

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

*“I dared to tell all, it was in 2003 [that] I had to give testimony ... [It is] important in that time that it [my story] was written in the book that can be read by our children and they will know that their mother was also involved in politics for the independence of this country... [But] until now they never appreciate our disgrace... We can say that Timorese women are like an empty plastic (bag) with no wind in it. We are living without dignity in Timor-Leste.” Cidalia, Timor-Leste*

*“When I told my story, I just felt again this pain of that day. That was all I felt, how I remembered back that day. So it made me feel sorry about that day I told about... [But] after I told out every true story, one difference I felt was this healing; of this thought that stayed with me, [it] started to go out, and this fear of [from] the Tension.” Erena, Solomon Islands*

### 1.1 Mass Violence and Victim Needs During Transitions Toward Sustainable Peace

Why is it that public truth-telling is sometimes helpful and at other times harmful to victims of mass violence? As evidenced in the above comments from two victims of armed conflict in Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste, the experience of testifying in their country’s truth commission was at the same time a beneficial and painful experience. Truth commissions have emerged as one of the most common post-conflict justice mechanisms created to rectify the consequences of past violence (Wilson 2001). However, recent research has found that public truth-telling in post-conflict settings can simultaneously have a negative impact on some victims of mass violence, while having positive effects for others (Brounéus 2008b, 2010; Byrne 2004; Clark 2010; Hamber et al. 2000; Kent 2012; Laplante and Theidon 2007; Rimé et al. 2011; Stanley 2009). To understand how these post-conflict justice mechanisms can avoid causing further damage to victims, there is a need to shed light on the puzzle

of why public truth-telling has a healing effect for some victims of mass violence while being harmful for others. Hence, this book aims to contribute to a better understanding about the impact of truth-telling upon victims by focussing on the ways in which public truth-telling in truth commissions may be beneficial for victim healing. To do this, I have set out to begin answering the question: *What are the possible pathways that lead from truth-telling to victim healing in post-conflict settings?*

Widespread and systematic violence may be carried out as a tool of repression against a population by internal authoritarian or military regimes, intrastate—including ethnic-based—conflicts, occupation by a foreign military regime, or state-sanctioned policies which marginalise a particular group (Staub 2011). Such violence may leave countries in a condition fraught with a tense political climate, dilapidated institutions and rule of law, economic hardship and poverty, unstable communities, widespread crime, and corruption as well as physical and emotional injuries of individuals (King 2011; Mani 2002). In recent decades, cessations of periods of mass violence have been followed with a variety of strategies initiated by international, state-level, and local institutions and organisations that aim to rectify crimes committed in the past in order to foment a transition to sustainable and harmonious peace. In the words of United States Institute for Peace president, Richard Solomon (as cited in Lederach 1997):

Sustainable peace requires that long-time antagonists not merely lay down their arms but that they achieve profound reconciliation that will endure because it is sustained by a society wide network of relationships and mechanisms that promote justice and address the root causes of enmity before they can regenerate destabilizing tensions (p. ix).

In order to transition to such a state of peace, it is suggested that individual and societal wounds resulting from past conflict must be addressed once violence has ended (Galtung 1996; Hamber and Kelly 2004; Hayner 2011; Kritz 1995; Leebaw 2008; Tutu 1999). Several authors have commented on both the prevalence of genocide in the twentieth century as well as the high numbers of civilian casualties in recent decades (French 2009; Moon 2009). The magnitude of violence in the recent past and hence, individual and collective trauma, necessitates attention as countries attempt to transition to a more peaceful future. Transitional justice, which is aimed at confronting the legacy of abuse perpetrated in the past (Teitel 2003), has been considered to be capable of fulfilling this need to address past trauma.

Transitional justice strategies may comprise a range of judicial and non-judicial mechanisms, including prosecutions, reparations, truth-seeking and truth-telling, institutional reform, purging of former state officials, or some combination of these processes (UNSC 2004). These mechanisms are intended to address consequences of mass violence through the achievement of four primary goals, which can be grouped into the following categories: peacebuilding, justice/accountability, reconciliation, and healing (Kritz 1995; Lambourne 2009; Leebaw 2008; Lundy and McGovern 2008). The determination of how these goals should be pursued through initiating the variety of available transitional justice mechanisms is often a challenging task in the face of competing needs and interests at the state, community, and individual levels (Lundy and McGovern 2008). To this end, transitional processes

inherently require trade-offs as the achievement of one goal may be at the expense of another (Lundy and McGovern, 2008). Common examples of this are the debates over whether post-conflict settings would benefit more from truth or justice, individual healing or national peacebuilding, as some believe these goals may be mutually exclusive (Gutmann and Thompson 2000; Rotberg 2000). In this book, I focus on a specific dimension of post-conflict justice processes by looking at how the transitional justice goal of ‘healing’ affects individual victims. I have chosen to investigate the goal of healing at the individual level based on the proposition that one way of promoting the ability of an emerging nation to overcome previous periods of mass violence and move toward sustainable peace is by addressing individual level consequences of mass violence (Galtung 1996). Indeed, as Mac Ginty (2010) argues, without addressing the ‘indirect’ and structural violence that affects worn-torn environments, the risk of returning to conflict is high.

Research on the relationship between transitional justice processes—particularly of the truth-seeking or truth-telling persuasion—and healing has been developing in the recent past. However, the reasons why some victims experience a sense of healing while others do not after truth-telling in transitional justice processes continue to remain unclear. Truth-telling processes—particularly truth commissions—are often praised for their ability to facilitate healing for victims of armed conflict, but recent empirical research from post-conflict settings such as Peru, Rwanda, South Africa, and Timor-Leste has found that in practice, truth-telling has a mixed effect on the promotion of healing for victims of mass violence. Findings from these studies illustrate that truth-telling can result in negative consequences including: revictimisation/retraumatisation, disappointment or dissatisfaction, frustration, increased symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and insecurity (Brounéus 2008b, 2010; Byrne 2004; Hamber 2009; Hamber et al. 2000; Kent 2012; Rimé et al. 2011; Stanley 2009). At the same time, some small-N studies conducted in these same settings show that truth-telling may be beneficial for victims of mass violence through offering victims a sense of relief, providing them with ‘truth’ or new information, confronting perpetrators to achieve a degree of closure, and receiving recognition, including the possibility of being provided with reparations or assistance (Byrne 2004; Clark 2010; Hamber et al. 2000; Kent 2012; Laplante and Theidon 2007; Rimé et al. 2011; Stanley 2009). Findings related to the impact of officially sanctioned truth-telling on victims have been inconsistent, indicating that while some victims may experience therapeutic benefits, others may feel as if they are worse off after participating in the same process.

Relatively few empirical studies have focussed on determining *why* truth-telling processes are experienced in such vastly different ways by victims of mass violence. Addressing one piece of this complex puzzle, this book seeks to begin clarifying how truth-telling in post-conflict settings may lead to individual victim healing. To this end, I conduct a comparative, empirical investigation of the potential positive impact of public truth-telling upon victims in two post-conflict countries, Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste. Intended as an exploratory, theory-building study, the material presented in the following pages looks at how victim healing can be facilitated

by giving public testimony in truth commission processes, via the causal mechanism of *voice*—a key component of procedural justice to be further discussed below.

This investigation is rooted in restorative justice and procedural justice theories, or more precisely, at their intersection. Restorative justice relates to repairing harm that results from past crimes by attempting to facilitate healing at the victim, offender, and community levels through a participatory process (d'Estrée 2006; Doak and O'Mahony 2006; Rugge and Scott 2009, p. 1; Van Camp and Wemmers 2013; Zehr 1990). Procedural justice, on the other hand, refers to the perceived fairness of a justice or decision-making process (Folger 1977; Lind and Tyler 1988; Thibaut and Walker 1975; Tyler 1994). Research that examined the therapeutic benefits of victim-offender mediation on victims of violent crime in Canada found that procedural justice can have a healing effect on victims who participate in restorative justice processes (Wemmers and Cyr 2005). Scholars point to many possible therapeutic benefits of procedural justice for victims of violence, particularly in relation to *voice*, which is believed to promote a sense of satisfaction, acknowledgment, reduction of uncertainty, empowerment, and healing for individuals (d'Estrée 2006; Folger 1977; Herman 2003; Laxminarayan 2012; Lind and Tyler 1988; Tyler et al. 1985; Van Camp and Wemmers 2013; Wemmers and Cyr 2006). According to procedural justice scholars, *voice* is the ability of an individual to express their views and opinions in a justice or decision-making process (Folger 1977; Lind and Tyler 1988). To add to this definition, this study approaches *voice* as a multidimensional concept in which not only the *telling* of one's experiences is important, but so is being *heard*. This interaction between telling and being heard can result in the feeling that one's suffering has been acknowledged and recognised by others (d'Estrée 2006; Van Camp and Wemmers 2013), an outcome which is considered a crucial component of the healing process.

A primary characteristic of victimisation is that it establishes an imbalanced power relationship between the perpetrator of harm and the one who is abused, essentially empowering the torturer while usurping power and dignity from the tortured (Agger and Jensen 1996; Mollica 1988). Writing on the effects of violent crime on victims, Govier (2009) asserts that 'people commonly seek vindication in the aftermath of wrongdoing because wrongs, by implication, deny worth and status' (p. 40). Having *voice* may be able to help victims to overcome the disempowerment and marginalisation of victimisation because

Voice can be seen as power, status, self-worth, identity, and even existence. Denial of voice can threaten perceptions of fairness, sense of legitimacy of authorities and systems, and ultimately can pose even an existential threat. People may react to denial of voice with non-compliance, passivity, frustration, agitation, and violence. Provision of voice is essential for a sense of justice, community restoration, and healing. (d'Estrée 2006, p. 118)

Through this portrayal, *voice* is considered inherently beneficial for both individuals and communities because of its ability to promote victim healing through re-establishing control and a sense of dignity. To this end, I argue that *voice* is a means through which victims can reclaim control and dignity by telling the story of their trauma and being heard by others, and is therefore a possible causal mechanism that links truth-telling to victim healing in post-conflict settings. As a key component of

this research, it is important to discern how I approach the concept of ‘healing’. For the purposes of this study, healing is defined as restoring one’s ‘capacity to resume the course of their lives’, wherein their past, whether it be ‘political commitment, personal relationships, work, and social connections’ becomes ‘meaningful in the present and the future’ (Cienfuegos and Monelli 1983 p. 44). As periods of mass violence can affect victims economically, physically, and psychologically, healing must be viewed through a ‘holistic’ lens (Clark 2010 p. 48). The above definition considers healing as the restoration of ‘the whole or complete person’ by acknowledging the variety of pathways beyond exclusively psychological or physical repair that may facilitate healing—a necessary perspective in post-conflict settings where victims are affected by trauma on a multitude of levels (Clark 2010 p. 40).

## 1.2 Outline of Findings

For this study, I interviewed a total of 19 individuals who were victims of mass violence in Timor-Leste and Solomon Islands and gave public testimony in the Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste (known by the Portuguese acronym, CAVR) and the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Using a least similar comparative case study research design, I found that when victims experienced *voice* within the context of their country’s national truth commission public hearings, three pathways toward healing were facilitated, namely: empowerment, catharsis, and social acknowledgment. I propose that fulfilling the desire to share their stories with others, contributing to the historical narrative of the atrocities committed within their country, and increasing awareness about what happened during the conflict while giving public testimony were aspects of *voice* which provided victims with an opportunity to restore control, or be empowered. Further, I argue that communicating the stories of their past trauma for others to hear was a source of relief, which I suggest was another aspect of *voice* that facilitated a sense of catharsis for interviewees. Lastly, receiving empathetic support or feedback can be considered as another facet of *voice* which allowed victims to receive social acknowledgement of their previous suffering. In light of the definition used in this study, I argue that these three pathways helped interviewees to transform their past trauma into something meaningful in the present and future as well as to restore their capacity to live their lives.

In addition to these findings that illustrate how having *voice* contributed to victim healing, I discovered several ways in which *voice* was inhibited in relation to giving public testimony, which I argue impeded interviewees’ sense of healing. Several instances where storytelling was limited or mismanaged by each truth commission were found, which hindered victims’ ability to have *voice* in the process. Some interviewees also cited experiencing feelings of distress associated with giving testimony related to either reliving traumatic memories in front of others, a perceived incompatibility between cultural norms and publicly airing sensitive stories, and experiencing fear or anxiety related to sharing their stories. Finally, I found that

*voice* was inhibited for some interviewees through the receipt of negative social reactions within their communities in response to victims' testimonies, which I suggest disrupted the healing process.

Two other issues emerged strongly as themes within the interviews in both Timor-Leste and Solomon Islands. First, responses from many interviewees in each country suggest that they felt frustrated and confused about the purpose and goals of the truth commission, even after they had given testimony. Second, the majority of interviewees cited feeling disappointed, upset, or hurt because they felt as if their participation in the truth commission process had not resulted in substantive outcomes, which ranged from material or monetary assistance, reparations, justice (in Timor-Leste), and reconciliation (in Solomon Islands). Based on the interview responses, I argue that the absence of these outcomes may have further compromised victim healing, as many argue that these components are necessary for victims to overcome their past trauma.

My findings thus suggest that *voice* is a possible causal mechanism that links truth-telling to victim healing through facilitating the creation of three pathways: empowerment, catharsis, and social acknowledgment. However, the healing potential of truth-telling may be jeopardised when victims' *voice* is hindered in instances where their ability to share their stories is limited, they experience distress related to giving testimony, or their testimonies are met with negative responses from community members. As comparative, empirical studies which investigate how truth-telling contributes to victim healing in post-conflict settings are currently limited in the field of transitional justice, the results from this study enhance the body of existing literature. In addition, the least similar comparative case study research design has allowed for the discovery of findings which may be relevant in other transitional contexts (George and Bennett 2004). My findings indicate that the realisation of *voice* within truth commission processes can be an important pathway to healing for victims of mass violence, although much remains to be done. Future studies should continue to test how the role of *voice* affects the healing potential of truth-telling in other post-conflict settings to develop a more complete understanding of *voice* as a causal mechanism. Finally, from a practical standpoint, the results of this study also contribute to an increased understanding of how victim healing can be better promoted within transitional strategies after periods of mass violence, which could be used to improve the design of future truth commissions.

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