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# Reconciliation in a Community-Based Restorative Justice Intervention

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*Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) are among the primary means for promoting reconciliation in communities recovering from violent conflict. However, there is a lack of consensus about what reconciliation means or how it is best achieved. In a qualitative study of the first TRC in the U.S., this research interviewed victims of racial violence who participated in the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (GTRC), a community-based restorative justice intervention. Findings reveal that participants conceptualized reconciliation as a multi-leveled process, that different concepts of reconciliation influenced assessments of the success and limitations of the GTRC, and indicate how community-based restorative interventions can be improved to contribute to reconciliation in a local setting.*

*Key words: reconciliation, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, restorative justice, victims, violence, post-conflict reconstruction, peace building*

Advocates of peace and nonviolence have long sought to find solutions to the problems of war, violent conflict and oppression (Adams, 1991), from Jane Addams' peace activism during WWI (Addams, 1922) to Gandhi's nonviolent revolution in India (Hiranandani, 2008). After the Nuremberg trials following WWII, war crimes trials and tribunals became the preferred means of addressing violence in the post-conflict setting (Stover & Weinstein, 2004). However, the limitations to implementing such trials include settings with an under-developed rule of law, jurisdictional restrictions, and political

compromises necessary to establish peace. Furthermore, trials are not victim-centered and do not promote the reconciliation of conflicting groups.

Addressing these shortcomings, restorative justice has emerged as a field of theory and practice that seeks to repair the social fabric that is damaged through violence (Braithwaite, 2002). Restorative justice has been applied to child welfare (Adams & Chandler, 2004) criminal justice (Umbreit & Armour, 2011), and international conflict resolution and peace-making (Beck, Kropf, & Leonard, 2011; Moore, 2004). Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) are restorative justice-based interventions that promote the social recovery from violence through reconciliation (Androff, 2010b). Originating in Africa and Latin America, TRCs have been applied globally, most famously in South Africa in the peaceful transition from Apartheid to democracy (Hayner, 2001). The international community, state actors and community activists have implemented TRCs and other reconciliation interventions at international, national and local levels, despite a lack of consensus on reconciliation's meaning or how to best achieve it.

This study examines the first TRC to be applied in the U.S., a community-based restorative justice intervention that sought to promote reconciliation in Greensboro, North Carolina after decades of division and animosity following a 1979 incident of racial violence. Through the perspectives of victims of the violence that participated in the TRC, this research seeks to understand reconciliation in a local, community-based context. This study investigates: how victims' expectations, perceptions, and experiences with reconciliation reflect differing conceptual understandings of reconciliation; how the Greensboro TRC (GTRC) attempted to accomplish reconciliation; and the limits of reconciliation in local settings. A better understanding of what reconciliation means in a local U.S. context and the successes and limitations of the TRC in achieving reconciliation will lead to improved interventions for promoting peace and rebuilding communities recovering from violence.

### The Greensboro Truth & Reconciliation Commission

The Greensboro Massacre was an episode of racial violence that occurred on November 3, 1979 in Greensboro, North Carolina (GTRC, 2006; Magarrell & Wesley, 2008). A racially mixed group of labor and social justice activists with ties to the Communist Worker's Party had been organizing for labor rights in North Carolina. Members had gained union leadership positions inside textile mills, and began to protest an increase of Ku Klux Klan (KKK) activity in the state. Earlier in 1979, the KKK screened their recruitment film, *Birth of a Nation*, in a community theatre and the activists protested outside and burnt a confederate flag. Vowing revenge, the KKK and members of the American Nazi Party made plans to attend a future demonstration; provocative and violent rhetoric escalated between the groups. The Greensboro Police Department and the FBI had an informant in the KKK and knowledge that the groups were arming themselves in preparation for the demonstration, yet there was no law enforcement presence on the day of the rally. On November 3, 1979, the demonstrators held a social justice rally and community teach-in in a low-income, African American neighborhood in Greensboro that was to culminate in a march. KKK and American Nazi Party members arrived at the demonstration in a caravan, and a fight broke out. The KKK and Nazis fired into the crowd, killing five demonstrators and injuring ten more.

Afterwards, police arrested some victims and surveilled others (Bermanzohn, 2003; GTRC, 2006; Waller, 2002). City authorities prevented further protests, harassed the survivors, and pressured the local media to portray the violence as an equal shootout between two radical fringe groups, even though only one side suffered casualties. The victims were portrayed in the media as outside agitators without community ties. Despite video footage of the shooting, the perpetrators were acquitted in two criminal trials by all-white juries. The District Attorney responsible for prosecuting the shooters was hostile to the victims, and denied publically any difference between killing communists in Vietnam and killing them in the U.S. Distrust of the city government grew among the low-income and African American residents, as many suspected

that law enforcement agencies were complicit in the violence. The fallout increased racial tensions and a climate of animosity that negatively affected life in Greensboro (Wheaton, 1987).

The survivors dedicated themselves to pursuing justice for the dead and the truth about the violence (Bermanzohn, 2003; Waller, 2002). In 1985 they won a federal civil suit against the Greensboro Police Department and the perpetrators. The settlement launched the Greensboro Justice Fund, a civil rights organization promoting democracy and racial tolerance in the U.S. South. One survivor founded the Beloved Community Center, which advocates for criminal justice and education reform, campaigns for the homeless, and has organized K-Mart workers.

The idea of reinvestigating the Greensboro Massacre was discussed at the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the violence by survivors and community leaders impressed by the success of the South African TRC. With philanthropic funding and NGO consultants, they decided to apply a similar model to Greensboro. In 2004 the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (GTRC) was created with a mandate to examine the causes and consequences of November 3, 1979 and to promote dialogue and reconciliation. In an effort to ensure that the process would be objective in its investigation and independent from the victims, the organizers conducted an inclusive selection process to choose the seven Commissioners that would lead the GTRC.

While many of the participants in the GTRC were victims and concerned community members, Greensboro police personnel, lawyers from the criminal trials, and a few of the perpetrators came forward to participate (GTRC, 2006; Williams, 2009). The Mayor and the City Council of Greensboro declined to participate and actually opposed the process, even though all the African American City Council members voted in favor of supporting the GTRC. Those who were opposed to the GTRC, including the city administration, claimed that Greensboro's racial problems were in the past and irrelevant to contemporary life, and that focusing on old issues would harm Greensboro's image. Further, the reaction of the wider community was mixed; there was a lot of support in the form of donations and volunteers, but many in Greensboro were

confused by, ignorant or critical of the GTRC for being overly focused upon the victims.

Without any governmental support, the grassroots GTRC did not enjoy subpoena powers to compel the disclosure of records or the testimony of individuals. The GTRC took voluntary statements from approximately 200 people, including victims, perpetrators, and community members, and held three public hearings on the events leading up to the violence, the events of November 3, 1979, and the consequences of the violence. They consulted the records they could obtain, however, many documents released under the Freedom of Information Act were significantly redacted. The GTRC concluded in 2006 with the release of the Final Report, a comprehensive account of their findings and recommendations for the community.

As an intervention, the GTRC faced significant constraints of funding, time, and authority that limited the scope of its work. Functioning as a grassroots community-based initiative without governmental support, the GTRC operated on a shoestring budget and with a small staff supported primarily by volunteers. By design, the GTRC was a time-limited intervention; the Commissioners were empanelled in 2004 and the Final Report was released in 2006. While it accomplished a lot in its two years, its work was also constrained by these time limits. The third limit on the GTRC's functioning was the lack of sanction and support from the City of Greensboro. In addition to the technical limitations of not having subpoena power to compel participation and obtain records, this may have harmed the appearance of the GTRC's legitimacy for some in the Greensboro community and contributed to the relatively low turnout of perpetrators that participated in the GTRC. That the GTRC was organized and completed its work in the face of these constraints is remarkable.

## Reconciliation

### *Definitions of Reconciliation*

Reconciliation is as popular a concept as it is unclear. Connotations of social harmony have led to unrealistic expectations of friendly relationships between warring parties (Kumar, 1999; Stover & Weinstein, 2004) and the goal of reconciliation has been dismissed as an ephemeral and spiritual

but impractical goal (Boraine, 2004; Tutu, 1999). Despite this conceptual confusion, the term abounds in social science and post-conflict projects around the world.

Reconciliation's etymology from Latin means 'coming together,' and its main usage has been theological (Boraine, 2004; Kumar, 1999; Minow, 1998; Tutu, 1999). Most definitions of reconciliation in post-conflict settings involve communication and mutual tolerance between opposing groups (Minow, 1998). Reconciliation has been defined as the "mutually conciliatory accommodation between antagonistic or formerly antagonistic persons or groups" (Kriesberg, 2007, p. 2), where each side accepts the other's "right to co-exist" (Kumar, 1999, p. 1). The peaceful co-existence of both victims and perpetrators of violence is the goal of reconciliation, achieved through normalized relations (Rosenberg, 1994) that involve both "restoring dignity to victims" and "dealing respectfully with those who assisted or were complicit with the violence" (Minow, 1998, p. 23). Stover and Weinstein (2004) prefer social reconstruction or reclamation to describe restoring safety, rejecting wrongdoing, and rebuilding communities after violence.

The willingness to 'put up with' people or groups that one previously was openly hostile towards is an essential ingredient of reconciliation (Cox & Pawar, 2006; Gibson, 2004; Stover & Weinstein, 2004). Increased cooperation and mutual tolerance through intergroup engagement and dialogue is based upon the social contact hypothesis of intergroup relations, which holds that the more people interact, the more likely they are to tolerate and accept each other. Applying this concept to post-Apartheid South Africa, Gibson (2004) found that "inter-racial reconciliation is heavily dependent upon interracial contacts" (p. 20).

Reconciliation does not necessarily entail forgiveness, which is often criticized as an unrealistic goal following violence (Kumar, 1999; Minow, 1998; Tutu, 1999). Reconciliation interventions and TRCs sometimes lead to forgiveness, such as when a former Apartheid death squad commander was forgiven by the widows of his victims after he participated in the South African TRC and apologized (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003). Despite a significant social psychology literature on interpersonal conflict and forgiveness (Enright, 2001), little

attention has been paid to the meaning and process of reconciliation among victims of violence (Androff, 2010a).

### *Approaches to Reconciliation*

Varying approaches differ on how to best achieve reconciliation, ranging from retributive justice, restorative justice, political, and social justice perspectives. Retributive justice advocates maintain that reconciliation is a by-product of the rule of law, and view criminal prosecutions as the best route to achieving reconciliation (Stover & Weinstein, 2004). Restorative justice emphasizes repairing the social fabric through mediation and dialogue between victims and offenders (Braithwaite, 2002; Umbreit & Armour, 2011), and views reconciliation as a process of re-humanization necessary to reverse the negative stereotypes and dehumanization that accompanies violent conflict (Androff, 2012b; Ajdukovic & Corkalo, 2004; Halpern & Weinstein, 2004). The political approach defines reconciliation as an exercise in state-building and democratization (Gibson, 2004). Restoring democratic discourse, supporting pluralism and diversity, adopting peaceful dispute resolution and joint participation in communal life are linked to strengthening civil society, open elections, and reforming institutions. Those who argue for compensatory or distributive justice hold that reconciliation would be best achieved through reparations and structural changes to the economic system (Minow, 1998). This perspective recognizes the role of inequality and structural violence in perpetuating physical violence.

Combining these perspectives and drawing from Bronfenbrenner and community psychology, Stover and Weinstein (2004) have proposed an ecological model of social reconstruction and reconciliation. This systems approach echoes social work's paradigm of the person-in-environment perspective (Payne, 2005). Stover and Weinstein (2004) define their ecological model as "a process that reaffirms and develops a society and its institutions based on shared values and human rights" and includes legal, education, economic and intergroup engagement interventions to address the factors that led to the conflict at the levels of individuals, communities and the state (p. 5).



*Reconciliation as a Multi-leveled Process*

Research by Stover and Weinstein (2004) reveals that social reconstruction and reconciliation is a slow process, occurs on multiple levels (individual, community, and state) and is affected by social identity, collective memory, and intergroup interaction. Daly and Sarkin (2007) also contend that reconciliation occurs on multiple levels ranging from individual to the international. Androff (2010a) developed a typology of interpersonal reconciliation that includes cognitive-affective reconciliation (changes within individuals), behavioral reconciliation (a gesture made by one person towards another), and social reconciliation (acknowledgment of another's behavioral reconciliation resulting in transformed relationships). Reconciliation also can occur within communities, as former perpetrators and victims learn to coexist, and within nations, when people are reconciled with the state following repression and persecution. International reconciliation refers to peaceful relations between nations following conflict.

In addition to occurring on multiple levels, reconciliation is also thought to be a process that unfolds in stages (Maynard, 1999; Stover & Weinstein, 2004). Most stage models of reconciliation and social recovery from violence include the steps of establishing safety, establishing culturally appropriate modes of bereavement, restoring trust and morality, and facilitating dialogue and education. Establishing safety is paramount; reconciliation initiatives often fail if the violent conflict is ongoing (Hayner, 2001). Bereavement entails cultural mourning practices of ceremony, art, dance, music, and drama that contribute to healing (Minow, 1998). Rebuilding trust and morality includes re-humanizing victims and perpetrators, promoting empathy, and creating a historical record of the injustices (Androff, 2012b). Dialogue and education foster critical reflection on the causes and consequences of the conflict, and work to cultivate respect and prevent future violence (Freedman et al., 2004).

*TRCs' Contribution to Reconciliation*

Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) are restorative justice interventions that investigate human rights abuses, political repression and violent conflict, and are one of

the most popular post-conflict interventions for repairing the social fabric (Androff, 2010b). The truth-seeking function of TRCs is a narrative process that aims to add victims' stories to the historical record (Androff, 2012a). The reconciliation function of TRCs seeks to repair the relationships between victims, perpetrators and the community. TRCs promote reconciliation by bringing together perpetrators, victims, and community members who may have been witnesses or supporters of various sides; all are given the opportunity to share their experiences and engage in dialogue. TRCs also contribute to reconciliation through public hearings, community mediation ceremonies, reparations and restitution. These strategies often incorporate traditional or indigenous models of community reconciliation and restoration by combining local culture, religion, and conflict resolution techniques into TRCs. The South African TRC emphasized an African concept of collectivity, *ubuntu* (Hayner, 2001), the Timor-Leste TRC incorporated animist shamans into local reconciliation ceremonies (Androff, 2008), and the Greensboro TRC worked with Christian churches, labor and civil rights leaders (Magarrell & Wesley, 2008).

TRCs must operate in the wider context of social reconstruction; the social recovery from violence, injustice, and repression is a large context for post-conflict interventions. TRCs do not constitute a comprehensive intervention for achieving reconciliation, and should be one tool among many. The GTRC did not result in total reconciliation in Greensboro, yet was able to contribute to reconciliation in important ways. TRCs are best understood as limited mechanisms that can contribute to a range of broader reconstruction efforts and can accomplish certain goals under certain conditions. If these are clarified, TRCs can be successful interventions in an ecological framework of post-conflict reconstruction. TRCs play a significant role with other social reconstruction efforts, including legal trials, economic development, education reform, as well as cultural practices that promote community bereavement, the re-humanization of social groups, trust building between groups, and peaceful conflict resolution.

## Methods

This study employed a qualitative design to explore the perspectives of victims of violence who participated in the GTRC ( $n = 17$ ). This is the first study of this population and their experiences of reconciliation, therefore, an exploratory, qualitative design is appropriate. In-depth, open-ended interviews allowed for a detailed investigation of victims' perspectives on reconciliation. An interview guide was developed for this research to examine the theme of reconciliation that elicited background information, such as respondents' demographics and socio-economic status. Respondents were asked what reconciliation means to them, if and how they felt the GTRC addressed reconciliation, how successful the GTRC was at bringing about reconciliation, and what the limits of reconciliation were in this context. Respondents were encouraged to express anything they felt was relevant as well as both positive and negative experiences with the GTRC. Contact information for victims who participated in the GTRC was obtained from the GTRC Research Director.

Each participant was first contacted with a letter describing the research project, and then contacted a week later by phone for follow up. After securing informed consent, participants were offered a small amount of compensation for their time, \$20. Purposive sampling identified seventeen victims of the 1979 violence who participated in the GTRC. Interviewing other victims of the violence who choose not to participate in the intervention was beyond the scope of this study. Perpetrators and community members were not included in this sample, in order to isolate victim's experiences with reconciliation as a result of their participation in the GTRC. The absence of perpetrators' perspectives is a limitation of this research and to understanding the GTRC's contribution to reconciliation, however, understanding victims' experiences of reconciliation is central to the functioning of TRCs. For the purpose of this research, the category 'victim' refers to the survivors of the Greensboro Massacre, including those shot and stabbed, widows and children of those killed, and others present who witnessed the violence and could have been injured. 'Participation in the GTRC' refers to victims who gave a personal statement in a private interview to a GTRC

staffer, delivered testimony before a public hearing, and attended GTRC events such as planning meetings, the seating ceremony of the Commissioners, and the Final Report release ceremony.

The sample was primarily comprised of the fourteen activists at the 1979 demonstration as well as three of their children. In 1979 the demonstrators were in their 20s and 30s, and their children were either very young or born afterwards; the oldest of this group was 9. The children, who refer to themselves as the Second Generation, were included because they met the sample inclusion criteria as victims and participants; the oldest was present at the demonstration and the others grew up deeply affected by the violence as their parents struggled through the aftermath and each gave a statement to the GTRC or testified before a public hearing. At the time of the interviews, the survivors were in their 50s and 60s, and their children in their 20s and 30s. Participants are randomly labeled A-Q to protect confidentiality. The sample was nearly even between genders; nine were female and eight male. Respondents self-identified their ethnicity; seven described themselves as White and non-Jewish, four described themselves as White and Jewish, and four identified as African American. Twelve of the respondents held graduate degrees, two bachelor's degrees, and three had completed high school but had not attended college. Interviews averaged two hours, and were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed in ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software. A hermeneutical approach and thematic coding were used to analyze data to uncover the meaning of reconciliation to victims. Triangulation was employed to verify findings by checking with GTRC staff, accessing the GTRC archive of statements from the public hearings, and by accessing local media, such as newspapers and blogs.

### Victims' Perspectives on Reconciliation

Respondents' descriptions of their perceptions and experiences with reconciliation reveal insights about what reconciliation means in a local community context. These findings include respondents' conceptions of reconciliation as a multi-leveled process, their views of the GTRC's efforts to address reconciliation, and reservations about its limits. The GTRC

was a complex intervention, and respondents had positive and negative assessments of its outcomes. Despite frustration with its limitations, respondents noted its value, "[the GTRC] is part of a flawed, but important, process ... people just have to recognize it for what it is" (B).

### *Defining Reconciliation*

When asked about their conceptions of reconciliation, respondents echoed the lack of consensus in the literature on a specific definition. Respondent H summed up the problem: "It's hard to know [what reconciliation is] because we have so little of it." However, respondents identified two key features of reconciliation: that it is multi-leveled and is a long term process.

*The multiple levels of reconciliation.* Respondents universally stated that reconciliation occurs on different levels. There can be many acts of reconciliation. "It's not a wholesale, single thing" (C). One respondent explained, "I think genuine reconciliation has taken place on a couple levels" (G). The levels along which reconciliation occurs were identified as micro and macro reconciliation. Micro-level reconciliation refers to changes in and between individuals. Macro-level reconciliation refers to changes between groups of people (perpetrators and victims, GTRC supporters and critics, African American and White communities, other minority-majority groups, and different age and class groups). It is unclear if macro-level reconciliation is the result of many cases of individual reconciliations, or if it is more than the accretion of reconciliation on the micro level. Macro-level reconciliation, played out on a larger scale than micro-level reconciliation, relates to ongoing efforts in the community to further the GTRC's work. Macro reconciliation involves "engagement" or getting diverse segments of the community to come together and participate in the GTRC. One example of macro reconciliation in the GTRC was that participants were made up of diverse age groups, specifically many young people (mainly college students) and older adults (mainly members of church congregations).

*The long term process of reconciliation.* In addition to the multi-level concept, most respondents described reconciliation as something that happens over a long period of time. In the

literature, reconciliation is most often conceived of as a process over time in multiple stages. Respondents indicated that the GTRC was a “really powerful first step” and “a good first step” (I) toward reconciliation, though there is still a long way to go. “I think steps towards [reconciliation] were achieved. I think it’s an ongoing process but I think [the GTRC] is definitely a good first couple steps towards it” (G). Thus respondents were positive but cautious, often referring to the GTRC’s contribution to reconciliation as the first stage of a longer process which required more work, “fundamentally I think this is like the first tiny step in a bigger process,” and “I think it was just more or less a beginning of acknowledging some injustice” (H). Respondents indicated that the GTRC began the process of reconciliation by acknowledging diverse perspectives and important issues, and by promoting dialogue between these groups.

Respondents were cautious in assessing the GTRC’s contribution to reconciliation in Greensboro, which revealed different perspectives on reconciliation. “I think that they helped it move along. It wasn’t like a magic thing, like one day [there is the GTRC] and the next day [there is reconciliation]” (E). Respondents also had varying ideas of what the GTRC could achieve. “I don’t think all of the social healing could come about through the truth and reconciliation process, but I think that’s an important part of it. I’m glad it’s happened” (H). As such, most respondents talked about wanting to see continued work towards reconciliation. “I hope the process will be ongoing because that will be [the GTRC’s] true legacy—if it can be promoted and built upon. Otherwise [reconciliation will be] very limited” (H). This respondent saw the GTRC’s contribution to reconciliation as part of a broader struggle for social justice.

I view this from the perspective of the struggle overall—it’s not a conclusive phase of the struggle, but an example of what can be done to move the struggle forward on the road towards making those changes that we want to see. (H)

Another respondent voiced that the full meaning of the GTRC will be revealed in the future, and determined by

activism. "I think it goes on. If there's going to be any meaning for Greensboro, it's got to come out in community organization and struggle" (M). Ongoing efforts at social change that stem from a TRC reflect a vision of reconciliation that includes social justice. This view necessitates that the full measure of community reconciliation may not be revealed until long after the completion of the GTRC.

### *Addressing Reconciliation*

Nine respondents felt that the GTRC successfully addressed reconciliation, and achieved more reconciliation than they had expected was possible. "There's been genuine reconciliation that has gone on, that would not have gone on" (G). Some were surprised at what the GTRC was able to do, "it was, in many ways, more than what I expected" (B) and "my expectations were exceeded" (I). Another respondent said, "I'm delighted with how it came out. I think [the GTRC] really did just such a good job" (I). Eight respondents had a more mixed perspective on what the GTRC accomplished. "The Truth and Reconciliation process exceeded my expectations and in some ways, I felt let down, so it was both. It was both more and less than I had hoped" (B). The primary factors that respondents identified as facilitating the GTRC's success in addressing reconciliation were the structure of the intervention and the stance of neutrality and independence of the community-based organization.

Respondent C believed that the structure of the GTRC promoted reconciliation. "There was an atmosphere conducive to people hearing one another's truth, maybe hearing it for the first time" and stated that "many acts of reconciliation happened in the course of the Commission's work" (C). She added that the GTRC "invited reconciliation," that the process had "reconciliation built into it." Hearing people's stories, especially listening to the perpetrators, promoted reconciliation. As C noted, "If you're going to sit and talk, not be shooting at one another, furthermore, you're going to listen; you're going to listen respectfully. People are going to have their say," which would "promote reconciliation." Another commented that "I never thought black people and Klan members could [both participate], but it's being done. It's honest, truthful and healing ... it's a good process" (D).

Others emphasized how the neutrality of the GTRC contributed to its success at reconciliation. The GTRC was organized so that the victims would not be in control of the process; this distance earned the GTRC objectivity. People described the GTRC as "an open process," and as being "transparent" and thus credible, because "it does draw on so many different people" (B, I). This independence for the victims was sometimes "frustrating" when some respondents felt that "[the victims] weren't having as loud a voice as we wanted" or that the Commissioners and other participants "were saying things that I disagreed with," yet many agreed that this was "really a mark of its value," and "that's part of why it's so good, because they are so independent and can say things that we wouldn't agree with." Respondent I added that this ensured that the GTRC wasn't "just the mouthpiece for Greensboro Justice Fund or former members of Communist Workers Party or the Second Generation [of survivors]." Despite the frustrations, many felt that the GTRC "really was beyond us and I think that that's part of what made its success." Another person indicated that the GTRC's objectivity was ensured by refraining from attacking city agencies. "I think they sought reconciliation honestly, sincerely. They didn't go around trying to bash the police" (H).

### *Limits of Reconciliation*

Respondents indicated that the GTRC's constraints and the overall lack of participation by perpetrators limited the GTRC's ability to achieve reconciliation. Respondent F felt that reconciliation was a great idea. "I really love the idea that you can make [reconciliation] happen, have some healing and get to a better understanding of what went on," but was poorly executed. "I've not been overly impressed with how this [turned out]."

Disappointment with the GTRC reflected the conception of reconciliation as a long-term process. Eight respondents were disappointed at the reconciliation achieved by the GTRC. "I expected more," one stated. Another noted, "there is still a long ways to go" (A, G). Many respondents were skeptical of the GTRC's contribution to overall reconciliation in Greensboro, "I had low expectations from the start. I wanted it to work, I thought it was a great idea, and I was glad someone else was



trying, but I wasn't going to put any of my time into it" (F). "I think it is a deafening silence there [on how the Commission addressed reconciliation]," leading to a negative assessment, "[I] think the impact of the GTRC upon the community has been minimal" (F).

Some respondents felt the absence of participation by some perpetrators hampered reconciliation from the outset. "I think the Commission was limited because the lack of involvement from the other side," and "the lack of participation by the perpetrators makes it difficult for it to be a complete reconciliation" (A). Respondent J added, "I would have liked to have heard more from the people who didn't like us ... it would have been nice to have more Klans and Nazis there just to hear what they had to say." This was disappointing to some respondents, due to the efforts of the GTRC to reach out to "the Klansmen, the Nazis, the police department, the public officials in Greensboro," which "offered them the opportunity to come forward and tell their story" (H). This was a common complaint raised in terms of achieving a wider reconciliation. "For the most part they didn't accept that opportunity, the fact that they didn't accept it probably hurt reconciliation more than helped it" (H).

Respondents were mixed in their views of the perpetrators that did participate; their differences were a result of their conceptions of reconciliation. Since most of the perpetrators didn't participate at all, and the few that did only did so in a very circumscribed manner, the majority of respondents were disappointed with this aspect of the GTRC. Several reasons were cited for this; chief among them was a lack of good-faith participation of the KKK and Nazi perpetrators, who did participate in the GTRC but stopped short of acknowledging their own failures and apologizing. Respondent B described prerequisites for reconciliation, "there has to be an acknowledgement of wrong-doing and sincere intent to be or do differently." They were not satisfied here. "I didn't hear a lot of that. Most of the people who came forward weren't being candid, weren't being forthright and didn't honestly want to acknowledge their wrong-doing." They shared their perception of what the perpetrators said. "We heard folks who said, 'I wish I hadn't come that day because what happened was I

ended up in jail for a day.” Others said, “I didn’t know there was going to be violence.” These statements were made “by people who brought the guns or organized the guns and knew there was going to be violence.” These respondents’ evaluation of the situation was that “saying, ‘I didn’t think that there was going to be violence,’ doesn’t lay a basis for the word reconciliation,” and this prevented “conditions for what I would see as real reconciliation which would have to come from some folks who had done some real soul searching.” Victims also described what they would have liked to hear from the perpetrators instead: “I did plan violence. I did come because I was planning to kill people and these are the people who I talked to and I really, really wish I hadn’t brought that gun and killed those people.” If they had heard statements to that effect, more of the victims would have been open to reconciliation, “then you can talk to me about reconciliation. In the absence of that it’s hard to imagine what that would really look like, for me” (M).

This failure to fully participate and engage in the GTRC frustrated many and constituted a significant obstacle to reconciliation that they were not able to overcome. “They’ve been able to obscure the situation for decades, for a generation and a half. So, on the subject of forgiveness, forget it. On the subject of reconciliation, forget it” (O). B felt that this prevented the GTRC from working as it was intended, because “the process itself didn’t lend itself to [reconciliation].”

Some respondents gave specific reasons why they thought the GTRC’s efforts at reconciliation were limited, including media relations, outreach efforts, and insufficient neutrality. Respondent F was impressed by the only perpetrator who apologized to two of the victims, and raised the question of “why wasn’t [the apology] a marquee story for our side? Not just for our side, but for the whole TRC process?” This failure to publicize even modest successes was seen as a limiting factor to drawing attention to the reconciliation efforts and a wider community impact “that was pretty powerful, but I never heard anybody make anything of it. I never heard anybody on our side say, ‘list that as a good thing.’” This kind of good press, this respondent felt, could have provided justification for the process. “You can say that’s worth it right there, just to

have even one guy who was so involved and a shooter [make an apology]."

Respondent J felt that reconciliation would have been better served through greater outreach to "more people who were not so happy with us" and if the GTRC had "some kind of follow up with ... people that don't like us." Others feared the victim-centered approach of the GTRC prevented perpetrators from being fully engaged in the process. Respondent F criticized the attitude of the GTRC as "'Oh, sure, we're going to apologize for what it's clear we did wrong, but basically, we were the good guys and they were the bad guys.'" This was seen as another obstacle to reconciliation, especially discouraging more perpetrator participation. "I never quite understood how that proposition was going to be inviting to anyone else, or how it was going to deal with people in the middle—it's a question for how TRC's can ever work."

Other respondents described victims that chose not to participate in the GTRC and who criticized the process. "There's been criticism ... that this is no place for a TRC." This person "hated the idea," of a TRC, "thought it was horrible," and felt that "to even say it in the same breath as South Africa was an abomination." Respondent J explained this person's perspective by saying, "[one of the demonstrators] is very angry about the history and doesn't [think the conflict was legitimate enough to warrant] a TRC."

Respondents cited confusion over the meaning of reconciliation, its nebulous nature and idealistic intentions, as preventing the GTRC from having more of an impact. Respondent F complained, "I haven't seen an explicit discussion about how you define it, or the process exactly for getting there? It seemed a little vague." This seemed especially true as people struggled to understand how reconciliation works. "From what I've seen, the plan is: if everybody tells their story, they'll feel better and they won't be so divided or angry, and there'll be some sort of implied reconciliation" (F). Four people questioned reconciliation as a realistic goal in a community characterized by power inequalities, emphasizing the economic disparities between the two sides. "It's not a question of two [equal] sides in conflict, [but] one side's got power and the other is side trying to defend itself" (K).

## Discussion and Implications

The GTRC is an example of the popularity and proliferation of reconciliation initiatives, however it is distinct from previous TRCs as a grassroots-organized and community-based intervention at a local level in a relatively small community context. The victims' lived experiences of recovering from violence and grappling with a community reconciliation intervention contribute to the clarification of the concept and especially its limitations. However, this research is limited by several methodological factors. The respondents were only interviewed after their participation in the GTRC. In the future, baseline data collected prior to the intervention should be used to assess participants' expectations of reconciliation interventions and combined with follow up studies. Also, this study only interviewed the victims that participated in the intervention; this was a self-selected population. Data from the victims that elected to not participate could shed light on further limitations of the GTRC and how it was perceived in the wider community. Most significantly, research with the perpetrators that did and did not participate is necessary to enlarge the picture of the GTRC; future research should attend to all affected populations in order to assess reconciliation interventions.

Respondents confirmed the two basic elements of reconciliation found in the literature—that reconciliation is both a multi-leveled and a long term process. Respondents distinguished reconciliation between individuals from reconciliation between groups, within community, and with the local city government. They stressed that reconciliation would be a long term process in Greensboro, and any contribution that the GTRC may have made is only the first step which needs to be consolidated and extended. Beyond these core elements, respondents expressed differences in their conceptualizations and thus experiences of reconciliation. For respondents who were generally satisfied with the GTRC, the process contributed to reconciliation and they accepted that reconciliation was a practical goal in this setting. They felt that reconciliation could be accomplished through dialogue; the process of getting people to talk and respectfully listening to the other side was seen as instrumental to establishing a measure of

reconciliation.

However, as noted in the literature, vague definitions and unrealistic expectations of reconciliation can confound the implementation of reconciliation projects. Some respondents had difficulty with the concept and were troubled with the ill-defined nature of reconciliation; others questioned its appropriateness as a goal. These respondents' understanding of reconciliation is linked to the goal of social justice and the transformation of society. It is likely that these expectations were too high and exceeded the GTRC's capacity to address and remedy the structural inequalities and injustices of social life in the U.S. South. Future TRCs may improve the intervention by better defining reconciliation. Clarifying participants' expectations of reconciliation may lead to more realistic views of the outcomes. If the process is defined more narrowly, people and communities may get more out of it. Greater specificity about the anticipated goals will lend itself to increased publicity and outreach campaigns, and may make reconciliation efforts more inviting to perpetrators. TRCs are limited interventions that can overpromise their potential; the very name of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission may contribute to unrealistic expectations by proposing that 'truth' exists and 'reconciliation' is achievable. When linked to social justice, the ideal of reconciliation is better thought of as a valuable process than an attainable destination. The concrete work of increasing mutual tolerance by facilitating dialogue and respectful listening between antagonistic groups is achievable and is a contribution of the GTRC. The willingness to coexist with others in a diverse society is a building block of peace and social stability; in this way, TRCs and reconciliation interventions can further the goal of peace and nonviolent social movements.

The City of Greensboro's opposition to the GTRC was another obstacle to reconciliation in the community. Some respondents felt that reconciliation was unrealistic in the absence of those in positions of power in the city. This relates to the view held by some respondents of the role of social change as an element of reconciliation. For these respondents, dialogue that does not lead to social change does not constitute steps toward reconciliation. Most TRCs have been borne of political transitions; there was no such transfer of power or change in the city administration in Greensboro. This hinders the GTRC's

ability to contribute to social change and limits its impact to the grassroots level. However, some respondents also felt that the GTRC had a low community impact, and that further publicity and outreach efforts would have enhanced its reception by the general population of Greensboro. Additional resources could have amplified the GTRC's publicity and outreach efforts. More attention to framing reconciliation initiatives to maximize community response and participation could improve future interventions. The GTRC's lack of official state sanction is unique among TRCs, however, there were benefits associated with this independence from government. State implemented reconciliation efforts have been criticized as instruments of political expediency. Some respondents found that the lack of City support increased the moral authority of the GTRC. It was a grassroots community sanctioned project—an exercise in direct democracy and an example of what citizens can accomplish despite resistance from the government. That even a few perpetrators participated is testament to the power of moral suasion of community-based projects.

The GTRC's success at meeting or exceeding some of the respondents' expectations of reconciliation and engaging some former perpetrators and victims must be weighed against the lack of participation by the city and majority of perpetrators. Their absence was the largest obstacle to reconciliation identified by respondents. In addition, the contribution of the few perpetrators who did participate was deemed insufficient by some respondents, but not all. They viewed the failure of the perpetrators to take responsibility for their harmful actions as a major impediment to reconciliation. Reflecting on the failure to engage the majority of perpetrators, one respondent raised the question of how the GTRC could have attracted more participation from perpetrators. A few previous TRCs were endowed with legal authority to grant perpetrators the participation incentive of amnesty or to compel participation; as a grassroots organization, these measures were beyond the scope of the GTRC. Further, compelling testimony may lead to dishonest or self-serving narratives, which may hinder reconciliation in a different manner. Although the GTRC did implement an inclusive process that invited the participation of all community stakeholders, the goal of full community engagement was not fulfilled. This indicates that reconciliation will be incomplete

when all sides do not participate in such interventions.

As an approach to reconciliation, the GTRC was squarely in the restorative justice perspective. In Greensboro, the retributive justice approach of prosecutions had failed. The political approach was absent from the GTRC without the involvement of the city authorities. The social justice approach of attending to structural inequality and reparations was beyond the scope of the GTRC. The need for reparations was perhaps lessened due to the 1985 civil suit settlement received by the victims. However, respondents did report that the GTRC was connected to ongoing efforts to bring about social change in Greensboro. With its restorative justice approach, the GTRC facilitated the social contact and engagement of perpetrators and victims through dialogue and listening to each other's perspectives. This process restored dignity to the victims and promoted mutual tolerance and peaceful coexistence. As the respondents remarked, the feat of having the Klan and demonstrators in the same room without violence was significant. Despite their differences, both sides were willing to 'put up' with each other.

A nuanced appreciation for the GTRC's contributions to reconciliation makes apparent the need to supplement reconciliation efforts with other community interventions working for social justice. Recalling the ecological model of social recovery from violence, a multiplicity of interventions is necessary to rebuild communities. The GTRC has begun the work of reconciliation in Greensboro, but the project of social transformation cannot end there.

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