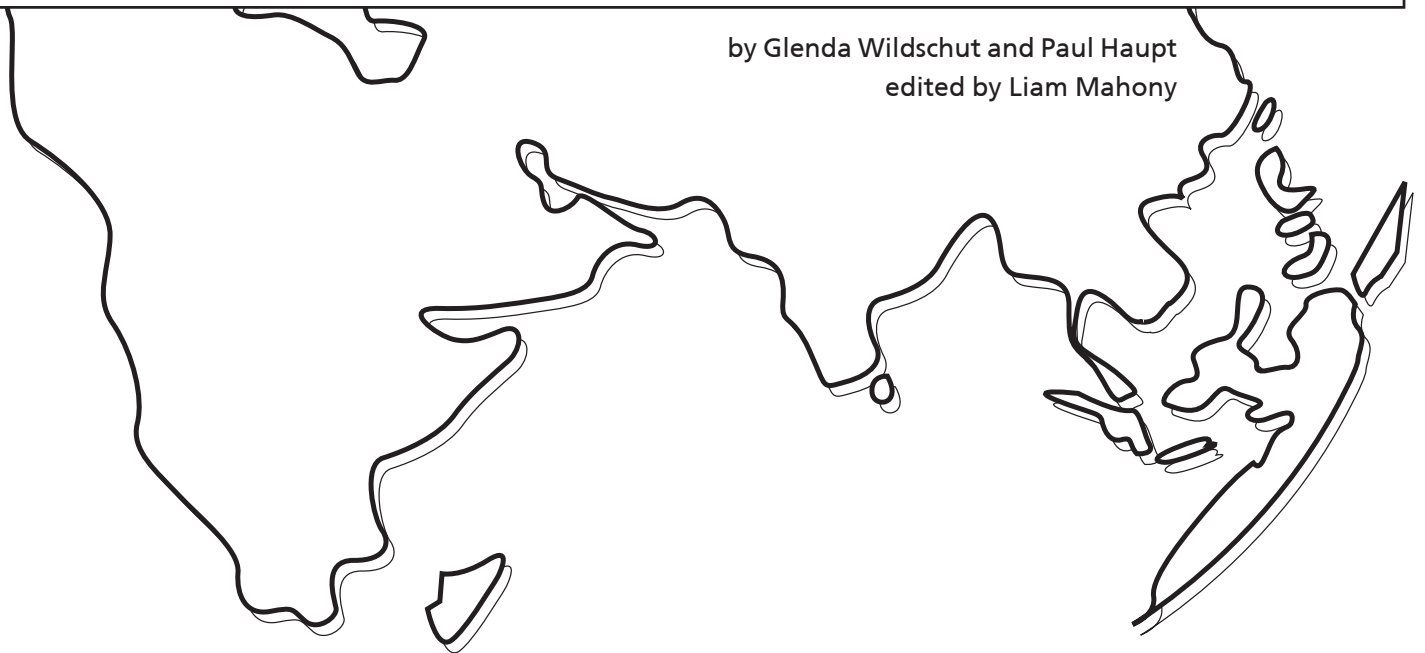


I'll Walk Beside You

Providing emotional support for testifiers at the South African Truth & Reconciliation Commission

by Glenda Wildschut and Paul Haupt
edited by Liam Mahony



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Acknowledgements

For nearly three years, from December 1995 to October 1998, I had the honour and privilege to serve as a commissioner on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In writing this notebook, I made ample use of the official report of the Commission (Part 2).

In this capacity I learned many valuable lessons—lessons of courage, hardship, good and unspeakable evil. Most of all I learned of a generosity of spirit amongst our people, particularly those who agreed to testify before the commission at public hearings. It is to these witnesses who exposed their hurt, trauma and pain on radio and before the glare of television cameras that I offer special thanks. Had it not been for testifiers we would not have had the possibility of a successful Truth and Reconciliation Commission. To the briefers who went beyond the call of duty to provide a safe space for the thousands of people who appeared before the commission, I salute you.

Writing this notebook—along with preparation for the New Tactics African Regional Training Workshop—has given me the space to reflect on the process of providing psychosocial support in the context of a judicial process, and I hope others will benefit from these insights. I thank my colleagues at the Desmond Tutu Leadership Academy, especially Cheryl Vallay, for all the assistance they have given in getting this job done. And finally, to my son, Luke, who has to step aside so that tasks like these can be done, I am grateful.

Glenda Wildschut & Paul Haupt

Glenda Wildschut is presently the director of the Desmond Tutu Leadership Academy. In 1995 she was appointed by President Nelson Mandela to serve as a commissioner on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission under the chairmanship of Nobel Peace laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu, where she served on the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee. She also worked at the World Health Organisation headquarters in Geneva, examining the role of health workers in transitional societies.

Ms. Wildschut has been involved in human rights advocacy since the early 1980s, working particularly with political prisoners in South Africa and Namibia, their families, exiles and orphaned returnee children. Ms Wildschut is a registered nurse, midwife, psychiatric nurse (specialising in child and adolescent psychiatry), community nurse practitioner and nurse educator. She is also a mother, sister, daughter and aunt, with interests in the arts, particularly choral music, and she trained as a classical singer. She is a member of the Cape Town Symphony Choir.

Paul Haupt is a clinical psychologist, currently the director of perpetrator studies at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in Cape Town. In this capacity, he has conducted more than 50 in-depth interviews among South Africa's former antagonists from across the political divides. This work aims to deepen understanding of the motives and perspectives of South Africans engaged in armed political conflict.

Mr. Haupt worked as a brifer for the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, providing emotional support for victims appearing in public hearings (including hearings on human rights violations and amnesty). He has extensive experience in the workings of the commission and has been engaged in the debates surrounding its work and South Africa's political transition in general.



September 2004

Dear Friend,

Welcome to the New Tactics in Human Rights Tactical Notebook Series! In each notebook a human rights practitioner describes an innovative tactic used successfully in advancing human rights. The authors are part of the broad and diverse human rights movement, including non-government and government perspectives, educators, law enforcement personnel, truth and reconciliation processes, and women's rights and mental health advocates. They have both adapted and pioneered tactics that have contributed to human rights in their home countries. In addition, they have utilized tactics that, when adapted, can be applied in other countries and situations to address a variety of issues.

Each notebook contains detailed information on *how* the author and his or her organization achieved what they did. We want to inspire other human rights practitioners to think *tactically*—and to broaden the realm of tactics considered to effectively advance human rights.

In this notebook Glenda Wildschut and Paul Haupt outline the victim accompaniment process for the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that developed the concept of “briefers” to install a victim-friendly process. Victims were provided with the opportunity to testify and be supported before, during and after the process. The TRC selected briefers—chosen from the caring professions, such as ministers, social workers and nurses—from the community to provide this support. The briefers acted as volunteers and were trained to perform various tasks with regard to the entire structural process of the TRC. As a consequence of the sustained, supportive work of the briefers during the entire process, victims better understood their legal, emotional and practical position. Thus, they felt they owned the process and were able to contribute in an important way by making recommendations about reparations. Briefers could be utilized in many settings—e.g. those involving domestic violence or rape, and tribunals court systems—where vulnerable victims need mediation and support to overcome traumatic experiences and especially in processes that involve perpetrators as well.

The entire series of Tactical Notebooks is available online at www.newtactics.org. Additional notebooks will continue to be added over time. On our web site you will also find other tools, including a searchable database of tactics, a discussion forum for human rights practitioners and information about our workshops and symposium. To subscribe to the New Tactics newsletter, please send an e-mail to newtactics@cvt.org.

The New Tactics in Human Rights Project is an international initiative led by a diverse group of organizations and practitioners from around the world. The project is coordinated by the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) and grew out of our experiences as a creator of new tactics and as a treatment center that also advocates for the protection of human rights from a unique position—one of healing and reclaiming civic leadership.

We hope that you will find these notebooks informational and thought-provoking.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kate Kelsch".

Kate Kelsch
New Tactics Project Manager

Introduction

Between 1995 and 1998, 21,529 people gave statements to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).¹ The thousands of hours of hearings were broadcast publicly and became the most watched programming in South African television history. Testifiers recounted the horrors of 34 years of apartheid and repression, bringing to light the contours of a national trauma, and the details of thousands of individuals' suffering.

Testifying publicly about one's own personal trauma is itself a terribly difficult experience. The TRC committed itself to creating a process that was friendly and accommodating for victims. Part of this process was a program of "briefing" for people coming forth to testify. Thousands of people were accompanied before, during and after their testimony by volunteers trained in psychosocial support as well as in the legal and practical realities of the hearing process. The goal was to provide the necessary support to make the experience of testifying an empowering one that would help in the victim's longer-term healing process, rather than contribute to renewed suffering.

The briefing process had positive effects on three different levels. On the individual level, it helped the testifiers overcome their apprehensions, avoid secondary trauma, process their painful past and move on with their lives. On a community level, it helped train community members to assist in the psychosocial healing process of the testifiers, while also bringing whole communities together to process and heal from their mutually shared past experiences. And finally, on a national level, the briefing helped the Truth Commission achieve its goal of creating a victim-friendly process that would promote national healing for a traumatised nation. On each of these levels, there are lessons to be learned that may be applicable in other contexts.

Historical context

Each time a country shifts from an authoritarian, repressive government to a newly democratic one, the infinitely complex issue of what has come to be known as transitional justice, has to be tackled. In South Africa, the most significant and powerful mechanism devised to deal with the country's transition and the problems that necessarily lay within it, was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The seed of this initiative was planted with the adoption of the Interim Constitution on December 5, 1993, which emphasised the importance of the country's reconstruction and pursuit of national peace. The Constitution aimed to finally seal the lid on the bloody conflict between the increasingly militant liberation struggle and the apart-

heid regime in power that had locked the country in a notoriously violent and oppressive stranglehold for more than 40 years. The United Nations and other world organisations had now declared apartheid "a crime against humanity." In line with this human rights perspective, the Constitution claimed to mark "an historic bridge between the past of a deeply divided society characterised by strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice, and a future founded on the recognition of human rights, democracy, and peaceful co-existence."

The fundamental concept behind the establishment of the TRC was that the future reconciliation necessary for peaceful co-existence in South Africa would be possible only as a result of knowing as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights committed during the apartheid era, a public recognition of the truth that had been hidden for so long by false propaganda at the hands of apartheid's helmsmen. Also, the transitional justice required to steer the country toward reconciliation had to be of a restorative, rather than retributive, nature. To this end, the decision was made to combine a process for granting amnesty to perpetrators with a process of public truth-telling on behalf of victims. Both procedures would serve also as an acknowledgement of past atrocities and lost dignities and place the new democracy on a moral plane within which the aim of preventing a reoccurrence was implicit.

Contrary to widespread belief, the South African TRC was not the first truth commission in existence, and other prominent initiatives can be seen to have served as its predecessors. Whilst undoubtedly the most ambitious and thorough to date in terms of its scale and powers, there have been some 17 similar commissions around the world since 1974, principally in Latin American countries that were also attempting to unmask the truths of their unsavoury histories. Nor was the TRC the first body established in South Africa to investigate human rights abuses. Following persistent reports and rumours in the media from 1989 onwards around the existence of death squads within the national army and police, the Harms Commission was appointed to investigate this specific matter. On the back of this, a Commission of Inquiry into Public Violence was established in 1992, and came to be known as the Goldstone Commission, headed by Justice Richard Goldstone. It was set up to investigate the origin of so-called "third-force" attacks, which were linked to the police and military instigating violent conflict between supporters of the Inkatha Freedom Party and the African National Congress (ANC), on trains and in other public places, in an attempt to destroy the peace process. In fact, 16,000 people were killed during the peace process.² The ANC also established two internal commissions in the early 1990s—the Skweyiya and the Motsuenyane Commission—in

¹ *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, Vol. 6* (2003). Kenwyn: Juta

² *Race Relations Survey 1990-1995*: Johannesburg: SAIRR



Briefers in a training session.



Briefer sitting behind a testifier and supporting her in a difficult moment during testimony.

response to allegations of human rights violations in its own armed camps across the border. An extensive process of debate and analysis within civil society further prepared the ground for the specific embodiment of the TRC. Eminent figures from other countries in conflict that had undergone similar processes—most notably, the former president of Chile, Patricio Aylwin—were invited to participate in a series of conferences and seminars in 1994 and 1995 that helped to formulate the Truth Commission.

At the request of then-president Nelson Mandela and by constitutional obligation, the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act created the TRC on July 26, 1995. The Act charged the TRC with “provid[ing] for the investigation and the establishment of as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights committed from March 1, 1960,” the year of the Sharpeville Massacre, until the democratic elections of 1994. To clarify the breadth of this mandate, the Act defined a “gross violation” as “the killing, abduction, torture, or severe ill-treatment of any person” with a political motive or any attempt to commit such an action. The Act further defines the “victims” as those who directly “suffered harm in the form of physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, pecuniary loss” or gross violations of human rights and “the relatives and dependants of such victims as prescribed.”

The President of South Africa was charged with appointing between 11 and 17 people to serve as truth and reconciliation commissioners. The TRC was mandated to create three committees: the Committee on Human Rights Violations which would serve as the investigative wing of the TRC and submit reports to the commission regarding human rights violations; the Committee on Reparations and Rehabilitation which would consider the cases of alleged victims and submit recommendations for the victims who applied for reparations; and the Committee on Amnesty which would facilitate open hearings on gross violations of human rights and grant or withhold amnesty for perpetrators.

Altogether, the aim of the TRC was to realise many of the ideals set forth in the South African Constitution. When proclaiming the justification for establishing the TRC, the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act cites that “the Constitution states that the pursuit of national unity, the well-being of all South African citizens and peace require reconciliation between the people of South Africa” and that “the Constitution states that there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for ubuntu but not for victimisation.” (Ubuntu is the concept that our humanity is dependent on the humanity of others.) While the mandate of the TRC clearly stated that victims of gross violations of human rights must be treated with the utmost respect and care, it also asserted that the commission must thoroughly seek to uncover all human rights violations occurring between 1960 and 1994, without regard to the race, sex or religion of either perpetrator or victim. In doing so, the commission would clarify many of the awful mysteries of the apartheid era and clear the way for national reconciliation, unity and progress.

Psychosocial support for victims and testifiers

The Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee of the TRC was responsible for providing victims with psychosocial and emotional support. From the outset the commission recognised the need to provide an environment that supported and respected the dignity of all who approached it and stressed the importance of sensitivity to the immediate needs of all those testifying, encouraging that they should be referred to existing service agencies for necessary support.

BIRTH OF THE BRIEFING PROGRAM

In the psychosocial sense, a “briefer” is someone who accompanies a person going through a traumatic time and subsequently helps people decode what has happened. The briefing methodology we used comes from critical incident debriefing (CID), a practice that has developed in situations where people have gone through unusual or traumatic experiences (natural disasters, for example). Prior to serving as TRC com-



missioner, I had been working on starting a torture treatment centre, and was on the board of a trauma centre. We saw, for instance, that when police or firefighters come back from a traumatic experience in their work, they recuperated from that trauma better if they had a process to talk through it. Likewise, I saw torture survivors who, when they talked about their experiences, would relive these traumas. As I surveyed the relevant literature at the Trauma Centre, I learned that levels of secondary trauma are reduced if there is an early briefing process. It has been shown, for instance, that posttraumatic stress syndrome is reduced in rescue workers when CID is applied.

More technical information on critical incident debriefing is provided in the Appendix. The tool is relatively simple and does not require professional skills. CID has three aspects: cognitive, emotional and practical. On the cognitive level, we ask the person, What were you thinking during the traumatic incident? On the emotional level, What did you feel during the event? And finally, on a practical level, What did you do? The CID process then illustrates to the affected person how their responses are normal, even though they were experiencing very abnormal circumstances.

We had a number of members of the health professions on the TRC (which is unusual—more frequently such commissions are composed of people with legal training). When we presented the idea of briefing to the rest of the commission, it was accepted easily. They understood that the process would be hard for those who testify. The TRC had committed itself to being a victim-friendly process that would give testifiers the dignity and the worth they deserve. More frequently it is the perpetrator who is in the limelight, with the victims playing a smaller part. This can be very frustrating for the victims. We chose to start the process with victim hearings rather than the amnesty hearings.

With the commission's approval, we spent a lot of time adapting the CID model to the TRC setting, where people would come to report on incidents or provide testimony. We found that people appreciated that support. The commission went so far as to appoint psychosocial professionals to our staff. Commissioners and staff also needed support for their own stressful work.

OBJECTIVES OF THE BRIEFING PROGRAM

With the briefing program we were addressing three levels of objectives:

Support and empower the individual: The primary goal was to establish a supportive environment for survivors in general, allowing them the space to express their feelings, in a healing process. We wanted to facilitate this process in order that it have the best

possible chance of being an empowering experience, one that would sustain or restore their sense of dignity, and which would not contribute to renewed trauma.

Support the community healing process: The TRC was investigating events with a cumulative impact. Massacres and discrimination had been targeted at whole communities. Each human rights abuse against an individual served as an act of terror to frighten everyone around them and left many people traumatised. The process of healing also needed to be collective. People needed to come to grips with the past in the context of their families and communities. Therefore, our process needed to draw from the community and family and find, strengthen or rebuild the resources for psychosocial healing within them. The process of training community briefers was crucial in this respect.

Maximise the impact on national healing: Finally, our briefing process was part of a massive national catharsis, and the hearings involved many thousands of victims. To really be victim-friendly we could not settle for a few visible, model cases of adequate emotional support. We needed methods that could be developed with limited resources that could effectively reach a substantial portion of the numerous people who would testify. And we needed a process that would show the whole country the importance we placed on maintaining the dignity of the victims, as this message would help the positive catharsis we sought.

To achieve these goals, we trained two kinds of briefers. A core group of briefers worked intensively throughout the process. In addition, community briefers were recruited and trained in each of the home communities of the those who testified. The core briefers were more intensively trained and gained more experience, as they helped testifiers from various communities month after month prepare for and go through their hearings. They also helped to train the community briefers. The community briefers had a more focused and shorter-term objective: to provide support for their own community and the testifiers coming from that community. Thus, some of our briefers were trainers of other briefers, and then within each community, these latter could continue to help the community learn about the healing process the victims needed.

The briever's job included:

- ♦ Facilitating the testifier's preparation in a supportive environment.
- ♦ Allowing survivors the space to express their feelings. (Some events had happened 20–30 years ago, others had just happened. Everyone was at different stages and we needed to support them wherever they were in their healing process.)

- Educating testifiers about the legal realities and implications of giving testimony.
- Educating testifiers, their families and their communities about the psychosocial dynamics of the process of testifying about the events of the past and the relationship to healing.
- Offering emotional support to each testifier before, during and after the hearing.
- In the case of the amnesty hearings, specific preparation encouraging survivors to imagine both possible outcomes (amnesty granted to the perpetrator, amnesty not granted) and to reflect on implications of each outcome for their own healing process.
- In some cases, briefers facilitated or mediated encounters between victims and perpetrators.

Briefing as a tactic

The process we developed involved the following stages: 1) initial contact with the community; 2) initial contact with witnesses; 3) a full-day briefing session; 4) the hearing itself; 5) a closure process; and 6) a follow-up visit.

1) INITIAL CONTACT WITH COMMUNITY: FINDING COMMUNITY BRIEFERS

The scale of the TRC's work nationally limited us to only about an eight-week relationship with each community. So it was important to stimulate whatever resources were in the community. Our capacity to follow up on the process was very limited.

Our initial contact with a community was usually in the form of a public meeting, involving teachers, people in the legal professions, health workers and others in the community. They would come to a community hall, where we would present the work of the commission. We would explain our needs and try to form a partnership with the community.

As with any kind of external intervention of a humanitarian nature, it was essential to build a partnership with existing community leaders and to value and take advantage of the resources and skills the community already had. We tried to identify the key stakeholders: community council members, people from faith communities, traditional leaders, authority figures, etc. They would be introducing the commission to the others in the community. We would ask these authorities to hold a public meeting and bring people together. Their permission and convening authority was important. Then we would move from there.

In most of the communities there was an affiliation with the South African Council of Churches, which helped us a great deal. In the Western Cape there was an organisation called The Religious Response to the Truth Commission which brought together NGOs

and members of the local faith communities. They helped us find local partners.

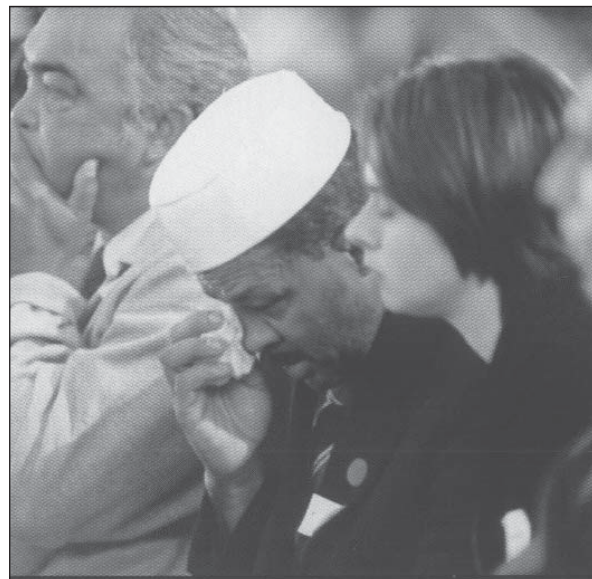
One immediate goal of this first gathering was to identify potential community briefers. Very often it was church people, social workers, teachers or nurses—people who already had certain professional experience helping individuals and the community through difficult situations. No one came into the briefing process without relevant experience. We needed people with some level of psychosocial training, because we knew we would not have time for an in-depth training process. The prospective community briefers would usually present themselves to us voluntarily. We found that as long as people came in with some basic experience in providing empathetic support, the training process was not difficult.

The next step would be training sessions with the selected community briefers. The sessions would go more deeply into the process, describe the needs of the witnesses and explore what kinds of support already exist within the community. (See section on training).

2) INITIAL CONTACT WITH WITNESSES

Once the cases were selected to be publicly heard by the Human Rights Violation Committee, invitations were sent to the witnesses. Invitation letters to appear before the TRC at a public hearing were typically hand-delivered by TRC logistics staff members. The invitation letter included details of the briefing process, the date of the briefing session and the hearing. TRC logistics staff made transport arrangements for witnesses to and from the briefing session and public hearing.

The briefers' first contact with a witness was generally on his or her arrival at the briefing session. Wit-



Briefers sits next to a testifier.



nesses were welcomed with something to eat and drink before the session began.

3) THE FULL-DAY BRIEFING SESSION

When we had a hearing scheduled for a group of testifiers from a community, we would organise a full-day briefing session two days beforehand. This would bring together all the witnesses scheduled for a specific hearing day. We wanted to create a sense of group support that could be maintained during the hearing itself. There were usually about eight witnesses scheduled for a given day and we encouraged them all to bring a friend or family support person with them.

We all sat in a circle, and witnesses and briefers introduced themselves. Then we would describe the role of the briefers and explain the agenda for the day's session. We sought always to eliminate as many unknowns as possible, thus reducing people's stress.

Next we would explain three key aspects of the hearing process:

- Practical and logistical aspects: We would give people an overview of the schedule, process and location as well as their own role in it all. We wanted to prepare people for the physical setting, which could be potentially intimidating.
- Legal aspects: For example, we encouraged people to read from prepared statements and urged them not to name new perpetrators in public (because all accusations had been corroborated in advance by the TRC).
- Emotional aspects: We discussed what unexpected feelings people might experience and clarified again the briefers' support role.

The next step was a tour of the hearing room to let people know exactly what to expect.

After returning from the hearing room, we divided into smaller groups of six to eight people to share stories, facilitated by the briever. For many witnesses, this was the first opportunity to share their stories in a group. For the briefers, this could be one of the most satisfying experiences. There was a sense of connection, as neighbours conveyed experiences for the first time. We encouraged these groups to stay in touch after the TRC process was over. Before closing, we would ensure that the group exchanged contact information to maintain a supportive connection after the event.

4) THE DAY OF THE PUBLIC HEARING

On the day of the hearing, the witnesses and briefers got together an hour before the hearing was to begin and discussed their immediate feelings about the day ahead. We again went over the logistics and schedule to minimise unknowns during that anxious period.

During the hearings, each witness was assigned a briever who provided support over the course of the day and accompanied him or her when he or she took the stand.

After the testimony, debriefing was very important. The witness would be taken to a separate room for this before going back into the public room. This would enable the briever to help him or her get through the process and also allow him or her to say anything else that he or she felt a need to add.

5) CLOSURE

We encouraged people to think in terms of "leaving it all behind"—to leave the trauma in the hands of the commission. This was a relief for many people. Figuratively, they could now turn their backs on it and leave it behind. We further urged them to continue to draw support from each other and from their community.

As a commission we did not conduct any particular closure rituals. But there were other accompanying organisations that took on such processes. In Kwazulu Natal there is a "washing the spears" ritual, linked to an ancient ritual in which none of the warriors can enter the village with their spears when returning from war. This ritual has adapted over time and is also a conciliation ritual. A part of the ritual is a physical action of not looking back—not looking upon the battlefield—literally putting it behind you. For some people Christian rituals, such as mass and communion, were also important.

CASE STUDY: THE BRIEFING PROCESS IN HANOVER

TRC staff had been working in the surrounding areas of Hanover for six weeks and Hanover had been identified as having centrally located facilities that could host a public hearing. Staff of the Human Rights Committee had collected victim statements. TRC investigators had corroborated victim statements. And the briever for the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee had identified and trained community members to help provide support to witnesses who were to appear before the TRC. The days preceding the public hearings were devoted to briefing witnesses. The TRC briever and trained community briefers conducted these sessions, preparing witnesses for the process of giving public testimony and supporting them through the often daunting process of sharing their traumatic memories in a public TRC hearing.

As witnesses arrived from surrounding communities for the day's briefing session, they were welcomed by the briefers and invited to a drink and sandwich. Many had traveled long distances. After greeting each other, the initial atmosphere of apprehension slowly gave way to a determination to tell their stories, to speak out—they were not alone. As usual, the brief-

ing session began formally with a welcome and introduction. Sitting in a circle, they all introduced themselves. The briefers facilitated the process as people shared a little about themselves and their feelings about sharing their very personal stories in a public forum. For the majority of people, this was the first occasion to share experiences with relative strangers. Each story revealed blatant disregard for human life and brutality generating intense emotions—tears, shock, anger and cries interrupted the stories, but were then contained by comforting words or a touch from a fellow witness. Sharing each other's pain, comforting words, exclamations of shock and horror and strong statements about the injustices endured developed camaraderie among witnesses, a realisation that although silenced, they were not alone.

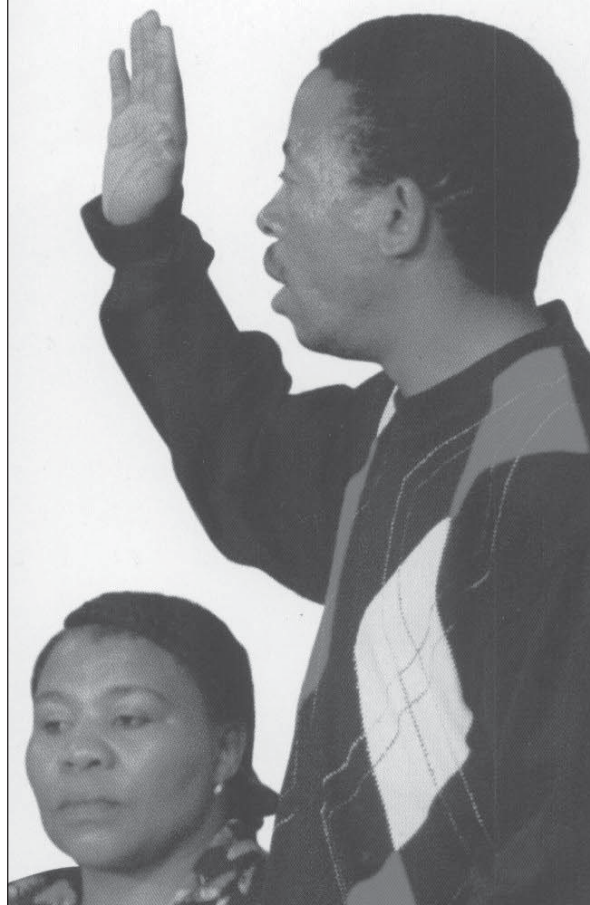
Group members felt a profound connection to each other after witnessing these painful memories. Drawing strength and inspiration from the experience of being heard and supported by each other, the determination to speak out was palatable. They had to share their experiences of the injustices and dehumanisation that characterised apartheid-era South Africa for the vast majority of South Africans, to give their traumatic stories away, to create awareness of the inhumane acts that were perpetrated in the name of politics and to share the responsibility that these atrocities are never again repeated.

The group's discussion gained momentum, facilitated by the briefers. Members of the various communities represented in the group began to talk about how they would stay in contact with each other once the TRC had completed its work and moved on. The challenge of remembering the past in a way that was meaningful to themselves and their communities took priority for the remainder of the day. Their aim was to decide how they would continue the process of healing that they and their various communities had begun and wished to continue. Two group members decided that they would lead by example. Implicated in a fatal attack on the brother of a fellow community member, "the perpetrator," a victim himself in another case, asked the brother of his victim for forgiveness.

Now acting as mediators, the briefers' task was to contain the process. The atmosphere in the group changed from relaxed and easygoing to a solemn, though content, silence. Although these two men had lived side by side in the same community for years, they had seemingly never had the opportunity to deal with this history that had estranged them. Now, more than a decade later, they seized the opportunity and prepared to take the risk. To manage this risk the briefers mediated the confrontation in order to help these former adversaries to engage each other as brothers as fellow South Africans and no longer as political enemies.

“The role of statement-takers and briefers, both full-time and voluntary, cannot be rated highly enough. They were the first face of the TRC for many and they helped deponents through the painful process of telling their stories and dealing with their feelings.”

Mary Burton Truth Talk 1 November 1997



This mediation generated a conversation that resonated deeply with the rest of the group as they too were grappling with the complex task of confronting the past in order to move on with their lives. To continue their journey of personal healing, they acknowledged their vulnerabilities as human beings and moved beyond the prejudices they held about one another that made it possible for them to dehumanise each other. As these two former enemies engaged in their complex history as violator and violated, they enacted a symbolic journey of healing for all in the room. Though an immensely difficult journey, it is also





Commissioner listens while testifier prepares for testimony.



Testifier being supported by community briefer after giving testimony.

one that brings with it the opportunity for change. In this instance, these two men were about to change their perceptions of each other forever. They decided that after they had given testimony to the TRC the following day, they would visit the site of the killing together.

As the sun rose over the town of Hanover, beginning a new day, there was an air of excitement and anticipation. That day, this little dusty town of 4,000 inhabitants, situated deep in South Africa's Karoo Desert, was hosting one of the TRC's hearings for victims of gross human rights violations. The silence that had shrouded the dark years of oppression, that had made its mark on even the smallest of South African towns, was about to be broken. This day was the opportunity for survivors and families of victims of gross human rights violations in and around the communities of Hanover to share their stories with the commission, the country and the world, firsthand experiences of the brutality of apartheid's inhuman, racist and unjust system.

The town's recreation centre was filled to capacity as members of the community eagerly congregated to hear testimony about the conflict, pain and humiliation their community had experienced. Each witness for the day's hearing was assigned a briefer who would support him or her throughout the day. The briefer accompanied the witness to the witness stand and after the testimony was completed the briefer

went with the witness to a private room where the witness was debriefed.

By lunchtime on the first day both the men who had been through mediation the previous day had given testimony. The two men had given differing accounts from different perspectives of the murder of "a brother" and "a spy" who had worked as a policeman in the community. Honouring their agreement, they walked across an open field, accompanied by their briefers, to the place where the killing occurred. A small crowd of community members followed. When they reached the site, they silently shook hands and embraced each other, tears filling their eyes. Onlookers, entangled in their own history and moved by what they were witnessing, broke the silence by applauding the men for their gesture of forgiveness.

It was at this level that much of the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee's work occurred. Out of the spotlight, in the silence of human engagement, this work of the TRC provided a concrete opportunity for the restoration of the human dignity of survivors and of the family and friends of victims of horrendous, dehumanising acts. Although it was an unseen side of the TRC's work, the restoration of human dignity in concrete and other ways was fundamental to the mandate and objective of the process. Restoring human dignity is, after all, a key challenge to every post-conflict society, as it attempts to establish a basis for social restoration, reconciliation and lasting peace.

As the sun set on Hanover that evening and the stars slowly began to light up the Karoo sky, the events of the previous days were somehow captured in the moments of dusk. The brief moments between the day that has passed and the day that is to come. Held together by trust in the knowledge that the night will bring refreshing rest and the day, more opportunity.

6) FOLLOW-UP

We learned after the first round of hearings in 1996 that the hearings could open up old conflicts that threatened stability in communities. It became clear that they needed to provide opportunities for reconciliation. Sometimes the community briefers were traumatised or overwhelmed by the requests of the testifiers. We felt it was important to go back to every community where the hearings had been held and try to deal with the issues that had not been resolved. Things had been revealed in those hearings that no one had known about in the community. These revelations in the communities required that there be space to think through the new realities and deal with them. It was not our mandate to resolve these problems, but we tried to provide the space within which the community could work to resolve them. Thus we brought in an additional step, involving a

follow-up debriefing visit for the whole community. These visits helped communities to:

- evaluate the impact of gross violations of human rights;
- help formulate reparations policy recommendations;
- devise strategies to promote reconciliation and healing for individuals and neighbourhoods; and
- begin to own the reconciliation process and create community-based initiatives that would continue after the commission's work had ended.

MEETINGS BETWEEN VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS

Sometimes at the follow-up meetings, or during preparation for the amnesty hearings, requests arose for victim-perpetrator mediations. Many were community-level mediations—some arising spontaneously—and the community would use some kind of ritual or symbolism to confront the issue. The briefers sometimes facilitated face-to-face meetings between survivors and perpetrators, as long as both parties wanted it. There was a lot of media hype about this, full of idealistic notions of forgiveness—always highlighting photos of any friendly looks or interactions. In contrast, the preparation for such sessions needed to be realistic and honest; there was no expectation that people would kiss and make friends. In the preparation, we wanted to help the survivors into a position to feel empowered to meet the perpetrators face-to-face. It is a situation where the victims see, for the first time, the perpetrator as a human being rather than a power machine.

Training for briefing

Working with victims of violence exposes helpers to the high levels of trauma and pain experienced by testifiers. To deal with this they need a certain level of skills. Because specialised facilities for trauma services are very limited in South Africa, and tend to be based in urban areas, it was a challenge to train counsellors in the rural areas where many testifiers lived.

Treatment of trauma is a long, slow process, so we hoped to provide testifiers with sustainable support that would be available long after the commission had concluded its work. For this reason, the emphasis was on building capacity in existing community structures, by training briefers within the affected communities.

Regional coordinators and a mental health specialist coordinated this training. Community briefers were trained to increase the commission's capacity to provide emotional support and assisted with the briefing and debriefing of testifiers before, during and after the hearings. After the hearings, they continued to provide support to people in their communities. This also ensured that support was provided by

people whom the testifiers trusted and who shared the same language and culture.

Briefers needed to be able to debrief people before, during and after giving testimony and to control their own emotions when dealing with the pain of the victims. Their training consisted of:

- sensitisation to interpersonal dynamics;
- role-playing, with a focus on person-centred and fact-centred listening and the effects on the interviewee of different styles of questioning;
- the paralinguistic aspects of listening;
- an introduction to posttraumatic stress syndrome symptoms;
- an introduction to basic crisis management skills;
- an introduction to stress management, using systems theory; and
- defining the boundaries of the briefers' role.

TRC staff who took victims' statements were also given this training, to sensitise them to testifiers' needs when they retell their stories. This was an important transfer of skills. Many of these statement-takers were paralegals, who had some training. These interviews tended to be quite formal, so we tried to encourage the statement-takers to be more emotionally supportive and cognisant of the needs of the deponent.

Outcomes

"The briefing process was the... human side [of the commission's work]—as most of the work was its quasi-judicial face." Paul Haupt, TRC brifer

Approximately 2,600 witnesses appeared at the various Human Rights Violations Committee public hearings of the TRC held across the country. Each was briefed, accompanied while giving public testimony and debriefed. The Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee had briefers in each of its four regional offices, a total of 11 full-time briefers. Between four and six community briefers were trained in each of the communities where the TRC held public hearings. A briefing session was held for every public Human Rights Violation Committee hearings.

In addition to their work during the hearings, briefers also provided support to survivors and families of victims who attended amnesty hearings. This work was not carried out in the same manner across the country and it is therefore difficult to estimate the number of amnesty hearings in which briefers provided support to survivors and the families of victims.

Most testifiers speak fondly of their briefers and say that they would not have had the courage to tell their story had it not been for the support of the briefers. For the TRC, although the briefing was less visible than the other work of the commission, it did



help to achieve the objective being a victim-friendly process.

The limits of the process

Several aspects of this work could have been improved, but in every case it would have required a significantly greater investment of human resources and time.

- We had a very limited ability to follow up sufficiently. There had been so much secrecy in the communities and this process took the lid off that. The kind of community mediation that should have followed after these hearings could have gone much further to achieve community-level reconciliation, but our mandate did not extend this far and resources would have been too limited in any case.
- We needed a way to offer support to the people who didn't appear in the public hearings. They had similar experiences and similar feelings. The public hearings provided a window into a community's experience, but the public testimonies were not necessarily the worst of those experiences. Thousands of other witnesses gave private depositions to TRC statement-takers. It would have been helpful to make a briefer available after testimony was given to every statement-taker.
- On a qualitative level, we had to be clear that this is a very focused model of support over a short time. Our briefers encountered many people in need of more intensive support, and had to refer quite a few to the Department of Health, Social Services and other services. We had to be strict about this, as the commission was not an implementing or service-providing body. The natural inclination of someone with psychological training might be to try to offer more intensive counselling support, but it was important that we not create unrealistic expectations of what we could offer.
- This was also a difficulty for the community briefers, who lived in close proximity to the testifiers. By nature of their role in the community, they might, in some cases, have been able to offer some level of ongoing psychosocial sup-



A one-on-one session between briefer and testifier.

port. But we were in no position to monitor the quality of such interventions. We do know that sometimes the briefers were overwhelmed with requests for support.

- The TRC ended up making many policy recommendations without any teeth. It was skewed in its use of resources, with insufficient investment in reparation and follow-up. It was a victim-based process in the short-run, but in the longer process the perpetrators got their amnesty immediately but reparation for victims was long-delayed.

Transferring the tactic INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Clearly the positive impact of this tactic has implications for any situation in which individuals are giving testimony about human rights abuse—or testimony about any traumatic experiences, for that matter. Our experience suggests, therefore, that any organisation or lawyer involved in litigation, lawsuits, prosecutions or legal inquiries into past traumatic experiences should be providing this kind of psychosocial support to the witnesses they are depending upon. All too often, legal processes are blind to the emotional and psychological impact on participants. Because human rights litigation is intended to promote the welfare of past and future victims, it is essential that such supportive processes be integrated into all witness preparation and testimony.

Similarly, the mainstream human rights movement is founded upon processes of fact-gathering and documentation of past traumas. Every human rights researcher who ever interviews a trauma survivor should be trained in the skills of psychosocial briefing. If not, they are not dealing responsibly with the risk that their fact-finding may have negative consequences on the very sources they depend upon—the survivors.

COMMUNITY LEVEL

Similarly, organisations looking into political traumas affecting whole communities can learn from this experience. It is important to recognise that communities have their own psychosocial resources in the helping professions, including mental health workers, religious leaders, teachers, doctors, nurses, and social workers. In any community process that looks into past traumas, such resources should be taken advantage of. Ideally, these people would be recruited to provide psychosocial support for the community as they investigate or mobilise around a past trauma. Organisational and community-level processes that look at the necessary political strategies for overcoming a community's difficult past must also deliberately plan for the psychological needs of the community as old wounds are re-opened.

NATIONAL LEVEL

Finally, every nation that goes through a post-conflict situation has to grapple with its past. In some cases, this is a daunting challenge, as the quantity of past crimes overwhelms any capacity for investigation, justice or accountability. No post-conflict nation has infinite resources, either financial or professional, for the needs of an exhaustive process, and in some conflicts the quantitative imbalance between past crimes and existing resources is even worse than it was in South Africa. So of course there will be trade-offs. We were largely looking at “window cases”—cases that were exemplary of the types of crimes that had been committed. There was never any impractical expectation that we could examine every crime that had been committed in the 33 years covered by our mandate. Our goal was that examining these exemplary cases would help to heal the entire country. Even those whose cases were not broadcast on television would see that justice and reconciliation is possible, and this would help them move forward in their lives with hope for the future.

We believe, however, that for victimised people to move forward with hope, they must see that the justice process was responsive to their needs. Any truth and reconciliation process will have to accept that it can only look at a fraction of the truth. The manner in which it looks at this fraction, though, is crucial: people watching the process must believe that it is legitimate. Even those whose cases never came to the TRC should have been able to watch the process and feel that it helps the victims, and even imagine that something similarly constructive might also have been possible in their own case. If, on the other hand, the invisible majority of victims see a process that further traumatises testifiers, or focuses entirely on the perpetrators, this will not empower the nation to see a better future for itself.

‘Why did they kill everyone, why didn’t they shoot them in the legs why didn’t they leave just one so that he could testify about what really happened?’ Mrs Cynthia Ngevu said before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the city yesterday.

Cape Times 24 April 1996



Although every truth and reconciliation process is underfunded and under-resourced, we believe it is essential that significant effort and resources be put into psychosocial support for people who testify, not only because it is a moral responsibility to support those individuals upon whose testimony the process depends, but also because the process will gain greater legitimacy. A post-conflict process of reconciliation can only succeed if it is legitimate in the eyes of the victims.



Appendix: Critical Incident Debriefing

A critical incident is one that "causes a distressing, dramatic or profound change or disruption in the physical (physiological) or psychological functioning" of a person (www.aaets.org). Such events commonly precipitate strong emotional reactions. If these situations are not properly handled, the victim's susceptibility to posttraumatic stress disorder is dramatically increased. In an effort to address these issues, the process of critical incident debriefing (CID), also referred to as critical incident stress debriefing, was developed to: assist in defusing emotions associated with such an event; address the physical and psychological impact of the incident on the individual; and provide information on stress management and other available support services.

CID was initially created to alleviate the impact of "secondary posttraumatic stress" on safety and health workers who are continually exposed to traumatic environments. Its uses were quickly expanded to deal with firsthand traumatic experiences, and CID has consequently become widely used as "psychological first aid" (www.columbiapsych.com). In both cases, CID uses techniques for "debriefing" (dealing with the physiological and psychological aftereffects of the traumatic event) and "defusing" (allowing the victim to vent their emotions regarding the incident), in order to:

- ♦ assess the impact of the incident on the victim;
- ♦ identify the immediate safety and security issues;
- ♦ "defuse" the event by allowing victims to express their feelings;
- ♦ validate the normalcy of the victims' responses to the event; help the victims make sense of their experiences and reactions;
- ♦ help predict future feelings or events by providing education on typical reactions to stress and other traumatic events;
- ♦ conduct a systematic review of the critical incident by looking at the physical, emotional and psychological impact of the incident on the victim;
- ♦ raise awareness of possible resources and support systems available to the victim;
- ♦ bring closure to the incident and assist with the victim's reentry into society; and
- ♦ refer the victim to a psychologist or other skilled mental health practitioner for further help, if necessary.

One important factor is how long after the traumatic event the CID takes place. To alleviate the interference of natural defence mechanisms, such as avoidance or denial, there must be at least 24 hours between the event and the debriefing session. Past this initial cooling off period, the impact of the session will diminish with time. While CID sessions occurring months and even years after the incident have been shown to have a positive impact on the victim, most experts agree that the session ideally should be held between 48 and 72 hours following the event. Furthermore, analysis of previous CID sessions suggests that holding such sessions close to the site of the incident can have a positive impact on the proceedings. While one-on-one sessions between the victim and a trained mental health practitioner can be beneficial, group sessions (using smaller groups for more emotional topics) are considered to be more effective than individual meetings.

These web sites contain more information on CID and posttraumatic stress:

http://www.pbhi.com/MgrsSupers_public/MyWorkplace/CrisisIntervention/IncidentDebriefingServices.asp

<http://www.hypno-therapists.co.uk/cid.htm>

http://www.health-concern.com/critical_incident_debriefing.htm

<http://www.aaets.org/arts/art54.htm>

<http://www.angelfire.com/biz2/dmhs/attach60.html>

<http://www.genestpsychology.com/traumainfodebrief.html>

http://www.columbiapsych.com/norman_cid.html

<http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/specialed/rci/app3.htm>

<http://www.istss.org>

The Mitchell and Dyregrove Model for Critical Incident Debriefing is the most common CID model used by debriefers (summary at:

www.health-concern.com/Free_Training/Critical%20Incident%20Debriefing.pdf). This process calls for two debriefing sessions: one short-term session aimed at disseminating information, defusing potentially detrimental emotions and curbing possible long-term effects; and one long-term session focused on reflecting on the incident and its aftereffects. The process of the Mitchell and Dyregrove Model is broken into seven phases:

- ♦ **Introductory phase:** The group becomes familiar with one another, ground rules and expectations are made explicit.
- ♦ **Fact phase:** A participatory process in which the group describes thoroughly the incident. There may be wide disparities among recollections of the incident, but a description of the incident, the feelings and reactions of those involved, their interaction with other victims and the conclusion of the incident must be focal points of the discussion.
- ♦ **Cognition (thought) phase:** The discussion turns to the "why" to explain the reasoning behind actions and feelings. Compare current and previous impressions of the incident.

- Reaction phase: Discuss the feelings and emotions associated with what happened and the results of the “why” discussion (above). This is the most involved and intense phase.
- Symptom phase: Discuss common reactions to stress and posttraumatic stress disorder. Assure the participants that their responses to the situation are normal.
- Educational phase: Continue assuring the participants that their responses are normal; teach and review mechanisms for coping with stress.
- Reentry Phase: This phase outlines the support structures available to the participants and predicted future responses to the situation. The facilitator summarises the previous session, distributes information and concludes the process.

Critical incident debriefing is a way to limit or alleviate the impact of posttraumatic stress disorder on people involved in potentially traumatising incidents. It allows for several mental health professionals to engage with many victims over a short period of time. While these sessions often provide the necessary support for victims of such incidents, they must also be used as a psychological triage unit. Following the session, the practitioner(s) must undertake a confidential debriefing session to psychologically evaluate each of the participants. If necessary, participants should be referred to mental health professionals for further treatment.



NOTES

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