

Acknowledgement: The Road to Forgiveness

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Preface

Joanna Quinn is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science at McMaster University. She was awarded a Graduate Research Fellowship by the Institute during the 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 academic years. During both of these years, she was doing work related to her doctoral dissertation, *The Politics of Acknowledgement: Truth Commissions in Uganda and Haiti*. In this dissertation, she is investigating the factors contributing to the apparent failure of truth commissions in these countries. In order to carry out this investigation, she needed to develop a theory of acknowledgement, consistent with notions of restorative justice. The ideals of restorative justice have fostered some interest in truth commissions as a kind of social organization, which might contribute to the forgiveness, reconciliation and trust-building needed in societies, which have experienced deep and violent communal conflict.

This short working paper sets out the theory of acknowledgement that Ms. Quinn elaborated during the tenure of her graduate research fellowship. It is a theory of potential interest to scholars interested in globalization and autonomy for two reasons. First, some argue that globalizing processes undermine nation-state sovereignty and capacity to respond to the needs of citizens, landed immigrants and refugees living within their territorial boundaries. In doing so, they create new opportunities and reasons for mobilizing communal groups within these same borders in ways that lead to violent and extensive conflict. Restorative justice approaches may be one way for moving forward once such conflict has occurred. Second, the gap between the formal existence of an international human rights regime and the implementation of its provisions on the ground is large across the globe. Truth commissions represent one of several innovative approaches used by some states and supporters of international human rights to build knowledge of human rights in communities where such knowledge has been lacking. International conventions on rights only become meaningful, such supporters suggest, when individuals and groups internalize this knowledge and then act to claim or assert these rights.

In developing a framework for evaluating the success and failure of truth commissions, Joanna Quinn adds to our understanding of the obstacles faced by those proposing the globalization of human rights.

William D. Coleman
Editor, Working Paper Series

Acknowledgement:

The Road to Forgiveness

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One of the most daunting tasks faced by a society left in ruin after a period of mass atrocity is the rebuilding of that society. In transitional societies, the outward signs of poverty and destitution often mask the importance of rebuilding those structural social institutions that form the basis of any stable society. Often, scarce resources are allocated to the repair of the physical infrastructure in its many forms, rather than to the repair of the social infrastructure of that same community. Roads and schools, for example, are given priority over issues of justice and security. Reckoning with past injustices, however, is an important step in the process of acknowledgement and forgiveness, leading to the rebuilding of a viable democracy, a restructured judicial system, and strengthened networks of civic engagement, all of which may lead, ultimately, to increased levels of social trust. And these are particularly important in overcoming the causes of conflict within divided transitional societies.

There is a strong and causal relationship between acknowledgement and forgiveness, social trust, democracy, and reconciliation. In this paper I argue that forgiveness, an interpersonal and cognitive process that encompasses the progression of acknowledgement as discussed below, may lead to many of the outcomes desired by transitional societies, including social trust, reconciliation and democracy. Forgiveness is able to promote healing of the self, the relationship between victim and perpetrator, and the community. The paper looks first at the constituent parts of acknowledgement. Second, it provides a sense of the meaning of forgiveness, and its role in the process of reckoning with the past. The paper then moves on to a discussion of civic engagement and social trust. Finally, it presents a short reflection on the effects of increased levels of trust and the implications for society.

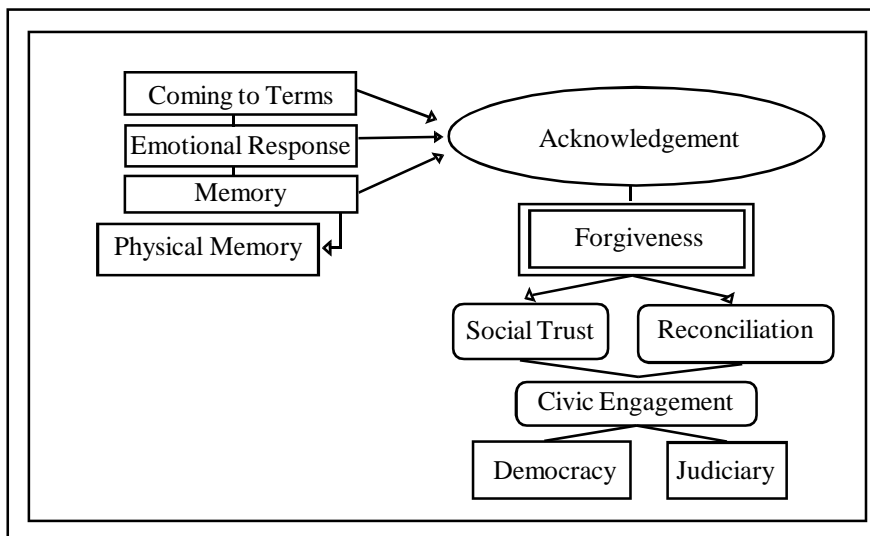


Figure 1: Diagram of Theory of Acknowledgement

In attempting to reckon with a history of mass human rights violations committed at the hands of the state, societies have increasingly opted to use methods of alternative and restorative justice over more widely-accepted methods of western retributive justice. Mechanisms such as the truth commis-

sion have proven to be useful instruments in searching for details of past events in societies where mass violations of human rights have occurred. Victims and perpetrators come forward to tell their stories, and from these a narrative history of the often graphic and frightening nature of the society's past emerges.

In the spirit of restorative justice, the truth commission lacks both the capacity for retribution and sentencing, and also for the provision of apologies or reparations to the citizens of a country who have been wronged by human rights abuses. As I define it, a truth commission, is made up of four components: it is (a) an investigatory body established by the state to (b) determine the truth about widespread human rights violations that occurred (c) in the past to discover which parties may be blamed for their participation in perpetrating such violations (d) over a specified period of time (Hayner 1994, 604).¹ In many cases, this rendering of past events may, in fact, be the first opportunity that victims have had to speak of their experiences. It is also likely to be the first time that these accounts will have been recorded in any way. In this respect, it may provide both individuals and communities with a version of their own history that includes the abuses wrought by previous regimes.

What is especially important about this truth-seeking process, however, is the acknowledgement that takes place throughout. Acknowledging the events of the past and one's complicity in them is particularly important. My theory of acknowledgement presupposes that acknowledgement is necessarily a multi-faceted process, comprised of separate and distinct acts to be undertaken by individuals within a given society (Govier 1997, 206; *See Figure 1*).² I have identified several of the components of acknowledgement, all of which are important in moving beyond acknowledgement to strengthen those aspects of civil society which are necessary for it to function as a cohesive whole. Acknowledgement will encompass several components, from emotional responses and coming to terms with the past, to memory and remembering, to commemorating and memorializing past events. It is my hypothesis that acknowledgement is the one stage through which any successful process of societal recovery must pass.

The diagram in Figure 1 suggests a possible configuration for the premise of the Theory of Acknowledgement. The arrows in the diagram represent the probable order in which the aspects of the theory might take place. However, the arrows are not meant to imply that acknowledgement is a sufficient condition for forgiveness. Instead, acknowledgement is a necessary condition for forgiveness, and for its several tangential effects, to occur.

In order for any society to begin to move forward, it must come to terms with its past. By this idea, I mean that people must be called to account for past events. The truth commission provides a means by which people may testify to their experiences and to the experiences of others who have been disappeared or killed. In facing the details of history, past events can be revisited, evidence uncovered, people and institutions potentially held accountable, and a rationale of deterrence made possible (Frayling 1996, 35; Orentlicher 1995, 406-407). Some, however, believe that such details should instead be left well enough alone (Adorno 1986, 114-116). And, while it is true that history tends to alter memory, leading to questions of accuracy and credibility, both individuals and societies must begin to talk about those events which have taken place (Mandelbaum 1938, chapters 1-6; Langer 1995, 37-38). For it is in the open discussion of these atrocities, in the revealing of the criminal actions of the perpetrator, that the victim can begin to take control of her circumstances. By implication, a society filled with powerless individual victims comprises a suffering, struggling whole. If wrongs are never discussed, the dregs of past atrocities are simply left to fester under the surface of that society, preventing the development of sufficient social cohesion and the kinds of civil society organizations needed for a society to move

ahead.

Similarly, the expression of emotion, although terribly difficult in many cases, is a healthy response. A simple nomenclature of the stages of grieving reveals that individuals must go through a wide range of emotions before they are able to move beyond the overwhelming feelings of loss experienced in traumatic situations (Kübler-Ross 1969, 34-105)³. This idea is based upon knowledge we have of the grieving process of “ordinary” individuals, who must deal with many of the same feelings as those people in societies who are recovering from an extended period of atrocity:⁴ feelings of loss, lack of self-worth/self-respect, and helplessness (Blomquist 1997, 58-61; Murphy 1991, 360; Govier 2001, 24). Often, however, victims and their families are forced to carry on with the tasks of everyday living without benefit of reflection on the past. These people may consciously remember nothing of past events, because the daily trauma they continue to experience may simply have become normalized;¹³ or else they have made a conscious decision to reject the truth surrounding the past, as witnessed in denial and revisionism (Klein & Kogan 1989, 299-304; Moses 1989, 291-295; Vidal-Naquet 1992, 20; Govier 2000, 11). Such denial becomes internalized as a means of coping, in much the same manner as those who normalize events. Such variations of repressed memory, however are not helpful. Until the facts are recognized and people have come to terms with the events of the past, a society cannot begin to grieve its losses.

This combination of coming to terms with the past and of emotional response hinge upon memory, and the remembering of past events. Past recollections form a critical component of the acknowledgement process. Individual memories, in fact, appear to become situated “within the larger narrative of the community,” forming a cultural or social collective memory (Osiel 1997, 258; Struken 1997, 2; Connerton 1989, 1-3). In this way, remembering by individuals contributes to the creation of a self-portrait of the larger society. Others, however, disagree, citing the recollection of past events as divisive, and having the capacity to jeopardize the future of the society (Speck 1997, 14; Langer 1995, 38).

Despite these views, memory has long been recognized as a fundamental element of the building of stronger societies (Perelli 1994, 39, 49-50; Bonhoeffer 1997, 43). This mental act of remembering is often complemented by its physical manifestation: memorialization and commemoration of specific events or people. In many societies, monuments and memorials are erected to honour both victims and survivors. These are sometimes hospitals or schools named after war heroes or former leaders, or actual memorial markers raised in tribute such as the Vietnam War Memorial or the military cemeteries of the British Imperial War Graves Commission. In other instances, days of remembrance are held to bring to mind past events. Israel, for example, observes Yom Hashoa in memory of those lost in the Holocaust. The physicality of memory serves as an indication of social acknowledgement, although we must remain mindful of the inclination of political leaders to take advantage of positions as victors to revise histories of events.

Once acknowledgement, in its many forms and guises, has taken place, the barriers to forgiveness are significantly reduced. And genuine forgiveness, the setting free or dismissal of the debt of the perpetrator, can then transpire. This is not to suggest that in forgiveness, hurts magically disappear, or that the victim will necessarily be able to forget the offence. Rather, through the process of forgiving, the victim is granted some measure of grace and comfort (Foster 2000, 199-200). The benefit of forgiveness, then, has much less to do with the perpetrator than with the victim, and is of potentially more benefit to the person engaged in forgiveness than to other people. For the carrying of grudges and outright discrimination and bitterness that come with resentment and unforgiveness are the stuff which

keeps acknowledgement from taking hold, and truth-telling from having any meaningful impact.

And this setting free enables the victim to start again to pursue relationships of camaraderie and friendship. Moreover, through the establishment of such interaction the victim is able to build bonds of trust, and to begin to participate in various social interactions and organizations (Müller-Fahrenholz 1997, 36). For it appears that in societies devastated by mass atrocity, the ability to trust is one of the parts of civil society which is most badly damaged. Without trust, there is apt to be distrust or worse. People inevitably stop believing their neighbours, stop accepting the word of their superiors, and stop participating in the stuff of civil society (Almond & Verba 1963, chapter 10). They become afraid and suspicious, and begin to keep to themselves, eschewing community projects.

Trust, that sentiment which informs interactions between and among individuals, has been identified as a “functional prerequisite for [even] the possibility of a society.” (Lewis & Weigert 1985, 968). It may be ascribed equally to groups with little difficulty (Govier & Verwoerd 2000, 13-14).⁵ Furthermore, trust has also been identified as an essential element in the development of networks of civic engagement and in the creation of strong political structures (Putnam 1993, 163-185; Barber 1984 chapter 6; Almond & Verba 1963, 264-265). It is also fundamental to the sustainable cooperation that must exist in order for any kind of restoration of relationships or acknowledgement of past events – reconciliation – to occur. A society’s beginning to trust, and the connection of such interpersonal trust with the laying of the foundations of democratic participation, the strengthening of civic institutions, and the re-establishment of social relationships, then, can have significant implications for that society’s transition from a divided, dysfunctional society.

Acknowledgement in and of itself is not an end point, as are reconciliation and strengthened civic institutions, for example. Nor is it, in and of itself, able to bring about some kind of meaningful change. Rather, it forms a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for outcomes such as democratization and judicial reform, reconciliation, and the growth of social trust to be realized. Ultimately the effect of the progression of acknowledgement, as outlined above, is to make possible both the *act* and the *process* of forgiveness (Schumm 1997, 274-275).⁶ And forgiveness itself, through acknowledgement, makes possible the creation of the bonds of social capital and social trust, which foster those democratic goals sought by transitional societies.

The process of acknowledgement, if it assists in overcoming the causes of conflict, has the potential to support real and lasting change. In allowing victims to come forward without fear of retribution to tell the often grim details of how various family members have been disappeared, raped or murdered, for example, the pattern of abuses from community to community becomes apparent. The testimony of perpetrators, too, helps to build an elucidated picture of events, while at the same time openly exposing their actions. By bringing these events out into the open, the power of the perpetrators over their victims is finally severed. And when these crimes have been acknowledged, individuals and their communities can begin once again to form relationships with their neighbours and to participate in the social activities and civic structures of society. In doing so, they have the potential to defeat the deep-rooted conflicts, which have served to paralyse that society. And it is these networks of civic engagement, enabled by the process of acknowledgement and forgiveness, which will lead to the re-building of the basic foundations of democracy.

NOTES

¹ This definition is adapted from a definition by Priscilla Hayner. Her model cites four primary components relating to the process of inquiry of truth commissions. The first of these is a focus by the commission on past events. Second, the inquiry's focus is more concerned with widespread human rights violations over a period of time and space and less concerned with particular events. Third, the mandate of the commission is temporary and clearly defined. Fourth, the authority of the tribunal in terms of inquiry must be augmented to allow for deeper levels of investigation. See Priscilla B. Hayner, "Fifteen Truth Commissions - 1974 to 1994," *Human Rights Quarterly* 16 (1994): 604.

² I believe it to be possible for individual acts or sentiments, particularly of trust and memory, to be extrapolated to the collective; that is to say, those acts which might normally be ascribed to an individual might often as easily be attributed to groups of people, keeping in mind that groups are "logically distinct" from their members. See Trudy Govier, *Social Trust and Human Communities* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997) 206.

³ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (Don Mills: Maxwell Macmillan, 1969) 34-105. She identifies five stages: denial/isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

⁴ There is no question that trauma and grief are, indeed, related, and that trauma can complicate the grieving process. See Cynthia Blomquist, "Comfort for the Grieving Child," in *Healing the Children of War*, ed. Phyllis Kilbourn (Monrovia, CA: MARC Publications, 1997) 58-61.

⁵ Govier and Verwoerd warn against four inferences: the fallacy of composition, in which an individual's characteristics may be ascribed to the entire group; the fallacy of division, in which an individual's characteristics may be inferred from the characteristics of the entire group; hypostatization, whereby the nature or "ontology" of the group is seen as different from that of its members; and atomization, whereby the individual is understood only within the context of her group affiliation. See Trudy Govier and Wilhelm Verwoerd, "Trust and the Problem of National Reconciliation," (Calgary: unpublished manuscript, 2000) 13-14.

²⁸ Schumm draws a distinction between the *aphiemi* or "letting go" act of forgiveness performed by God, and the "process" or struggle that humans often undergo in attempting to do the same. See Dale Henry Schumm, *Forgiveness in the Healing Process*, in *Healing the Children of War*, ed. Phyllis Kilbourn (Monrovia, CA: MARC Publications, 1997) 274-275.

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To assist scholars at McMaster and elsewhere to clarify and refine their research on globalization in preparation for eventual publication.

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