Collective Memory Practices as Tools for Reconciliation: Perspectives from Liberation and Cultural Psychology

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COLLECTIVE MEMORY PRACTICES AS TOOLS FOR RECONCILIATION: Perspectives from Liberation and Cultural Psychology

Glenn Adams and Tuğçe Kurtiṣ

ABSTRACT: Many African communities have appropriated the international practice of “Truth and Reconciliation Commissions” (TRCs) as a means to construct a shared sense of collective memory, identity, and purpose in the aftermath of violent conflict. In this paper, we consider alternative forms of collective memory practices that might better suit the task of reconciliation in postconflict West African communities. Drawing upon the theoretical perspective of cultural psychology, we first identify the conceptual foundations of canonical TRC practice in particular Christian traditions that valorize revelation, truth, confession, and forgiveness. We then propose alternative practices of collective memory that have conceptual foundations in local practices or traditions that recommend secrecy (Shaw 2000), directed forgetting (Cole 2001), and other forms of interpretative silence. Drawing upon the theoretical perspective of liberation psychology, we note the ways in which conventional TRC practice, by focusing attention on acts of wrongdoing within communities, can reproduce silence about broader political and economic injustices that produce ripe conditions for conflict. We then propose alternative practices of collective memory to illuminate the role that local elites
and citizens of rich nations play in the ongoing reproduction of unjust postcolonial conditions that can lead to conflict situations within communities.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Psychology, Liberation Psychology, Silence, Sierra Leone, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions

I. INTRODUCTION

Peace, prosperity, and smooth functioning of a society require coordination of activity and forms of interpersonal cooperation that, in turn, depend on social-psychological resources of “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) involving relationships of trust and a sense of common welfare. These social-psychological resources are among the first casualties of a civil war and among the most difficult aspects of society to rebuild in the aftermath of conflict. Although true in any case, this generalization is especially true of Sierra Leone and similar cases in which neighbors, classmates, and family members perpetrated barely thinkable violence upon each other, often in the absence of any discernible, preexisting ideological rationale.

Faced with the destruction of trust, many communities have advocated that postconflict African governments implement some form of TRC as a means to construct a shared sense of collective memory, collective identity, and collective purpose.1 In this paper, we first consider the extent to which the conceptual foundations of TRCs, at least in their typical manifestations, lie in constructions of reality associated with particular traditions of Christianity. We then discuss the appropriateness of TRC practices and institutions for the task of reconciliation in postconflict West African settings.2

II. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Two theoretical perspectives inform our analysis of TRCs in West African settings. One is the theoretical perspective of cultural psychology (Shweder 1990). The other is the perspective of liberation psychology (Martín-Baró 1994). The contribution of these perspectives is in providing a conceptual framework for identifying the possibility of neocolonialism or imperialism in scientific theory and practice applied to postcolonial African spaces.
The theoretical perspective of cultural psychology provides a framework for highlighting the particular historical roots of psychological and other scientific or therapeutic practices that individuals and organizations deploy in their relief, peacemaking, and social justice efforts. Although popular understandings often suppose that the primary business of this perspective might be a reifying concern with characteristic tendencies of essentialized group traditions, the point of a cultural psychology analysis is not to describe how phenomena vary “across cultures.” Instead, the goal is to illuminate a general process that is typically invisible in more mainstream scientific approaches: specifically, the grounding of psychological experience (and the scientific study of psychological experience) in particular constructions of reality (Adams et al. 2012). In contrast to the naturalizing tendency in mainstream psychological science, which tends to locate the essential architecture of mind in genetic code or brain structure, a cultural psychology analysis highlights the extent to which the architecture of mind is also inscribed in the structure of everyday cultural worlds (Adams et al. 2010; Adams 2012). One can fruitfully apply this perspective to identify potential manifestations of neocolonialism and imperialism in the concepts and practices that inform relief, peacemaking, and social justice efforts in the aftermath of violent community conflict.

The action-oriented, theoretical perspective of liberation psychology is remarkable as one of only a few perspectives in psychological science with a scientific imagination grounded firmly in “majority world” (Kağıtçıbaşı 1995) or postcolonial contexts. The defining statement of a liberation psychology analysis comes from the work of Ignacio Martín-Baró (1994), who received his doctorate in social psychology from the University of Chicago and taught at the University of Central America in El Salvador until right-wing death squads assassinated him in 1989. In addition to his identity as an academic researcher in the field of social psychology, Martín-Baró was a Jesuit priest who served an impoverished parish near San Salvador. His vision of liberation psychology results from the intersection of these two identities, an application of psychology to the cause of social justice. Inspired by the liberation theology movement of Latin American Catholicism, Martín-Baró proposed three pressing tasks for a social psychology of justice and liberation from oppression.

The first pressing task that Martín-Baró identified is one that follows directly from the liberation theology principle of a “preferential option for the poor.” A liberation psychology requires development of
a workable science of mind that, rather than pathologizing tendencies observed in oppressed communities as backward or maladaptive, privileges the perspective of the oppressed as a source of important insight about healthy human adaptation. The rationale for this principle is not so much about the political value of solidarity with oppressed masses, but rather the scientific value of truth. This perspective holds that mainstream psychological science and related fields do not provide an objective or positionless account of experience but instead have their basis in particular constructions of reality that remain obscured or invisible in typical research. By privileging the perspective of the poor as an epistemological foundation, one can apply a mindful corrective to the somewhat mindless or unrecognized positioning of mainstream academic perspectives and thereby promote a more adequate understanding of events.

One way that the perspective of the oppressed contributes to a more adequate understanding of events is via the second pressing task that Martín-Baró identified: de-ideologizing everyday experience. A liberation psychology perspective emphasizes that prevailing understandings of everyday experience are not the neutral or natural reflection of objective truth. Instead, they represent particular constructions of reality that, consciously or not, reflect the perspectives and serve the interests of the powerful. From this perspective, researchers and practitioners can advance the cause of liberation by doing work that exposes the constructed, ideological nature of everyday realities.

Finally, an important strategy for de-ideologizing everyday experience is the third pressing task that Martín-Baró identified, recovering historical memory. Everyday experience takes shape within larger narratives of nation and society that are rooted in stories about the past, give meaning to present events, and propose courses of future action consistent with interpretations of the present. However, the narratives of history and identity that underlie constructions of everyday experience are not “just natural” or objective accounts of the past, but instead reflect the perspective and serve the interests of people in positions of dominance. Accordingly, an effective way to resist domination is to challenge the representations of history and identity upon which constructions of everyday experience depend. As Martín-Baró put it:

The prevailing discourse puts forth an apparently natural and ahistorical reality, structuring it in such a way as to cause it to be accepted without question. This makes it impossible to
derive lessons from experience and, more important, makes it impossible to find the roots of one’s own identity, which is as much needed for interpreting one’s sense of the present as for glimpsing possible alternatives that might exist . . . . The recovery of historical memory supposes the reconstruction of models of identification that, instead of chaining and caging the people, open up the horizon for them, toward their liberation and fulfillment (1994: 30).

From a liberation psychology perspective, the path to reconciliation in communities torn apart by violence lies in production of collective memory (or representations of history) based on the “truth” of ordinary people’s experiences. These constructions of collective memory provide the foundations for corresponding imaginations of community (i.e., “models of identification”) that—because they are based on open revelation of objective truth, rather than ideologically motivated misinformation and false consciousness—serve the interests of liberation.

III. BUILDING COLLECTIVE MEMORY: TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSIONS

Although we are unaware of any explicit connection between the two, this liberation psychology prescription for reconciliation resonates very closely with a popular set of collective memory practices through which many African societies have tried to reconstruct a sense of community after civil conflict: Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. The best-known case was in postapartheid South Africa, where the new African National Congress (ANC) government set up a TRC as a mechanism for production of a national consciousness. The idea was that the TRC would bring to light past injustices in order to build an open, common-ground understanding of history, which in turn would provide a foundation for an emerging national identity as a progressive multicultural community. Since the South African TRC, proponents have suggested similar TRCs as mechanisms to resolve conflicts and repair shattered communities across the African continent (including Sierra Leone).

Although TRCs typically operate as projects of the state rather than projects of religious organizations, they often have links to (especially Christian) communities of faith. The most obvious manifestation of links to faith communities is in the leadership of TRCs, which often includes leaders of religious organizations. For example, the chairman of
the South African TRC was Archbishop Desmond Tutu of the Anglican Church, and the chairman of the Sierra Leonean TRC was Bishop Joseph Humper of the United Methodist Church. Presumably, the participation of spiritual or religious leaders adds moral legitimacy and spiritual weight to the otherwise political components of the TRC exercise. However, beyond the active participation and leadership of religious leaders (and more central to our focus in this paper), several features of TRCs have conceptual bases in communities of faith, most notably: transcendent truth, apologetic confession, and forgiveness.

Chief among these features is one that TRCs clearly share with liberation psychology perspectives: the notion of an objective truth. The inclusion of the “T” in TRC reflects a belief in the socially redemptive value of revealing and publicizing a transcendent truth as a means to reconciliation. The concept of transcendent truth refers first, to the sense of being universal or unbound by context (i.e., “the way and the truth and the life” apart from which there is no salvation; John 14: 6, New International Version Bible) and second, to the sense of liberation from bounds (i.e., “the truth will set you free”; John 8: 32, New International Version Bible). Besides these scriptural references, the focus on liberatory and transcendent truth has clear resonance with Christian values of openness, transparency, and public testimony and has achieved the status of something akin to an international standard or “natural” law of human social psychology (for a remarkable discussion, see Shaw 2007). However, it remains unclear whether this belief in the socially redemptive value of “truth” is based on empirical observation or itself is an article of faith based on particular imaginations of reality.

Related to the idea of transcendent truth is another feature that reveals conceptual bases of TRCs in particular faith traditions: the practice of apologetic confession (Asad 1993: 95–97). The practices of apology and confession reflect and reproduce the idea that one can achieve salvation by fully disclosing the wrongdoing that one has committed, contritely requesting forgiveness for those actions, and renouncing the way of life that fostered wrongdoing. Again, though, it remains unclear whether belief in the efficacy of apology and confession for the production of reconciliation is based on empirical observation or instead is an article of faith based on particular imaginations of reality. Research on apology for both individual and collective wrongdoing suggests that it may have therapeutic value and promote healing for apology-giving perpetrators, but it may be less therapeutic for apology-receiving victims (for a review, see Blatz, Schumann, and Ross 2009).
Finally, practices of apologetic confession are related to practices of forgiveness. Many faith communities enjoin their adherents to “love your enemies” (or something similar), or they approvingly recount tales of pious saints who forgave tormentors who caused them grievous injury. Although TRCs have varied in the degree of amnesty they offered wrongdoers and few have enjoined victims to forgive their oppressors, the logic of the institution—emphasizing public confession by more or less contrite oppressors who then suffered little or no punishment—is such that many participants and onlookers may feel pressure to forgive. Here again, it remains unclear in the empirical record whether practices of talking or giving voice to past wrong (rather than practices of silence) are productive of forgiveness. Likewise, it remains unclear whether belief in the therapeutic or reconciliation-promoting potential of forgiveness is based on empirical observation or instead is an article of faith based on particular imaginations of reality. There are certainly theoretical reasons to doubt that it promotes the cause of social justice.

IV. A CRITIQUE OF TRC PRACTICE

The discussion in the preceding section suggests that beliefs in the efficacy of TRC practices for the goal of reconciliation may have their basis more in something akin to the notion of faith than scientific research. Research suggests that the social and psychological benefits of forgiveness are not straightforward. However, problems also arise in the emphasis on truth, openness, and confession.

To the extent that the psychological ecology of TRCs exerts pressure on oppressed individuals or communities to forgive their oppressors, it raises questions about adverse consequences for victims’ psychological well-being and the broader sense of social justice within communities. At the individual/interpersonal level, research suggests that forgiveness may have some psychological benefits for victims who suffered various instances of wrongdoing (Baumeister, Exline, and Summer 1998; Freedman and Enright 1996; Hebl and Enright 1993; Karremans et al. 2003; McCullough et al. 2001). However, it may also have costs. For many individuals, assignment of responsibility to oppressors serves an important function (besides truth) of deflecting responsibility from self, thereby preserving a sense of self as a competent, moral actor. Accordingly, to the extent that forgiveness entails (descriptively or prescriptively) absolution of perpetrators/oppressors, it deprives the oppressed of an important self-preservation strategy. More generally, the pressure to forgive evil deeds or
absolve evildoers may compound the experience of injury to a person’s experience of moral and ontological security.

In any case, evidence about the potential benefits of forgiveness often comes from research limited to instances of individual recovery from interpersonal wrongdoing. There is a scarcity of research that examines the effects of forgiveness on individual recovery from intergroup wrongdoing, where somewhat different psychological dynamics are at work. For example, a recent study among Iraqi refugees reported that positive mental health outcomes were associated with forgiveness of individual perpetrators of violence at an interpersonal level, with forgiveness of collaborators in the oppressive Hussein regime at an intergroup level, but also with an attitude of unforgiveness toward the dictator (Saddam Hussein) himself (Kira et al. 2009). Similarly, one way that TRCs and other forgiveness interventions work is via inclusive or superordinate categorization: that is, inducing people from oppressed subordinate groups to “imagine community” (Anderson, 1983) or self-categorize at a higher level of social identity (e.g., the nation) that includes their oppressors. However, the psychological benefits of superordinate categorization remain unclear, especially if such categorization undermines subgroup identity-protective mechanisms and motivation to engage in collective action for social change (Wright, Taylor, and Moghaddam 1990). In short, the consequences of forgiveness and unforgiveness vary depending on particulars of the forgiveness situation, and it is inadvisable to make generalizations based on interpersonal forgiveness literature.

Even if forgiveness provides some benefits for individual well-being (which again remains unclear), it might still do harm at a more collective level. Forgiveness often entails (descriptively or prescriptively) that one relinquish a sense of moral outrage. To the extent that it does so, it results in dissipation of a source of energy that one might otherwise harness to fight for societal change (Martin, Brickman, and Murray 1984; Smith 1993, 1999; van Zomeren et al. 2004; Walker and Pettigrew 1984). Rather than serve the cause of social justice, then, TRCs can serve a conservative or even reactionary political purpose (and the reproduction of relations of domination) by deflecting energy away from collective action in the service of a short-sighted view of individual well-being. The critique here is similar to the critique of individualistic mental health practice or (socially unconscious) religion in general: to the extent that an ideology provides individual peace of mind (e.g., by focusing people’s attention on salvation in the afterlife), it provides a palliative function
that leads people to tolerate painful or oppressive circumstances in the here and now that they would otherwise not tolerate.

Another problem concerns the issue of truth. Both TRCs and a liberation psychology analysis focus on the power of a liberatory or transcendent truth. However, questions arise, even within a liberation psychology perspective, as to what constitutes truth. At first glance, it might seem that the TRC practice of bearing witness to document (rather than remain silent about) injustices is an excellent example of the liberation psychology principle of privileging the voices of the oppressed as an epistemological standpoint or window on truth. However, this ignores the fact that social perception in general is necessarily subjective (see, e.g., Griffin and Ross 1991). The issue is not merely that people have needs and motivations to interpret events in somewhat biased ways (e.g., to see the world as predictable and just; Lerner 1980) but rather that people can only interpret events from a particular position or perspective. That is, people do not have direct access to objective reality, but instead dynamically construct an experience of reality from bits of the sensory data and their (often implicit) theories about how the world works. In short, there is no guarantee that the testimony of witnesses and participants in the TRC process is not itself free of various forms of “false consciousness” or conceptual and ideological blindness.

A likely form of such blindness in the TRC process has to do with the conceptual individualism that pervades Western thought and mainstream social science. This metaphysical position holds the self-contained, atomistic individual to be the locus of experience and promotes an impoverished, mechanistic conception of the collective as the mere aggregate of such individuals. To revisit the earlier example, the typical focus of mental health efforts is almost exclusively (and in keeping with the biomedical model) on the well-being of the self-contained individual organism. To the extent that people consider collective elements of mental health, it is typically in terms of the aggregate of such individuals. Informed by this limited understanding, one might evaluate the effectiveness of TRCs in terms of their success in promoting healing through forgiveness or expression, validation, and alleviation of individuals’ pain. However, this focus on palliation of individual pain leaves intact oppressive systems or other ecological stressors that may be the ultimate causes of injury and pain in the first place. In short, what might be good for the health of individual citizens might not be good for the long-term health (i.e., peace and social justice) of the society as a whole (and vice versa), and the discourse of
TRCs often shows conceptual slippage between levels of individual and collective well-being.

In similar fashion, one can question whether the instantiation of TRCs in settings like Sierra Leone fit the conditions that, from a liberation psychology analysis, might make them effective tools of lasting reconciliation, liberation, and fulfillment. It makes sense that attempts at community healing would focus on relations within the community, as current and future neighbors from opposing sides will have to find a way to live together. However, a liberation psychology analysis proposes that testimony of victims serves the purpose of liberation to the extent that it de-ideologizes the supposedly “natural” constructions of reality that enable and reproduce relations of domination. It is unclear that victims’ testimony fulfills this purpose in a context like Sierra Leone, where perpetrators of violence were often themselves victims of similar violence at the hands of similarly oppressed others and their motivations for violence had few discernible links to particular ideological constructions. From this perspective, the near-exclusive focus on individual dynamics of testimony and confession typical of many TRCs fails to produce lasting reconciliation because it deflects attention away from “true” causes of community conflict in an unjust geopolitical order.

This last statement raises an important question: what are the “true” causes of conflict? TRCs in contexts like Sierra Leone may aim to work at reconciliation by documenting suffering, providing accountability, and encouraging mutual understanding (maybe even forgiveness) within communities. However, a liberation psychology perspective (in the tradition of Martín-Baró) holds that a more liberatory focus of such institutions—in keeping with the goal of “de-ideologizing everyday experience”—would be to acknowledge and validate people’s experience of suffering while directing their explanations for that suffering away from people within communities toward the ideological constructions that underlie the collective dispossession of everyone in the community. In this reading of a liberation psychology analysis, the value of TRCs might be to draw upon energy that people might otherwise apply toward retaliation within the community and use this energy as a motivation for collective action against the broader geopolitical forces that produced and reproduce their postcolonial condition.

Alternatively stated, the typical practice of TRCs in settings like Sierra Leone focuses on documentation of suffering and harm for the recovery of historical memory in a relatively proximal form, and this typical practice may promote remedies that address relatively proximal
sources of violence. However, an exclusive focus on this relatively proximal form of historical memory may neglect more distal forms of historical memory concerning the larger context of poverty and dispossession that likewise productive of community conflict. From this perspective, the task of a liberation psychology in a case like Sierra Leone is to encourage recovery of historical memory on a more distal scale than is typical in TRCs.

This discussion suggests potential limitations of a liberation psychology analysis, at least in the tradition of Martín-Baró (1994). This perspective arose in a context of civil wars in El Salvador and Nicaragua, pitting left-leaning populist movements against conservative or reactionary forces operating with support of the United States. In that context, it is easier to see how one might use popular consciousness to “de-ideologize everyday experience” and challenge the ideological constructions of reality that afford and reproduce neocolonial domination. However, these strategies may be less relevant when the memories that people offer concern violence within the community that appears to lack discernible links to larger ideological commitments. In these cases, the danger is that a detailed recounting of violence will prolong experiences of trauma, stoke resentment and desire for revenge or retaliation, and decrease the likelihood of reconciliation (for a similar point, see Shaw 2007).

To the extent that TRCs have their roots in particular traditions of Christian faith, one might ask how well this feature of TRCs resonates with simultaneous religious/faith practices—with emphases on secrecy and occult power (see Ferme 2001; Jackson 2004; Shaw 2000)—that inform everyday experience in many West African settings. For example, one might ask how TRC constructions of confession practice with foundations in Christianity, law, and psychotherapy (Asad 1993; Brooks 2000) resonate with more longstanding constructions of confession practice—for example, confession elicited after discovery of wrongdoing via divination (e.g., Jackson 1975)—that inform experience in many West African communities.

A cultural psychology perspective provides a theoretical framework for making sense of this issue. In general, a cultural psychology perspective considers the extent to which canonical understandings of health, social justice, therapeutic practice, and other concepts that inform reconciliation efforts do not function as context-invariant principles, but instead have their foundation in specific cultural-psychological ecologies. In particular, we have considered the extent to which theory and research
in mainstream psychological science—and other fields/domains (e.g., counseling, therapy, pastoral practice, community development, and social science in general) that inform and draw upon psychological science—valorize what one might refer to as “promotion-oriented” ways of being: an open approach to interpersonal relations characterized by free disclosure, eager pursuit of pleasurable companionship, and a construction of interpersonal situations as opportunities for personal enhancement (Adams et al. 2012). Conventional approaches imagine these promotion-oriented ways of being to be normative in both descriptive and prescriptive senses. That is, these tendencies appear to be the ways in which “normal” humans experience self and relationship (descriptive norm), and people who live in these ways tend to have better outcomes—they report greater satisfaction, less depression, less anxiety—than people who do not do life in these ways (prescriptive norm). Conventional approaches in psychological science and related counseling fields not only valorize promotion-oriented ways of being as descriptively and prescriptively normative, but also regard the apparent superiority of these ways of being as a fundamental manifestation of human nature.

In contrast, we draw upon a cultural psychology analysis to suggest that the apparent superiority of promotion-oriented ways of being is the context-dependent product of particular ecologies that reflect and promote a subjective experience of abstracted independence. These ecologies of abstracted independence entail an implicit belief in the ontological priority of the atomistic individual and an experience of the social world as something akin to a high-mobility, frictionless, free market populated by free agents who are at liberty (or are compelled) to construct relationships (Adams et al. 2012). In such ecologies, the benefits of mutual openness are relatively high as a necessary glue to hold together inherently unstable connections. People experience their authentic nature in terms of personal characteristics and feel motivated to express their subjective experience in an attempt to bridge the gap to similarly atomistic beings and create “true” relationships as a means to fulfill fundamental human needs for belongingness (see Giddens 1991). Equally important, the dangers of openness are relatively low in such ecologies because people have the sense that they can escape problematic connections with relative ease (Adams et al. 2012). In short, this analysis suggests that the practices of openness, transparency, disclosure, confession, testimony, and revelation of “truth” that inform TRCs may reflect the foundations of scientific imagination, in particular constructions of reality and associated psychological ecologies.
The question then arises as to the appropriateness of these promotion-oriented practices when conflict resolution specialists and community development practitioners import them for application in particular African settings. As an answer to this question, and in contrast to the promotion-oriented normative strategies that inform psychological scientific imagination and related institutional practices, theory and research in many West African settings have noted the prevalence of what one might refer to as a prevention-oriented way of being: a cautious approach to intimacy characterized by careful attention to interpersonal obligation, concerns about interpersonal harmony, silence or restraint (versus expression), and practices of secrecy or occlusion (see, e.g., Ferme 2001; Shaw 2000). Although mainstream psychological science might regard such ways of being in a pathological light, we propose that these prevention-oriented ways of being are the generally adaptive product of particular ecologies that reflect and promote a subjective experience of embedded interdependence and the ontological priority of community (Adams et al. 2012).

As an expression of this experience of reality, Jackson (1982: 17) quotes a Kuranko proverb that he translates as “One’s birth is like the bird-scaring rope”—the network of string and metal bits that one sees in rice fields across Sierra Leone. By tugging on the rope from a central point, one sets in motion the whole network of string to produce a cacophony of clanking metal that scares marauding birds away from the maturing rice crop. This metaphor for the human condition reflects and promotes people’s understanding that, for better or worse, they do not exist in isolation; instead, their experience reflects connection to others in the community whose influence reverberates across networks of social relations like a tug of the bird-scaring rope.

Within such ecologies of embedded interdependence, people may feel less compulsion (or freedom) to create connection than canonical scientific understandings propose. That is, the experience of embeddedness may mean both (a) that people feel less need and associated motivational urge to create additional relationships and (b) that people feel less room for personal action to create links other than those that local realities have already afforded them. Rather than intimate disclosure and emotional support to bridge the space between atomistic actors, circumstances of life direct people’s energies toward the materiality of care (Coe 2011) and fulfillment of obligation in the networks of “true” relationship that constitute the common ground of everyday life (Adams and Plaut 2003). Equally important, potential for friction in ecologies of embedded
interdependence—the fact that people necessarily “rub against” each other in the course of everyday life or have abundant opportunities to “rub each other the wrong way”—alerts people to the potential dangers of openness (see, e.g., Adams 2005; Shaw 2000). In ecologies of low relational mobility, where escape from problematic connections is difficult, people may experience motivations to be relatively guarded about interpersonal interactions, especially of the sort that could be productive of conflict.²

To summarize, canonical practices of open disclosure and testimony may constitute best practices for the production of collective memory conducive to community reconciliation given the particular sociocultural ecologies and historical trajectories that inform mainstream psychological research. However, these canonical practices of open disclosure and testimony may be less efficacious given the everyday ecologies, historical trajectories, and corresponding understandings of reality that inform experience in many West African settings. If so, then the emphasis of reconciliation efforts on open disclosure and testimony not only may fail to produce anticipated benefits, but also may do harm—for example, by asking participants to re-live and perpetuate the experience of trauma, by prolonging community conflict, or by ironically silencing local voices who propose and perform alternative memory practices for reconciliation.⁵

V. CONCLUSION: TOWARD ALTERNATIVE COLLECTIVE MEMORY PRACTICES FOR RECONCILIATION

Although we have questioned the efficacy of memory practices associated with TRCs for the task of reconciliation in postconflict West African societies, we do not deny that they may serve other important purposes: for example, historical documentation, sense of restorative justice, deterrent to future violence, and perhaps even personal healing in some cases.⁶ Likewise, even if canonical forms of TRC practice lack efficacy in West African settings, this does not mean that alternative forms of collective memory practice would be similarly inefficacious. Indeed, as we noted earlier, a liberation psychology analysis emphasizes the critical importance of collective memory practices (i.e., “recovery of historical memory”) as tools for re-imagination of community (i.e., “models of identification”) that are conducive to reconciliation, collective action, and social justice. In this concluding section, we outline two directions for alternative practices of collective memory for the production of reconciliation in West African settings.
Contextualizing TRCs

One direction for alternative collective memory practice follows from a cultural psychology analysis of neocolonialism in scientific research and practice. Simply put, neocolonialism in science refers to the forceful imposition of ideas and practices from powerful geopolitical centers to relatively powerless postcolonial communities. In the present context, neocolonialism can occur when researchers and practitioners take collective memory practices conceived within and adapted to particular cultural ecologies or historical trajectories and impose these practices on spaces to which they may be less well adapted. This imposition can do violence to the extent that researchers and practitioners intervene with “standard” practices that, because they are not designed with West African realities in mind, often do more harm than good.

A cultural psychology perspective serves as an antidote to neocolonialism in science by illuminating the extent to which canonical concepts and practices are not context-free standards rooted in essential human nature, but instead have their foundation in particular historical processes and constructions of reality. With regard to the present topic, one can apply a cultural psychological analysis not only to illuminate the extent to which canonical collective memory practices have their conceptual roots in particular traditions (e.g., Christian faith or promotion-oriented relationality) but also to suggest alternative memory practices that resonate better with local realities (with their own cultural ecologies and historical trajectories).

In a previous section, we noted how canonical practices of collective memory rely on promotion-oriented strategies that are in conflict with local practices of secrecy and silence in many West African settings (e.g., Shaw 2000). Beyond their lack of resonance with local practices of secrecy and silence, memory practices that focus on testimony and other forms of explicit verbal disclosure may fail to promote “models of identification” conducive to harmony or reconciliation. This is especially so to the extent that these practices involve circles of recrimination between people within communities who occupy similarly disempowered positions in global systems of domination and oppression.

A promising alternative might be local strategies of collective remembering that de-emphasize explicit verbal disclosure and revelation in favor of what Cole (2001) has referred to as “directed forgetting.” Directed forgetting refers to strategies of remembering that build upon traditions of ritual practice (e.g., healing, cleansing, ancestral sacrifice, etc.;
see also Shaw 2007) to repair communities in the aftermath of conflict. These practice-oriented forms of collective remembering emphasize restraint or containment rather than open revelation, focus on purification and re-integration of stigmatized ex-combatants, and attempt to dissipate rather than exacerbate interpersonal tension. Ritual practices of directed forgetting not only provide means of “re-membering” community experience that resonate with local understandings (e.g., of both human interaction and relationships to cosmos; see Tengan 1991), but also provide opportunities for collective action on community healing projects that cut across fault lines of conflicting factions. Such practices may be especially well suited for ecologies of embedded interdependence, where the densely interconnected character of everyday life tends to amplify tension and affords relatively few opportunities to avoid friction once it develops. As such, practices of directed forgetting may have a greater likelihood of success than practices of open revelation in creating imaginations of community, “models of identification,” or sense of collectively shared reality conducive to harmony and reconciliation.

An important point to emphasize here is the extent to which ritual performances of directed forgetting are active forms of memory practice or dynamically constructed instances of what one might refer to as “interpretative silence” (see Kurtiš, Adams, and Yellow Bird 2010). Contrary to conventional understandings, forgetting and silence are not passive absences of memory or speech. Instead, forgetting and silence are deliberate practices of remembering and communicating that people actively deploy (whether as a conscious individual strategy or culturally evolved technologies) to manage or contain problematic past events. From this perspective, reconciliation after violent conflict—and the very possibility of collective identity itself—requires successful acts of collective forgetting.\(^7\)

There is a tension in the concept of “interpretative silence” that deserves further comment. In our past work (Kurtiš et al. 2010), we have used this concept to refer to strategies of collective denial that national leaders use to create models of identification that facilitate ongoing domination. In the present paper, we use the concept to refer to practices of collective remembering to create models of identification that facilitate reconciliation. One reading of this tension—especially from the liberation psychology framework—might be to say that practices of interpretative silence or directed forgetting privilege the goal of peace or reconciliation above that of justice or liberation from oppression. A cultural psychology analysis complicates this reading by problematizing the
notion of voice (and denial of voice). From this perspective, the universalizing discourse of the international TRC regime, which mandates open revelation of liberatory truth, may ironically constitute a form of neocolonial injustice to the extent that it violently silences local voices and practices of directed forgetting attuned to local conditions.8

Recovering Memory of Broader Macrosocial Processes

A second direction for alternative practices of collective memory follows from the concern about de-ideologizing everyday experience. A liberation psychology analysis might propose that the problem with typical practice of collective memory in institutions like TRCs is not so much the focus on explicit verbal testimony, but rather the focus of attention in such testimony. An exclusive emphasis of reconciliation efforts on relationships between people within communities deflects attention away from the broader structures of experience with sources outside the community that are nevertheless productive of community conflict. In cases like Sierra Leone, the strategy of de-ideologizing everyday experience suggests a focus of reconciliation efforts on promoting community awareness about (and tangible collective action against) the economic injustices and postcolonial condition that reproduce community members’ collective disempowerment. Besides engaging people’s energies in forms of collective action that contribute to imagination and re-membering of community, the value of this strategy is to direct attention to deeper, distal causes of conflict rather than proximal mediators of those distal causes. From this perspective, economic security and community development are antecedents of reconciliation, not consequences, and one must provide justice before one can achieve peace.

To its noteworthy credit, the final report of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (SLTRC 2004) devoted an entire chapter (chapter 2) to a discussion of the historical antecedents of the conflict in injustices of both the colonial and postcolonial period. Regarding the colonial period, the report mentioned such antecedents as the resource-extraction base of the colonial economy and the administrative division of Sierra Leone into a relatively favored, Freetown-based colony and a relatively neglected, hinterland-based protectorate. Regarding the postcolonial period, the report mentioned such antecedents as military interference in the political process, institution of one-party
rule, corruption and incompetence of government officials, and violent suppression of political dissent.

By including a discussion of these historical antecedents in its final report, the SLTRC combats a form of silence and denial about the role of economic violence and injustice as instigating factors. From this perspective, the acute outbreak of extreme violence did not erupt suddenly from out of nowhere, but was a predictable response to the chronic economic injustice that prevailed in Sierra Leone during the decades before the war. This explanation places responsibility for the conflict not only with the disaffected youths and others who fought with various armed factions, but also with the old guard and bearers of “legitimate” authority whose less spectacular acts of chronic economic violence and injustice set the stage for the conflict. This explanation also implies that the hopes for lasting peace and reconciliation require that current and future governments take strong measures to fight enduring conditions of economic violence and injustice.

Although the final report of the SLTRC combats silences and denial about the role of colonial and Sierra Leonean elites in creating the chronic conditions for violent conflict, it re-inscribes another form of silence and denial regarding the role of international actors in the postcolonial “new world order.” People in such settings are not just more-or-less disinterested spectators of events in post-conflict African communities. Instead, these people’s actions actively reproduce conditions of postcolonial injustice that impede reconciliation efforts and afford further conflict. Yet, despite the central role that everyday actions of people in global centers of domination play in reproduction of conflict in African communities, canonical accounts of such conflict typically remain silent about the role of ordinary international actors.

As an example of broader processes of silence and denial, consider a video advertisement that appeared online during the same December 2010 weekend in which the West Africa Research Association convened the conference (in Freetown, Sierra Leone) that was the source of papers for this special issue of *ACPR.* The advertisement enacts a powerful cultural script: the purchase of a diamond as a holiday gift. A man who emerges from a Tiffany & Co. jewelry store to a snow-filled holiday scene, bearing a small package in hand, accompanied by a woman, young girl, and infant. As the man walks down the street hand-in-hand with the young girl looking up at him in admiration, the woman (carrying the infant) leans over to give him an appreciative kiss.
For people whose subjectivity is shaped by a lifetime of exposure to such advertisements, this script has powerful emotional appeal, both reflecting and reinforcing the power of diamonds as a symbol of love, commitment, domesticity, and even security (i.e., relational, economic, and ontological). However, when one views the advertisement in the context of a conference about peacemaking set in Sierra Leone, one becomes acutely aware of what is absent from the advertisement: various forms of violence associated with the extraction of diamonds from African settings. The reference here is not only to violence associated specifically with production of so-called “blood diamonds,” but also to the suffering, pain, destruction, upheaval, and insecurity associated with the more general processes of extraction whereby the continent’s wealth flows to foreign hands without benefit to the masses. This more general economy of extraction, fueled by excessive consumption in rich societies, continually reproduces the intolerable conditions that afford violent conflict in many African societies.

From this perspective, one of the most harmful consequences of mainstream social science is the propagation of individualistic or atomistic constructions of social reality that remain silent about collective or geopolitical forces (see Adams and Salter 2007 for a discussion of this idea with respect to the biomedical model in psychological and health science). The construction of conflict as interpersonal violence, like the construction of illness as a matter of diseased bodies, provides a mechanism of collective delusion or repression that deflects attention away from conflict-affording features of the postcolonial order and allows people in rich societies to forget or remain ignorant of their participation in global systems of domination. A liberation psychology perspective suggests that a particularly fruitful direction for collective memory work toward the goal of reconciliation is the challenging of the ideological constructions of everyday experience that promote collective forgetting among people in centers of global power about their role in the production of conflict in African spaces.

NOTES

Commission 2004), and South Africa (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2001).

2. Adams presented an earlier version of this paper at the conference “Peacemaking in West Africa: Faith Communities and Their Role in Conflict,” which the West Africa Research Association organized in December 2010 at Freetown, Sierra Leone.

3. Indeed, Shaw (2007) reports that individuals in Sierra Leone during the TRC hearings in everyday conversation advocated a quite different, alternative strategy of “forgive and forget,” linking the achievement of reconciliation to practices of interpretative silence rather than forced disclosure.

4. For example, see the long history of discussions on the topic of “avoidance relations” in the field of social and cultural anthropology (e.g., Radcliffe-Brown 1940).

5. Again, see Shaw (2007) for a similar point.

6. That said, observers express doubts about the efficacy of TRCs for these purposes too (e.g., Avruch 2010). For example, Shaw (2007) cites the Trauma Center for Victims of Violence and Abuse, which reported that 60–70% of those who testified before South Africa’s human rights violations hearings experienced difficulties and regretted testifying.

7. As Renan (1990: 11) famously argued in this regard, “Forgetting … is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation,” that is, the imagination of community is feasible only insofar as people are willing to forget (and forgive) violence associated with the imposition of particular constructions of community.

8. Yet again, see Shaw (2007) for a similar point.

9. Portions of the advertisement were still available online in a video clip that we retrieved on April 9, 2012 from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkZaVS0wrI8

REFERENCES


