the effects of TRCs and offers insights into the value of more comprehensive mechanisms for assessing the impacts and local perceptions of commissions.

Keywords
International norms, methodology, transitional justice, truth and reconciliation

Introduction
Over the last decade, many truth and reconciliation commissions (TRCs) have been initiated in countries emerging out of conflicts or political turmoil across the globe. Truth
commissions are truth-seeking bodies set up to investigate past records of human rights violations. The underlying assumption is that the investigative process itself and the resulting historical narrative will lead to justice and reconciliation (Hayner, 2002). In general, in both policy and academic literature, TRCs are associated with several goals and expected outcomes, including healing, justice and peace-building. Among its goals, a truth commission purports to offer victims, witnesses, and perpetrators a setting to tell their stories, thereby creating a historical, and often public, record of past human rights violations (Von Zyl, 2000). Unlike legal records, the narrative produced by truth commissions does not abide by rules of criminal evidence collection, which allows for a broader perspective on the pattern and causes of violence. The unifying national historical narrative is supposedly a crucial first step in nation-building (Christie, 2000: 117). In addition, the commission’s hearings, as well as the final report, if it is a public one, serve as an official acknowledgment of the victims’ suffering and loss. This public acknowledgment is meant to have a therapeutic effect by providing closure and healing for individual victims as well as for society as a whole.

Above all, truth commissions are associated with multiple democratizing effects, which lead to the view that truth commissions are essential for democratization processes. The process of establishing and executing truth commissions is meant to signal a clear break from the practices of the former regime and the new regime’s commitment to the rule of law, thereby promoting the legitimacy and accountability of the new regime. In addition, truth commissions make recommendations for political, judicial, and educational reforms that are intended to set the new transitioning state on a better path toward a stable and properly functioning democracy.

Beyond their multiple positive effects associated with the democratization process, truth commissions have been closely tied to the concept of reconciliation. Although the relationship between truth-seeking and peace was not new,¹ it regained interest following the South African post-apartheid truth and reconciliation process. One of the legacies of the South African truth commission is the emerging consensus about the nexus between truth and reconciliation (Moon, 2008). As the argument goes, interpersonal reconciliation between individuals and groups fosters basic trust, respect, and cooperation, and therefore is particularly important in peace negotiations, nation-building, and post-conflict reconstruction (Bloomfield et al., 2003; Borer, 2006; Lambourne, 2009).

In spite of the broad international consensus about the multiple positive effects of TRCs, empirically assessing these assumed positive effects has been challenging. In fact, there is little knowledge and next to no consensus about the actual long-term consequences and impacts of truth and reconciliation commissions. Moreover, there are virtually no established mechanisms for measuring these consequences and therefore for assessing the overall success of the commissions in achieving their stated objectives. This article addresses this gap between the widespread and international institutionalization of TRCs and the lack of empirical assessments. It considers the following question: what are the mechanisms for measuring the effects of TRCs and how effective have they been?

In pursuit of this question, we begin by establishing the institutionalization of truth and reconciliation commissions. The article then reviews and evaluates the ways in which practitioners and scholars have so far evaluated the effects of truth commissions.
We point out that, because of pressure from the donor community to present evidence-based assessments of TRCs, there has been a move toward the application of wide-ranging social science methods to study them. Although there have been important advances in the empirical assessments of TRCs, three enduring biases are identified. The first type of bias has sociological or professional origins and refers to the virtually undistinguishable mix between advocacy, scholarship, and practice. Often it is the same organizations and individuals who promoted, supported, and facilitated the TRC process that fund and conduct post-TRC evaluations. The second – and the most pervasive – type of bias is methodological. By and large, scholars of transitional justice have been drawn to three methodologies: surveys, focus groups, and quantitative data analysis. These methodologies are typically weak in accounting for local contingencies and conditions and often do not adequately represent – and may even ignore or silence – marginalized groups, such as young people and women. The third type of bias has methodological origins but is mostly epistemological. The survey method, which has been particularly popular in the field, assumes that respondents share basic understandings of major concepts such as ‘peace’, ‘reconciliation’, ‘justice’, ‘security.’ We observe that there are more than a few instances in which these concepts fail to align themselves with indigenous knowledge and interpretations.

Combined, these three biases – the sociological, methodological, and epistemological – reinforce and deepen the gap between how TRCs are evaluated internationally and how local communities perceive them. Truth and reconciliation commissions have been promoted as a locally driven process attuned to individual citizens’ voices and concerns. They are said to be initiated for ‘the community’ and the assumed benefits of TRCs – including forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing – presumably materialize at the local level. Despite claims that TRCs are locally driven processes, there are few mechanisms for measuring and evaluating the impacts of these processes at the individual and community levels. Moreover, we have found that the dominant mechanisms utilized to measure the effects of TRCs augment, rather than bridge, the gap between the global transitional justice paradigm and local processes and perceptions (Shaw and Waldorf, 2010).

It is international organizations such as the United Nations and the International Center for Transitional Justice that are key actors in promoting TRCs and in evaluating these processes. These international organizations tend to be presented as ‘experts’, ‘closest to those most in need’ and the only actors capable of ‘decoding,’ ‘interpreting,’ and translating local knowledge into policy (Mohan and Stokke, 2000: 254). The funding and technical capabilities of these organizations give them an epistemic privilege over local partners. This finding echoes Uma Kothari’s critical work on development policies, in which she argues that generalized and external representations of ‘local’ knowledge, practices, and needs are often selective and rarely drawn from extensive interaction with, or input from, the so-called locals (Kothari, 2005; Kothari and Minogue, 2002). Efforts described as collaborative between international and local actors may merely serve to legitimize the activities of international organizations. Building on this argument, we contend that the results of research methods that do not address these potential contradictions between the international and the local cannot necessarily be seen as effective mechanisms of assessing the impacts of truth commissions or representative of indigenous knowledge or opinion.
Upon identifying the biases in assessments and explaining their combined effect in augmenting the gap between the ‘global’ and the ‘local,’ we propose an integrative research approach that would overcome, or at least minimize, the identified biases. Focused on this approach, we offer general criteria for future research with the goal of paving the way toward developing more sound, representative, and inclusive mechanisms for understanding the impacts of TRCs. The goal of this article is neither to promote nor to criticize specific mechanisms of transitional justice or particular TRCs. Furthermore, is it not our objective to present a definitive ‘new’ methodology for measuring the impacts of TRCs. Instead, our goal is to emphasize the need to think rigorously about how we assess the effects of TRCs, demonstrate the need for effective mechanisms of assessment for TRCs, and offer integrative criteria as a step forward in developing such mechanisms.

Truth and reconciliation commissions have become ‘normalized’ and are often an integral part of post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation. Accordingly, we argue that, given the surge in TRCs and their prominence in national reconstruction and reconciliation planning, it is essential to determine rigorous ways to assess the impacts and legacies of these processes; particularly their long-term impacts. Implementing TRCs involves an incredible amount of human capital and resources – often at a time when both of these are extremely limited. Therefore, measuring the extent to which TRCs achieve their stated objectives, as well as the broader and lasting effects of the commissions, should be a major priority. Assessment measures and accountability mechanisms can help to make certain that precious resources are allocated appropriately.

The worldwide internationalization and institutionalization of TRCs

In the last decade, truth commissions have become a common policy choice for newly democratic states emerging from repressive regimes or intra-state conflict. By 2006, there had been 41 truth commissions in various stages of operation, of which 23 were established only in the decade between 1996 and 2006. By 2008, there were six additional truth commissions that were already in drafting stages (Colombia, Kenya, Afghanistan, Iraq, Côte d’Ivoire, and Nicaragua). Beyond their spread worldwide, truth commissions, and the truth-seeking principle they embody, have been institutionalized at the international level (Ben-Josef Hirsch, 2007).

One measure for the institutionalization of TRCs at the international level is their official endorsement by international organizations, including leading human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International (Ben-Josef Hirsch, 2009). Nowhere is the endorsement of truth commissions more obvious than at the United Nations (UN). In addition to making recommendations for truth commissions in specific cases, in 2003 the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) began developing a ‘tool kit’ for establishing the rule of law. The recommendation and guidelines for truth commissions were developed by Priscilla Hayner and were published in collaboration with the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) and the European Commission in 2006 (UNHCHR, 2006). The UN has also been actively involved in specific cases of truth commissions,
including Sierra Leone (2002), East Timor (2002), Liberia (2004), Burundi (2005), and the Democratic Republic of Congo (2005/6), and, more recently, in the initiation of truth-seeking processes in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kenya.

A second measure for international institutionalization is the institutionalization and professionalization of transitional justice as a policy area and a field of academic study (Ben-Josef Hirsch, 2009). The first and main indicator is the establishment of a distinct organizational apparatus: the International Center for Transitional Justice. The ICTJ began operating in March 2001 to ‘assist countries pursuing accountability for past mass atrocity or human rights abuse’ (ICTJ, 2009). Within a year of its opening the Center’s staff grew from four core staff members working out of temporary offices to 20, and by 2004 it increased again to more than 40 full-time staff members as well as many more affiliated consultants and experts. By 2006, the Center had more than 100 employees. Overall, in the relatively short time it has been operating, the ICTJ has become a leader in advocating, studying, and practicing transitional justice. As a matter of fact, it has become the organizational apparatus that defines what transitional justice is. According to some commentators, the ICTJ has become co-equal with, if not even more of a principal than, the UN during processes of democratic transition and post-conflict reconstruction (Sotver et al., 2006: 249).

Although the ICTJ is, without a doubt, a leader in researching and studying transitional justice, scholarly interest in the subject is much broader. In a 2002 Foreign Affairs article, Jonathan Tepperman observed that ‘the truth business, in short, is booming,’ and ‘a new academic discipline has sprung up to study the commissions’ (Tepperman, 2002: 128). Similarly, Neil Kritz of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) notes that ‘transitional justice has matured into a field of study worldwide,’ and cites the statistic that, whereas between 1970 and 1989 there were only 150 publications (books, book chapters, and academic articles) on transitional justice, the number jumped to more than 1000 publications during the 1990s (Kritz, 2003: 22, fn.21). Like any other academic field, transitional justice has its own ‘classic’ texts that are cited repeatedly (for example, Boraine, 2000; Hayner, 2002; Kritz, 1995; Teitel, 2002). In addition, elite universities in the United States offer seminars on transitional justice, in which truth commissions are often discussed at length. In conferences there are now distinct panels and chaired sections on transitional justice. The topic of truth commissions also attracts many young scholars, and at least 30 PhD dissertations on truth commissions were completed in the United States and Canada in the last decade (Ben-Josef Hirsch, 2009).

Empirical assessments of TRCs: challenges and weaknesses

The worldwide spread and the institutionalization of truth and reconciliation commissions indicate that undoubtedly they are ‘here to stay.’ Indeed, it is repeatedly noted that truth commissions are ‘increasingly deemed to be imperative for the consolidation of democracy’ (Borer, 2006: 17) as well as an ‘indispensable’ or ‘essential’ pillar for resolving conflicts (Bloomfield et al., 2003: 3). In light of this evident international institutionalization, it is somewhat puzzling that there has been little knowledge and almost no agreement about their actual long-term consequences and likelihood of success. Even in
the supposedly successful case of the South African TRC (1995), there have been serious doubts about the actual effects of the commission on the transition process and on reconciliation specifically (Allan, 2000). Critics often argue that proponents of truth-seeking commissions overstate their importance and that the core assumptions about the relationship between truth-telling and peace-building are flawed and supported by neither logic nor evidence (Mendeloff, 2004). Some go even further, arguing that truth commissions do not realize their stated goals of achieving justice, recording a truthful historical narrative, and facilitating reconciliation; instead truth commissions, they argue, ‘can have perverse effects, sometimes exacerbating tensions and other times providing public relations smoke screens for regimes that continue to abuse rights’ (Snyder and Vinjamuri, 2004: 20).

Although it may well be that the ‘jury is still out’ and not enough time has elapsed in order to evaluate the real long-term consequences of truth commissions, it appears that one of the main reasons for the lack of evaluation is largely a gap in policy and scholarly literature; namely, the lack of established mechanisms for measuring the alleged multiple benign effects associated with truth commissions and therefore for assessing their overall success. By the mid-2000s, the lack of empirical research had been widely acknowledged in the growing transitional justice scholarly community (Daly, 2008; Mendeloff, 2004; Van Der Merwe et al., 2009a; X/Change, 2007). Specifically, there has been pressure from the donor community to present evidence-based assessments of the effects of truth and reconciliation commissions (Bell, 2009). Consequently, there has been a move toward the application of wide-ranging social science methods (including surveys, focus groups, interviews, oral histories, transcript analysis, community studies, institutional change analysis, policy analysis, and quantitative analysis) within research on TRCs (Pham and Vinck, 2007). In spite of the significant developments in the study of transitional justice in general, and TRCs specifically, we have identified several critical and enduring weaknesses and challenges.

Professional bias

In general, there has been a tendency in the transitional justice literature to mix advocacy and scholarship. Often it is the same organizations and individuals that are involved in setting the scholarship agenda as well as advocating the normative, pragmatic, or emotional merits of truth commissions. Those who engage in research are often professionally invested in the process they come to evaluate. Consequently, there is virtually an indistinguishable mix between scholarship, practice, and policy prescriptions (Vinjamuri and Snyder, 2004). For example, other than studies done by academics, the two leading and most prolific organizations that study TRCs are the ICTJ and the Role of Law Program at the USIP. Although both organizations have produced many high-quality research reports and assessments – including some that critically evaluate transitional processes – one cannot ignore the fact that both these organizations are also the leading advocates for, and advisors on, transitional justice processes.

Policy debates over truth commissions tend to revolve around claims about their causal effects; yet many of these debates involve ‘faith-based’ rather than ‘fact-based’ discussions; that is, discussion of the desired or expected outcomes of TRCs rather than
data or evidence of the actual effects of the commissions. According to a recent extensive literature review, this trend results in scarce empirical evidence and limited knowledge about the actual impact of the commissions (Thomas et al., 2008). In some cases, especially when it comes to assessing the less tangible effects of TRCs such as psychological healing, assessments relied not on the assessments of the local affected population but on those of the TRC staff and NGO workers (Millar, 2010).

Attempts to sound the opinion of national stakeholders have largely been limited to policy makers and inside actors in transitional justice processes, who are hard pressed by a donor-driven economy to acquiesce to donor priorities. A few local NGOs and civil society organizations, mostly financed by the same donors and foreign governments, have been involved. Thus, there are vertical relations that obstruct the flow of local input and limit motivation to create broader mechanisms of evaluation (Alatas, 2000: 89). According to Höglund and Öberg (2010) these obstructions are obvious and can be further sub-divided into social desirability and acquiescence biases. Social desirability bias happens when ‘participants in a study underreport certain behaviors or expression of deviance, or in some way conform to the norm they believe is in existence’ (Söderström, 2011: 148). Acquiescence bias, on the other hand, obtains in situations where people are more likely to concur with the evaluators’ suggestions rather than disagree. Both forms of biases are not limited to specific kinds of study, yet they are accentuated when interests in advocacy and scholarship are conflated and in most cases it is a question of wanting to appear better, more normal, and more acceptable in the eyes of superior partners (Söderström, 2011). Evaluations of TRCs based on the views of local NGOs and human rights activists may therefore not adequately reflect the perceptions of populations on the ground. Millar, for example, cites studies on the psychological aspects of the South African TRC that have interviewed almost solely peace-building and NGO professionals for evaluating the effects of healing (Millar, 2010: 482, fn.21–23).

Epistemological bias

Associating multiple goals with TRCs leads to variance in the measures that are used for their impact. This might be less of a challenge when measuring variables such as levels of violence/security and human rights violations, which both have somewhat widely acceptable definition and quantitative measures. However, this challenge is mostly evident in the conceptual differences regarding what constitutes truth and reconciliation, and all the more so on how to measure it. This becomes a particularly acute issue given the prevailing and growing use of surveys in the study of the effects of TRCs. Most surveys used to assess the impacts of TRCs use multiple-choice questions. This method assumes that respondents share basic understandings of major concepts such as ‘peace,’ ‘reconciliation,’ ‘security,’ and that there are no other potential answers beyond the choices given.

The implications are noteworthy. In the first place, some of these critical concepts through which so-called local processes of reconciliation are defined and measured are unfamiliar to indigenous people, and more rooted in Western experiences. Those that are familiar may also be subject to diverse interpretations given the cultural plurality of local
societies. As a result, there are instances in which these concepts fail to align themselves with indigenous knowledge and interpretations that grow out of direct experiences of people on the ground. Unfortunately, the practice has been to devalue diversity and experience (Edwards, 1989); instead, researchers tend to couch their studies in languages common to existing global transitional justice networks and policies. Fricker calls this testimonial injustice, meaning that the hearer gives a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word (Fricker, 2007: 1).

Notably, there have been to date more than a few compelling attempts to address these epistemological challenges. Specifically, scholars have sought to conceptualize reconciliation in a way that will allow systematically studying it (Brouneus, 2008). Although these developments are welcomed, in themselves they only partially solve the problem of epistemological bias. Observable data such as statements and behaviors may provide indication for changes in levels of reconciliations in a society; they still do not provide us with information about the subjective assessments of these levels by those who are supposedly the subjects and goals of the reconciliatory process.

As noted above, international organizations such as the UN and the ICTJ are key actors in the TRC process and in its evaluation. These international organizations are presented as being the ‘experts’ ‘closest to those most in need’ and the only actors capable of ‘decoding,’ ‘interpreting,’ and translating local knowledge into policy (Mohan and Stokke, 2000). The funding and technical capabilities of these organizations give them an epistemic privilege over local partners. Edwards notes that the most extreme form of technical dominance is the ‘empirical’ questionnaire-based survey designed, analysed, and controlled by people outside the community that is being studied:

The natural consequence of a concern for technical interpretations of reality is that knowledge, and the power to control it, become concentrated in the hands of those with the technical skills necessary to understand the language and methods being used.

(Edwards, 1989: 118)

Some collaboration with local actors serves to legitimize the activities of international organizations but the results of such collaborative endeavors cannot necessarily be seen as representative of indigenous knowledge or opinion.

**Methodological biases**

Significant drawbacks to existing evaluation approaches are the methods and methodologies used in surveying and gathering data. The turn toward evidence-based evaluations of TRCs materialized primarily in three methodologies: surveys, focus groups, and quantitative analysis. As we noted above, the survey methodology, which has been praised by some social scientists as a ‘particularly promising avenue for future research,’ specifically for its potential in providing context-specific data (Söderström, 2011), is actually prone to significant epistemological bias. One notable drawback in this context is that often multiple-choice questions do not engage respondents in a manner that solicits local meanings and understanding of the processes of reconciliation. This is unfortunate because data collection on the social and psychological processes of healing after war should not be
limited to a strict methodological procedure. Respondents should be at liberty to express themselves in ways that coded answers cannot account for. Moreover, respondents may be inclined to complete multiple-choice questionnaires in order to satisfy the researcher or to avoid being embarrassed. Respondents may feel ashamed to demonstrate a lack of knowledge by completing the ‘No Idea’ column (usually the last option), which is typical in these types of questionnaires.

Thus, it is not uncommon to have a majority of respondents affirming that transitional justice processes are beneficial and at the same time admitting that they have little or no knowledge about them. To cite one example, in 2003, an opinion poll on the attitude of Sierra Leoneans toward the TRC and the Special Court, conducted by Campaign for Good Governance (CGG), stated that 17% of respondents fully understood the purpose of the TRC. Yet, in that same poll, 60% affirmed that the Commission was beneficial to every Sierra Leonean.

For focus groups, questions relating to unit of analysis and generalizing findings always come to the fore. As Söderström (2011) observes, it is never clear whether opinions expressed are true of the entire group or the individual in question. For instance, are responses from an amputee victim of the war in Sierra Leone reflective of the experiences of amputees generally or just the individual victim? This problem is exacerbated by the fact that not every member of a group will express his or her position on everything. A related challenge is determining the unit of analysis: Is it the individual or the group?

In the context of evaluating the effects of TRCs, this methodological limitation is augmented by the professional bias already mentioned above. Often, the focus groups and surveys are conducted by the same organizations and individuals who promoted, supported, and facilitated the TRC process. One could conceptualize this situation in the terms used by Edwards, who notes that the most extreme form of technical dominance is the ‘empirical’ questionnaire-based survey designed, analysed, and controlled by people outside the community that is being studied:

The natural consequence of a concern for technical interpretations of reality is that knowledge, and the power to control it, become concentrated in the hands of those with the technical skills necessary to understand the language and methods being used.

(Edwards, 1989: 118)

This is the case with a major study done in Sierra Leone by PRIDE and more recently the extensive survey by the BBC World Service Trust; both were conducted in collaboration with the ICTJ. As already noted, the ICTJ is one of the leading advocators for transitional justice mechanisms such as the TRC. We argue that these surveys are examples of a blurring of lines between evaluation and advocacy. When promoters of the TRC process conduct surveys, focus groups, and interviews, it may be difficult to determine if their enthusiasm in advertising the benefits of the process, during the pre-focus group information sessions, has an impact on participants’ responses during focus groups.

Another drawback to focus groups relates the capacity of such methods to collect feedback or input from a representative population, particularly from marginalized groups. Focus groups that include local representatives or community figureheads,
including chiefs, community elders, and religious leaders, will not necessarily serve as forums where ordinary community members express their lived experiences uninterrupted. Young people and women may be cautious not to express opinions that conflict with positions of elders. In other instances, community leaders can influence the responses and outcomes of focus group discussions. Furthermore, these methods rarely measure specific objectives of the TRC; rather, they tend to ask broader questions about reconciliation, peace, and the implementation process. This perpetuates the ‘faith-based’ rather than ‘fact-based’ dynamic in that participants are asked to comment on the implementation process and the objectives of the Commissions rather than the actual impacts.

Along with other branches of social sciences, scholars of transitional justice have been drawn to quantitative methodologies; namely, large-$n$, cross-time/cross-space studies to assess the effects of truth commissions and of transitional justice in general. The move in this direction has yielded richer and more robust datasets (see, for example, Dancy et al., 2010; Olsen et al., 2010) that added to our understanding of the effects of TRCs as well as their interaction effects with other mechanisms of transitional justice, such as trials. Nevertheless, should the focus on empirical assessment of TRCs move solely or even principally toward large-$n$ studies, two inherent weaknesses will endure. In the first place, these studies are blind to changes in the normative context in which each TRC has operated. For example, truth commissions, before the setting up of the South African TRC, operated within a different international normative environment, under different rationales and with different goals from later post-South Africa ones. Therefore, it is misguided to either aggregate or compare early and late cases with regard to the same set of expected outcomes. Sikkink and Booth-Walling, for example, include in their ‘justice cascade’ dataset all truth commissions since 1974. They analyse the correlation between truth commissions and the recurrence of human rights violations in order to determine the deterrence effect of truth commissions (Sikkink and Booth-Walling, 2005). Although deterrence may have been an important goal for early truth commissions, since they were conceived as a weaker alternative to criminal trials, in the later truth commissions deterrence is by no means a central goal. This bias is not unique to quantitative large-$n$ studies. Small-$n$ comparative studies also err by comparing early and late cases or by applying post-hoc analysis, which seeks to evaluate effects that were not even conceptualized when the truth commission operated. Joanna R. Quinn, for example, applies the concept of restorative justice to evaluate the impact of the 1986 Ugandan Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights (Quinn, 2004). Given that the concept of restorative justice was introduced to the logic of truth commissions only in the report of the South African TRC more than a decade after the Uganda truth commission, it is little surprise that Quinn finds no lasting impact.

Not differentiating between the early and late cases of truth commissions is likely to yield bias in the evaluation of their effects. Using similar datasets, other scholars have proposed evaluating the effects of truth commissions on democratization (Brahm, 2007). In these studies, the problem of aggregation emerges from the different measurements for democratization these studies use. In Emily Brooke Rodio’s study, for example, she measures the effects of truth commissions on accountability, the rule of law, shared history, and cooperation among groups (Rodio, 2008). Whereas the first two measures make sense for early truth commissions, this is not the case for using shared history and cooperation
among groups, which are both dimensions of democratization that were associated with the truth-seeking process only following the South African TRC.

Second, these large-n, cross-time/cross-space datasets are also blind to local contextual factors, specifically to those that are not easily captured by quantifiable measures, such as interpersonal relations and perceptions of justice. The tradeoff between general inference and sensitivity to context is not unique to the study of the effects of TRCs; however, given that TRCs are promoted as a locally driven process attuned to individual citizens’ voices and concerns, we should at least give adequate attention to designing methodologies that come to assess these aspirations about the process in ways that are indeed attuned to individual citizen’s voices and concerns.

An additional related challenge is that many confounding variables may be operating concurrently within the state at the same time as a TRC is implemented. Accordingly, there is a very high likelihood of co-linearity with other elements of the political transitions, which makes it difficult to determine if indeed it is the truth commission process that accounts for any of the benign outcomes associated with them. This challenge is even more pronounced in recent studies. As was noted earlier, there is a growing attention to the need to evaluate the effects of transitional justice mechanisms. Increasingly, however, the findings are about the effects of transitional justice in general and less about the differentiated or distinct effects of TRCs. Accordingly, there are more robust findings suggesting that combining and sequencing mechanisms of transitional justice indeed strengthen human rights and democracy. However, when it comes to the net effect of TRCs in these countries, findings are far less conclusive (Olsen et al., 2010).

Another contentious issue has been the extent to which TRCs complement or conflict with local community-healing processes. The assumption has been that TRCs complement or incorporate traditional healing mechanisms and are therefore easy bedfellows. It is difficult to disaggregate the local from the formal processes, and attention to indigenous healing can often either romanticize local practices or generalize the peculiarities and specifics of cultural traditions.

Undoubtedly, there have been important advances in the study of the effects of transitional justice mechanisms, and both scholars and practitioners widely acknowledge the importance of this research agenda. However, the main biases identified here – namely, the undistinguishable mix between advocacy and scholarship; the epistemological inconsistencies about what and how outcomes are being measured; and the significant limitations of the more common methodologies – seem not only to endure but actually to frame the current research agenda.

Toward an integrative approach

There is an obvious overlap between the professional, epistemological, and methodological biases identified above. Combined, these biases reinforce and deepen the gap between how TRCs are evaluated internationally and how local communities perceive them. There have been discussions about the need for more representative and inclusive research processes for decades (Höglund and Öberg, 2010); however, research methods have not changed accordingly. To a large extent, scholars and representatives from organizations continue to develop research tools in the West, travel to the global South
only to collect ‘data,’ and analyse and distribute the data primarily throughout the West. By contrast, we propose that methodologies to evaluate the long-term effects of TRCs should be integrative. That is, methodologies should not merely include or ‘add in’ local input at the application stage of the research, if at all. Similarly, allowing selected locals to participate in research processes developed and managed by individuals and groups outside the relevant communities or regions should not necessarily be seen as empowering, representative, or inclusive. Instead of these limited efforts to insert, extract, or select local knowledge, methodologies aimed at assessing the impacts of TRCs should integrate individual, local inputs in the design, application, and interpretation of the research.

In terms of the design phase of a research project, an integrative methodology must meet several criteria. In the first place, no advocates, practitioners, or participants in the TRC process should take part in designing or conducting the research, in order to minimize the effects of mixing advocacy with scholarship. This criterion directly addresses the potential for professional bias discussed earlier by working to prevent the research process and outcome from being influenced by people who may have incentives to misrepresent the facts. It is important to note that it is not merely external or international professionals and advocates of TRCs who should be excluded from designing and conducting assessments. It has been found that certain local individuals may be partial toward particular outcomes of TRC assessments as a result of invested interests. Apart from international practitioners who may be interested in protecting or elevating the transitional justice agenda, TRCs normally recruit locals as statement takers, interpreters, key informants, and mediators. Moses Chrispus Okello has found that because of these individuals’ association with the work of the TRC they may be liable to two types of information distortion, including providing ‘systematically distorted or false information’ or allowing ‘particular types of information’ to be ‘systematically left out’ (Höglund and Öberg, 2011: 189; Okello, 2010).

Second, in order to address the second epistemological bias, local research partners should be identified before the project is initiated and should be central to the development and implementation of any evaluation mechanisms. This criterion is based on the contention that reconciliation is a complex process; understanding and measuring impacts require a collaborative research design that is equipped to study the ‘micro-processes of armed conflict and peace, and to provide depth, detail, and individual perspectives to complex events’ (Brouneus, 2008: 145). Such a collaborative approach enables the evaluation process to benefit from the research skills and experience of both international and local partners. Insider knowledge is indispensable to establishing networks of contacts and understanding the culture and political sensitivities related to the local justice and reconciliation (Smyth, 2005). Where distinct cultural and linguistic features are involved, insiders may bring a different epistemological perspective, which could promote more research methods that are appropriate and effective in a particular context. Furthermore, knowledge-sharing and collaboration should promote various unique perspectives in interpreting the research data.

Similarly, researchers should draw on the regional background in the development of research instruments and the selection of research communities. Having a local, rather than a foreign scholar, is another measure that might help remove respondents’
expectations of the motivation of the questionnaire. It is expected that local communities will be at ease to respond to interviews and share their lived experiences with people who they know understand their dialects, history, and way of life. Unlike non-locals, or outsiders, whose intentions are generally treated with suspicion, local researchers can more easily establish trust.

Two key criteria should be met in order to avoid the types of methodological biases we identified earlier. First, evaluation mechanisms should not focus on transitional justice in general or assessments of TRCs broadly conceived; rather, they should be designed to collect responses relevant to the objectives of specific local TRC processes. Unlike the bias inherent in large-\(n\), cross-time/cross-space studies, such an approach would avoid presuming or predetermining the goals of the TRC process. Moreover, reconciliation must be seen as a multi-layered process including national, societal, and individual levels (Brouneus, 2008). Whereas national reconciliation focuses on the symbolic and judicial acts of governments, reconciliation at the social level is concerned with victims’ experience of participating in a truth-telling process for reconciliation, and changes of attitude by members of former enemy groups during and after such a process (Brouneus, 2008: 292).

The second criterion for addressing methodological bias is a committed focus on the community level. Most of the assumed effects of TRCs, especially healing and reconciliation, are at the community level. There have been several community-based studies of TRCs; however, these in-depth – often ethnographic – studies tend to focus on the process of the TRC and not on its effects (Shaw, 2008). Local communities are also part of survey studies that aim to measure the effects; yet in these studies the ‘community’ is understood in terms of geographical localities and as one of many variables that may or may not correlate with the respondents’ responses to the survey questions. An integrative approach would address this by focusing the research methodology at the level of the individual, rather than at some abstracted idea of the community. Moreover, an integrative approach would involve having locals leading the research – partially through having them define key concepts related to the research in their own terms.

For some social scientists, an important limitation of survey methods is that they measure perceptions of institutional performance as opposed to ‘actual’ institutional performance (Thomas et al., 2010). National reconciliation initiatives and activities do not automatically translate into societal changes in emotions, attitude, and behavior (mutual acknowledgement of suffering) (Brouneus, 2008). Thus, although policy practices generally attract international attention, normative and strategic policy statements alone cannot measure reconciliation. We therefore propose an entirely different approach, which does not view perceptions as a proxy for performance but rather places these perceptions at the center of the evaluation process. As a result, instead of projecting upon the respondents any predetermined notions or understandings of abstract concepts such as reconciliation and truth, an integrative approach would involve asking respondents to explain how they understand these concepts in general and how relevant these concepts are to their post-TRC experience.

Accordingly, the effects of the truth commission process are sought not at the level of the community, or in terms of institutional and/or political outcome, but rather at the level of individuals’ subjective evaluation. By focusing on perceptions and asking
respondents to provide their own definitions of key concepts such as truth, justice, peace, or security, the often futile epistemological debate on how to define and measure these concepts scientifically is set aside (Van Der Merwe, 2009b). Accordingly, an integrative approach would endogenize the notion that these concepts are inherently subjective and context-specific.

An example of an appropriate starting point for implementing our integrative approach would be a community-level qualitative in-depth interview-based questionnaire. The questionnaire must comprise open-ended, semi-structured interview questions, aimed at assessing the extent to which a particular TRC achieved its specific objectives, including promoting truth-telling as a form of reconciliation, establishing a record of the conflict, and breaking the cycle of violence and preventing future conflicts. Furthermore, the questionnaire must include a section on concepts and definitions. Here, respondents should be given an opportunity to define some of the major terms used within transitional justice research and policies, including ‘peace,’ ‘community,’ ‘healing,’ ‘security,’ ‘reconciliation,’ and ‘truth.’ In addition, interviews should take into account power relations that may inhibit vulnerable groups from freely voicing their opinions. For instance, a gender-balanced sample could disaggregate data by gender to see if there are significant differences in perceptions between men and women. Conducting separate interviews with community figureheads such as chiefs and religious authorities could also minimize their influence on responses from other community members. This will give opportunity to further disaggregate findings by social status and power relations in research communities.

**Preliminary conclusions and the road ahead**

Although aspects of such an integrative approach are evident in current research related to truth commissions, by and large the three main biases we identified earlier in this article have prevailed in current assessments of TRCs. Our integrative approach is novel in that it addresses each of these enduring biases and offers concrete criteria for future research. It is anticipated that an integrative approach will lead to novel findings about the role of the TRC in the post-conflict peace-building process. By removing preconceived notions about the expected effects of the TRC and asking local individuals to define key concepts, we envision that the expected effects would be somewhat different from what other studies hypothesized and measured.

In the broader context of the academic and policy world, it is hoped that the proposal of an integrative approach will initiate an open and constructive debate over the ways in which practitioners and academics have been evaluating post-conflict peace-building processes. Specifically, we would like to see a debate over how these elevations and their inherent biases affect the allocation of resources to these processes. It is expected that this debate will also draw the attention of the donor community and ultimately will inform a more efficient allocation of donors’ resources.

Finding ways to assess the success of TRCs will add to the existing knowledge about how wars impact different populations and communities, what types of mechanisms communities have developed and relied on to facilitate their own healing and reconciliation processes, and what local individuals impacted by war see as conflict
prevention mechanisms and sources of lasting peace. This process will also result in recommendations that could lead to processes that more effectively promote reconciliation, healing, and lasting peace and stability.

More nuanced, ethical, and impartial mechanisms of assessment must continue to be developed in order to better understand the impacts of TRCs. There is an imbalance between advocacy, attention, and generalized research on TRCs and mechanisms of assessment. It remains concerning that truth commissions continue to be promoted and implemented in various contexts across the globe given how little is known about their effects. It is equally concerning that truth commissions are put forward as community-level processes at the same time as they are driven, funded, implemented, and advocated largely by international organizations and institutions. There is no denying that the objectives of truth commissions are noble and worthy and that healing and reconciliation are important processes for communities recovering from atrocities. However, continual effort must be made to understand the meaning or process of healing and reconciliation for specific communities and the impacts and long-term legacies of specific commissions.

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**Notes**

1. The Commission on the Truth for El Salvador (1992) was the first truth commission to emerge out of a negotiated peace accord brokered by the United Nations. Two years later, the Guatemalan Historical Clarification Commission (1994) was established under similar circumstances. In these two commissions, however, the scope and the stated goals of the truth-seeking process were defined rather narrowly: a fact-finding process aimed at the disclosure of previously unknown or suppressed information. Reconciliation was by no means a main goal of these commissions as reflected by their mandate and reporting.

2. Another indicator for the institutionalization of transitional justice as a distinct academic field is the 2007 launching of the *International Journal of Transitional Justice*: a peer-reviewed academic journal by Oxford Journals, which recently has been ranked in the top 10 of international relations journals. Notably, although the journal publishes articles on transitional justice broadly defined, it has repeatedly emphasized the centrality of truth commissions.

3. In one of the recent attempts to develop a structured method to measure national reconciliation, Brouneus identifies two interesting hypotheses: (1) more national reconciliation initiatives may indicate less reconciliation and (2) informal and local reconciliation initiatives may be more effective for producing actual reconciliation than formal national initiatives (Brouneus, 2008).

**References**


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