

Role of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Healing the Wounds of the Apartheid Era in South Africa (A Qualitative Research)

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Abstract

This article examines the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of South Africa, its purpose, and its role in addressing the legacy of the apartheid regime. It emphasizes how the TRC facilitated South Africa's transition from apartheid through acknowledgment of the past, exploring the policies implemented by the TRC to provide remedial support to those injured by racial segregation. In the context of TRC The terms "gray zone" explicate A term coined by Primo Levi, referring to the morally ambiguous space between victim and perpetrator, often used in transitional justice literature to denote complex roles during conflict where "Kleenex Commission" refers A colloquial, often critical nickname for the TRC, suggesting it emphasized emotional testimony (tears) over material justice or accountability. The study investigates how a white minority determined to hold onto power ultimately agreed to majority rule, and how the extraordinary political transition was achieved without widespread violence. In the absence of empirical data, this examination is guided by a theoretical framework reflecting how international legal institutions can contribute to healing in post-conflict societies marked by human rights abuses. Drawing from relevant literature, the article concludes by assessing the TRC's successes and shortcomings. Despite noble aims, many victims have seen little material improvement in their lives since apartheid ended, revealing ongoing challenges in South Africa's journey toward reconciliation.

Keywords

Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Apartheid Regime, Healing, Gray Zone, Retribution, Reparation, Retaliation, Transition, Kleenex Commission, Peace

Process

1. Introduction

The establishment of Truth Commissions is widely regarded as a noble effort, essential for transitioning from authoritarian regimes to democratic societies. Historically, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) have been formed in various countries undergoing political change, initially focusing on investigating human rights violations. Over time, their roles have expanded to address broader issues of conflict and civil discord. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is a “third way” between retributive justice and national amnesia (Tutu, 1999). Instituted under the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act (1995), it sought to build a historical bridge between a society deeply divided by race and conflict, aiming for peaceful coexistence, democracy, and development opportunities for all South Africans regardless of color, race, belief, or sex (Villa-Vicencio & Verwoerd, 2000).

The TRC’s vision was to promote societal reconciliation through individual testimonies and responses, avoiding both vindictiveness and neglect of past suffering. The new South African constitution rejected retribution and retaliation in favor of understanding and reparations. Its objectives included investigating human rights violations from 1960 to 1994 and providing victims a platform to share their stories, which was hoped to alleviate long-standing suffering. President Nelson Mandela said, “South Africa’s people remember their dreadful past to deal with it, to forgive when necessary but never to forget” (Mandela, 1999). Likewise, Archbishop Tutu insisted there is no future without forgiveness, but forgiveness requires knowing the truth to prevent repeating past atrocities. White South Africans and the TRC by the 1980s, whites constituted a declining portion of South Africa’s population, making it difficult to justify the country as a “white man’s country.” Despite this demographic shift, many white South Africans remained apathetic or even resistant to the TRC process, limiting the goal of collective atonement (Müller-Fahrenheit, 1996).

The legacy of apartheid in South Africa represents one of the most profound and prolonged systems of institutionalized racial segregation and human rights abuses in modern history. For decades, the apartheid regime enforced racial discrimination, oppression, and violence against the majority Black population, creating deep social wounds and a divided society. With the collapse of apartheid in the early 1990s, South Africa faced the enormous challenge of transitioning from a racially segregated authoritarian state to a democratic society based on equality, justice, and human rights. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established in 1995 under the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, emerged as a pioneering mechanism aimed at addressing this painful history. Chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the TRC sought to promote healing and

national reconciliation by uncovering the truth about past atrocities, providing victims with a platform to share their stories, and offering perpetrators conditional amnesty in exchange for full disclosure. This approach was rooted in the belief that uncovering truth and fostering forgiveness were essential steps toward sustainable peace and social cohesion.

Despite its noble intentions, the TRC's efforts have been met with mixed reactions. While it played a critical role in South Africa's peaceful transition to majority rule and helped avoid widespread violent conflict, many victims and survivors have questioned whether true justice and reparations have been achieved. The commission faced criticism for granting amnesty to some perpetrators, perceived inadequacies in delivering material reparations, and the limited improvement in the living conditions of many marginalized communities after apartheid. This study aims to critically examine the role and effectiveness of the TRC in healing the wounds of apartheid South Africa. It explores the commission's policies and practices, the dynamics between racial groups during the transition, and the political compromises that shaped its work. Furthermore, the study considers the broader theoretical implications of truth commissions as instruments of restorative justice in post-conflict societies, especially in contexts where political power balances constrain full accountability. By reflecting on South Africa's experience, this research contributes to understanding the complex challenges of transitional justice and national reconciliation in deeply divided societies. Here's a clear and focused set of Objectives of the Study based on the article about South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

2. Objectives of the Study

The apartheid government under Prime Minister P.W. Botha implemented reforms intended to maintain white minority control through a racially segregated parliament, excluding black South Africans from full citizenship. These reforms fueled greater opposition and unrest, culminating in protests and violent confrontations. The TRC was deeply shaped by political compromises, especially concerning amnesty for perpetrators. Amnesty required full disclosure but was part of a deal ensuring that those in power would not face prosecution after relinquishing control (Wilson, 2001). Human rights organizations played a crucial role in lobbying for limitations on blanket amnesty and influencing the TRC's mandate.

Criticism and Controversies-The TRC has faced criticism for sacrificing victims' rights and justice in favor of political expediency. Some survivors, like activist Griffiths Mxenge's brother, Churchill Mxenge, expressed skepticism, saying it is difficult to forgive without justice (Wilson, 2001). The national process of reconciliation often diverges from individual healing, especially in the short term. The final TRC report (2003) warned against blanket amnesty and recommended reparations of approximately USD 348 million for victims, urging both government and business contributions. Yet, thousands still await reparations, and disparities in wealth, housing, education, and health remain, highlighting that rec-

conciliation is an ongoing struggle.

The TRC's Role in Healing South Africa's Wounds-Skepticism about the TRC remains prevalent in the black community, sometimes dismissively called the "Kleenex Commission" due to the tears shed during testimonies. Despite this, black South Africans actively participated in hearings, showing their desire for recognition and justice. However, many feel that peace has been superficial, as material and social conditions have not significantly improved for the majority. The TRC's mandate to restore dignity through reparations and rehabilitation has only partly been fulfilled, leaving many victims frustrated and disillusioned.

The transition to Majority Rule-The apartheid conflict was essentially between the ruling National Party (NP), which sought to maintain white supremacy, and the black majority, who demanded equal rights and political representation. Internal resistance, exemplified by movements like the Black Consciousness Movement led by Steve Biko, combined with growing international pressure, eroded the apartheid regime. Economic changes and demographic shifts made apartheid increasingly unsustainable. The NP's attempts at reform under Botha, including the tricameral parliament, failed to quell opposition, leading to intensified protests and international sanctions. Negotiations eventually led to the transition to majority rule, facilitated by compromises between the NP and the African National Congress (ANC). While this process avoided widespread violence, it required concessions, including amnesty for perpetrators.

The Reflections on Reconciliation-Archbishop Tutu noted that while there was a strong desire for reconciliation among black South Africans, enthusiasm was lacking among many whites (Friedman & Gool, 1997). Criticism of the new democracy from some whites, often ignoring their legacy, threatened national unity. The TRC has been seen as a "beacon" for other nations facing similar challenges, yet reconciliation remains complex and contentious. It demands sacrifice and truth-telling, but without tangible reparations and social change, its promise remains unfulfilled. Thus, the Specific objectives are:

- To analyze the role of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy.
- To examine how the TRC addressed human rights violations and facilitated restorative justice through truth-telling and amnesty provisions.
- To assess the impact of the TRC on national reconciliation and social healing among South Africa's racial groups.
- To evaluate the criticisms and limitations of the TRC in achieving justice, reparations, and long-term social transformation.
- To explore the broader implications of the South African TRC experience for transitional justice mechanisms in other post-conflict societies.

Based on those objectives, here are some clear.

3. Research Questions

- 1) How did the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) contribute to

South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy?

2) In what ways did the TRC address past human rights violations through truth-telling and the amnesty process?

3) What impact did the TRC have on promoting national reconciliation and social healing among different racial groups in South Africa?

4) What were the main criticisms and limitations of the TRC in delivering justice, reparations, and long-term social transformation?

5) What lessons can other post-conflict societies learn from the South African TRC experience regarding transitional justice?

Based on the topic around the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and reconciliation as a peace-building process, the suitable Research Method adopt a qualitative research design to explore the complex social, political, and psychological dimensions of reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa. The research aims to understand how the TRC functioned as a peacebuilding mechanism, its successes, limitations, and impacts on victims, perpetrators, and the broader society. The study will use a case study approach, focusing specifically on the South African TRC as a critical instance of transitional justice. This design enables an in-depth examination of the processes, outcomes, and contextual factors influencing reconciliation efforts.

4. Research Method and Data Handling

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to explore the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of South Africa as a key transitional justice mechanism. Given the historical nature and complexity of the TRC's operations, this methodology enables an in-depth exploration of documents, discourses, and, where feasible, firsthand perspectives to understand how the commission facilitated healing and reconciliation after apartheid.

4.1. Document Selection Criteria

Data for this research were primarily collected through document analysis of both primary and secondary sources. The documents were selected using the following criteria:

- Relevance to the policy design, institutional processes, and outcomes of the South African TRC;
- Inclusion of firsthand victim narratives, testimony excerpts, or policy discussions related to reparations, amnesty, or reconciliation;
- Coverage of the TRC period from 1995 to 2003, as well as later evaluations and comparative studies from 2004 to 2024;
- Credibility and scholarly merit, prioritizing government reports, peer-reviewed academic literature, and publications by reputable NGOs and transitional justice institutions.

Primary sources included volumes of the TRC Final Report, the Report of the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee, and official statements. Secondary

sources included scholarly works by transitional justice experts, theologians, and legal scholars.

4.2. Thematic Content Analysis

The selected texts were analyzed using thematic content analysis, a qualitative technique for identifying patterns and meanings within textual data. The steps in the coding process were as follows:

- Familiarization: Close reading of documents to understand the context and framing of key themes.
- Initial coding: Using inductive reasoning, the researcher identified recurring words, phrases, and ideas related to transitional justice and reconciliation.
- Theme development: Codes were grouped into broader categories such as justice, reparation, amnesty, truth-telling, victim voice, white resistance, and post-conflict healing.
- Refinement: Themes were reviewed and refined based on coherence and recurrence across different documents.
- Interpretation: Patterns were interpreted within the theoretical framework, specifically assessing how institutional structures shaped outcomes and perceptions of justice.

This analysis helped expose both the intended goals of the TRC and the gaps between policy and lived experience, offering a grounded basis for evaluating its legacy.

Semi-structured interviews are Optional or if feasible, to complement the document-based analysis, the study design includes the option for semi-structured interviews with individuals knowledgeable about South Africa's transitional justice process. While these interviews were not conducted for the current version of the study, a potential implementation plan is outlined below:

- Sampling strategy: A purposive sampling method would be used to select key informants such as scholars, legal experts, NGO workers, religious leaders, or individuals involved in the TRC process. If required, snowball sampling would assist in identifying additional participants through referrals.
- Ethical considerations: Interviews would be conducted following standard ethical research guidelines. Informed consent would be obtained, confidentiality maintained, and participants would be allowed to withdraw at any stage.
- Interview protocol: An interview guide would be used with open-ended questions focusing on perceptions of the TRC's achievements and shortcomings, its impact on victims and communities, and comparisons with other truth commissions globally.

Although not realized in this iteration, the inclusion of interview data would deepen the study's engagement with lived experiences and help triangulate findings from the document analysis

5. Justification

A qualitative, case-study approach is appropriate due to the exploratory nature of

the research question and the emphasis on understanding social processes in their historical and political context. It allows for rich, detailed data collection and interpretation, which is crucial when dealing with sensitive topics such as reconciliation and trauma.

6. Limitations

This study primarily relies on secondary sources such as TRC reports, academic literature, and public documents. While these provide valuable insight into the institutional and historical dimensions of reconciliation, the absence of direct interviews with victims or practitioners limits the depth of subjective and experiential analysis.

7. Clarify the Theoretical Framework

The international legal institutions can contribute to healing, as mentioned. Transitional justice theorists such as Ruti Teitel, *Transitional Justice* (Teitel, 2000), are foundational for understanding the legal-political framing of post-conflict mechanisms, and Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness* (1998), is useful for analyzing the balance of justice and reconciliation. This study is grounded in the theoretical perspective that international legal institutions such as truth commissions, amnesty frameworks, and reparations mechanisms play a vital role in promoting healing and social reconstruction in post-conflict societies. These institutions offer structured, often state-sanctioned, means of acknowledging past atrocities, facilitating justice, and fostering national reconciliation.

A central theoretical foundation is drawn from Ruti Teitel's work, *Transitional Justice* (Teitel, 2000), which argues that transitional justice exists in a unique legal-political space, where states must balance the need for justice with the political necessity of stability and reform. Teitel emphasizes that truth commissions serve as "normative narratives"; they don't merely document violations but help redefine societal values and legal norms in periods of transition. Applying Teitel's framework, this research views the South African TRC as an institutional mechanism that helped construct a new moral and legal order, while deliberately avoiding destabilizing retributive justice.

In addition, Martha Minow's *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness* (1998) offers critical insight into the moral and psychological tension between holding perpetrators accountable and enabling societal healing. Minow introduces the idea that forgiveness, when institutionalized through processes like truth-telling, amnesty, and reparations, can offer victims a sense of justice that is restorative rather than punitive. Her work informs this study's emphasis on the human dimensions of reconciliation—not only legal structures, but also the emotional, symbolic, and spiritual processes at play in South Africa's transition.

Together, these theorists provide a conceptual lens through which the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) can be analyzed, not merely as a historical episode, but as a transitional legal institution that strategically nav-

igated the gray zone between justice and peace. This framework supports the study's focus on assessing how the TRC enabled or limited healing through its core mechanisms: truth-telling, conditional amnesty, and reparations. It also justifies the case study's exploration of whether these mechanisms adequately responded to victim needs while maintaining political stability.

8. Literature Review

Reviewed the literature comparing South Africa's TRC to others. Authors and works (2020-2024) Paige Arthur (2021)—On comparative post-conflict truth-telling and Hamber and Wilson (2022)—On psychosocial healing post-TRC. Also, Clara Sandoval (2023)—On reparation effectiveness in Latin America and Africa. Integrating the recent comparative works by Paige Arthur (2021), Hamber and Wilson (2022), and Sandoval (2023) into your existing review. This strengthens your analysis by placing South Africa's TRC within a broader international context of truth commission experiences and outcomes. Focusing on the Comparative Literature Review in the context of South Africa's TRC in a Global Perspective. Recent scholarly literature has expanded the understanding of truth commissions by comparing the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to similar mechanisms in other post-conflict contexts. These comparative studies highlight both the innovations and limitations of the South African model, offering valuable insight into its global legacy and relevance.

According to the scholar Arthur (2021), in her updated work on post-conflict truth-telling, she explores how various truth commissions around the world have adapted the South African TRC's public testimony model. Arthur emphasizes that while South Africa's TRC was groundbreaking in foregrounding victim narratives in televised hearings, subsequent commissions such as those in Sierra Leone, East Timor, and Colombia have developed more context-sensitive approaches that better address localized needs. For example, the Colombian commission integrates regional victim forums and emphasizes collective memory, contrasting with the more centralized and symbolic structure of the South African TRC. Arthur's analysis suggests that while South Africa established a powerful symbolic framework for reconciliation, its model was not fully equipped to translate recognition into sustained justice or reparative transformation.

Another scholar, Hamber and Wilson (2022) revisit the psychosocial legacy of South Africa's TRC, focusing on the emotional and mental health outcomes of victims and survivors who participated in its processes. They argue that the commission's focus on public truth-telling did provide many with a sense of acknowledgment and symbolic validation; however, in the absence of follow-up psychosocial support and material reparations, many victims reported enduring trauma, disappointment, or retraumatization. Hamber and Wilson contrast this with emerging models that emphasize integrated trauma care and long-term psychological accompaniment, such as in Rwanda and Gambia, suggesting that South Africa's TRC may have prematurely concluded its role in healing without institu-

tionalizing ongoing support mechanisms.

Reviewed the research of [Sandoval \(2023\)](#), which provides an in-depth evaluation of reparation effectiveness across Africa and Latin America, directly critiquing the South African TRC's limited reparative outcomes. While the TRC recommended approximately USD 348 million in reparations, actual disbursements fell short, and bureaucratic delays compounded victims' frustration. Sandoval contrasts this with more successful programs in Peru and Morocco, where national reparations plans were structured with clearer implementation frameworks, victim registries, and dedicated institutions. Her work underscores that symbolic justice alone is insufficient for long-term reconciliation—economic redress, healthcare, and land reform are necessary to repair the structural violence underpinning past atrocities. Sandoval's comparative findings support the conclusion that South Africa's reconciliation, though internationally celebrated, remains materially incomplete.

Taken together, these recent studies illuminate how South Africa's TRC has inspired global truth-telling initiatives but also caution against over-reliance on its symbolic gains. They collectively advocate for a more holistic transitional justice model—one that integrates psychosocial healing, community participation, and robust reparative measures to fulfill the broader goals of justice and reconciliation. On reparation effectiveness in Latin America and Africa, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) remains one of the most studied transitional justice mechanisms in post-conflict societies. Rosoux in *The SAGA Handbook of Conflict Resolution* ([Rosoux, 2020](#)) explores reconciliation as a peace-building process, emphasizing both the potential and the limits of the TRC. He highlights that while the TRC helped initiate national healing by encouraging dialogue and acknowledgment of past abuses, structural inequalities and ongoing socio-economic disparities limited its long-term impact.

Maluleke's theological perspective in *Dealing Lightly with the Wound of My People?* ([Maluleke, 2020](#)) offers a critical reflection on the TRC, questioning whether the process sufficiently addressed the spiritual and emotional wounds of victims. He argues that reconciliation needs a deeper engagement beyond legal and political frameworks to fully heal communities traumatized by apartheid. [Asmal et al. \(1996\)](#), in their work on reconciliation theory, provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the TRC's goals, highlighting the importance of truth-telling, acknowledgment of suffering, and the complex interplay between justice and forgiveness. Their theory suggests that reconciliation involves a balance between holding perpetrators accountable and fostering social cohesion.

The *Report of the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee* (Volume Six, Section Two, Chapter Two) underscores the challenges faced in adequately compensating victims and facilitating rehabilitation. It points out that reparations were often seen as symbolic and insufficient, revealing gaps between policy and victims' expectations. The *Truth & Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* (Volume One) serves as a foundational document, detailing the processes, hear-

ings, and outcomes of the TRC. It illustrates the commission's role in uncovering truth, promoting public acknowledgment of atrocities, and offering conditional amnesty in exchange for full disclosure.

In addition, the *Case Studies: Obstacles & Opportunities for Transnational Justice* (TRC DPI Working Paper) situates the South African TRC within a global context, examining its pioneering role while highlighting obstacles such as political interference, limited resources, and varying victim experiences. This paper also discusses the potential for transnational learning, where the South African experience informs other countries pursuing justice and reconciliation.

9. Findings and Discussion

The findings from this qualitative case study reveal that the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) made significant contributions to symbolic justice and national dialogue, but it fell short in delivering material reparations and achieving sustained social healing.

9.1. Symbolic and Narrative Successes

The TRC succeeded in creating a public space for victims to share their stories, fostering a national conversation around truth-telling and forgiveness. The public hearings, broadcast nationally, helped confront denialism and enabled collective memory formation. Drawing from the theoretical insights of Minow (1998), this process created a platform for restorative rather than retributive justice, helping many victims feel acknowledged.

9.2. Legal-Political Balancing and Amnesty

Following Teitel's (2000) theory of transitional justice, the TRC navigated a politically negotiated middle ground. The conditional amnesty policy, while criticized, arguably allowed the country to avoid civil war and enabled a peaceful democratic transition. However, it also limited the ability of victims to see perpetrators held accountable, as seen in testimonies from the Khulumani Support Group.

9.3. Partial Implementation of Reparations

Despite the TRC's recommendation of ZAR 17,000 (approx. USD 2,700 at the time) per victim and broader calls for community reparations, the South African government distributed only a fraction of the promised reparations. This has been termed an "implementation gap" (Sandoval, 2023), reflecting broader difficulties in translating policy recommendations into action. Comparative studies such as those on Colombia's reparation programs (Guarín et al., 2022) suggest that the lack of an institutionalized victim registry and limited political commitment contributed to these failures.

9.4. Socioeconomic Stagnation

Post-TRC, many victims remained in structurally disadvantaged positions, with

little change in access to healthcare, education, or housing. This aligns with Brankovic's (2021) findings that truth commissions, without integrated social policy reform, often fail to transform survivors' material realities. The perception that justice was "spoken but not delivered" remains a significant source of disillusionment.

10. Criticism and Controversies.

The TRC, though globally celebrated, has been the subject of extensive criticism on several fronts:

1) Amnesty at the Expense of Justice—Critics argue that the conditional amnesty program prioritized political stability over individual justice. While some perpetrators confessed their crimes, others were never held accountable, and many victims felt justice was traded for peace. This tension is captured in the sentiment expressed by victims like Churchill Mxenge: "*It is difficult to forgive without justice.*"

2) The "Kleenex Commission" Perception—Among some black South Africans, the TRC was derisively nicknamed the "Kleenex Commission" for its perceived focus on emotional catharsis rather than tangible justice. Although many welcomed the chance to speak, the lack of follow-through in reparations contributed to a perception of state indifference and symbolic tokenism.

3) White Apathy and Non-engagement—noted by Friedman and Gool (1997), many white South Africans remained skeptical or indifferent to the TRC process. This limited the potential for national reconciliation, as collective atonement was undermined by a lack of reciprocal moral reckoning across racial lines.

4) Exclusion of Structural and Economic Violence—The TRC's mandate narrowly focused on gross human rights violations rather than the broader structural violence of apartheid, such as forced removals, job reservations, and land dispossession. This omission left unresolved some of the most enduring legacies of the apartheid system.

11. Conclusion

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa was a historic and ambitious undertaking that helped the nation confront its violent past through truth-telling, forgiveness, and institutional dialogue. As a transitional justice mechanism, it offered a normative redefinition of national identity, favoring restorative justice over punitive responses in line with global legal-political theories (Teitel, 2000; Minow, 1998). However, the TRC's long-term impact has been limited by insufficient reparations, a failure to address socioeconomic disparities, and incomplete national participation, particularly among white South Africans. Its legacy thus remains contested: while it enabled a peaceful transition to democracy and inspired global truth commission models, its inability to deliver material justice left many wounds unhealed.

Comparative insights from Colombia, Morocco, and Peru reveal that sustained

victim support, institutional follow-up, and economic redress are essential for meaningful reconciliation. South Africa's experience underscores the necessity of aligning symbolic justice with substantive social transformation. Reconciliation is not a single moment of truth but an ongoing process demanding structural commitment and inclusive participation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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