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Mapping the Reconciliation Sentiment

ETIENNE MULLET, IMMACULÉE MUKASHEMA AND WILSON LÓPEZ LÓPEZ

The exact meaning of the term “reconciliation” depends on the degree to which trust and cooperation between opponents have been restored. At level zero, reconciliation may be understood as nothing more than the acquiescence and submission of the defeated. At level 1, it can mean non-lethal coexistence; that is, fighting has been put to rest but the issues that led to the dispute have not been resolved. At level 2, reconciliation can mean democratic reciprocity; that is, fighting has stopped and, in addition, both parties have resumed the capability to cooperate at least minimally. Finally, at level 3, reconciliation corresponds to the termination of enmity, the exchange of mutual apologies, and the gradual restoration of friendship and collaboration.

The meaning of the expression “reconciliation sentiment” is quite different. According to Jacob Shamir and Khalil Shikaki, it is the intimate feeling of being reconciled with the people who harmed you or with the people you have harmed. It is, therefore, necessary to distinguish the political reconciliation of nations from the reconciliation sentiment of their citizens; that is, from reconciliation at the intimate level. In addition, full reconciliation between two groups of people can be attained only if a wide majority of citizens personally feels that they are reconciled with their former adversaries. The reconciliation sentiment is only loosely linked with national or political reconciliation. Personal healing and the reconciliation sentiment that can accompany it are psychological processes that depend on personal dispositions and social circumstances. At the individual level, reconciliation is made easier when the transgressor has begged for forgiveness to the victim, and the victim has personally granted it to the transgressor.

At the beginning of 2007, Immaculée Mukashema and Etienne Mullet, working in the context of post-genocide Rwanda, explored the way people conceptualize the reconciliation sentiment as an intimate construct. Firstly, they examined the psychological structure of this sentiment using

the Rwandese people's own views. They interviewed eleven victims of the genocide against Tutsis, who lived in the area of Butare, Southern Rwanda. These persons suggested a variety of statements about the reconciliation sentiment. Examples of such statements were: "Feeling reconciled with the people who harmed you means that you can now be in control of yourself when you are in their presence", and "... means that you are willing to share pleasurable activities again with the people who harmed you."

Second, using these statements, Mukashema and Mullet created a 47-item questionnaire that they applied to a large sample of 262 primary victims (widows or children of killed people), secondary victims (families that had lost one or several of their members), and tertiary victims (people who suffered from the country's chaotic situation during and after the genocide). These participants, aged 18-70 years, also lived in the Butare area. They were invited to rate the extent to which they agreed with each statement about the nature of the reconciliation sentiment. Through factor analyses, a two-component mapping of people's views was obtained. The first component was intrapersonal in essence. It corresponded to statements that expressed the capacity not to harbor violent feelings when in the presence of the offenders; that is, the capacity to keep self-control. This component resonates with the kind of reconciliation that was termed "non-lethal coexistence" above (level 1). The second component was interpersonal in essence. It corresponded to statements that expressed the gradual resumption of trust and collaboration. This second component resonates with the kind of reconciliation that was called democratic reciprocity above (level 2). Unsurprisingly, participants rated the interpersonal component of reconciliation sentiment as more typical of the idea of reconciliation than the intrapersonal one.

Third, the robustness of this two-component mapping was assessed using another sample that also experienced bloody conflicts in the past: young adults who lived in Luanda, Angola, during the country's civil war. These participants were presented with the set of statements issued from the study conducted in Rwanda. Their agreement ratings structured themselves in the same two-component way. Interestingly, among Angolans, the interpersonal component was rated as less typical of the idea of reconciliation than it was among the Rwandans. This difference may be explained by the fact that, in Rwanda, many perpetrators and many victims have continued to live in the same places whereas, in Angola, perpetrators and victims are not usually locally intermixed so that daily interaction is uncommon.

Societal context thereby affects people's ratings regarding the components of the reconciliation sentiment without affecting their psychological structure.

Fourth, Mukashema and Mullet created a Reconciliation Sentiment Questionnaire by rewording the subset of statements that most closely expressed the two-component structure of conceptualizations about the reconciliation sentiment. Examples of reworded statements were: "I feel I can now be in control of myself when I am in the presence of the people who harmed me," and "I feel I am willing to share pleasurable activities again with the people who harmed me." The researchers applied this to a new sample of 195 primary and secondary victims of the Rwandese genocide, aged 18-69 years, and living in the Butare area. These participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with each statement about the feeling of being reconciled. Through statistical analyses, the expected two-component mapping was found. Ratings corresponding to the intrapersonal component were mostly located on the positive side of the agreement scale, but ratings corresponding to the interpersonal component were lower. Seventy-five percent of agreed with the view that they can live in close contact with their perpetrators without experiencing strong desires of violence, and 43% expressed a renewed trust and cooperation reconciliation sentiment.

Fifth, Mukashema and Mullet assessed the robustness of their two-component mapping by analyzing data from a sample of perpetrators of the genocide. In the statements used, the expression "the people who have harmed you" was replaced by the expression "the people whom you have harmed." Again, the two-factor structure was found. Intrapersonal ratings were similar to the ones found among victims, but interpersonal ratings were much higher. It was as if, through their positive responses, former perpetrators expressed a strong desire to be reintegrated into society.

Finally, Mukashema and Mullet examined the relationships between their measurements of reconciliation sentiment and associated constructs such as mental health (sleeping problems, anxiety, and perceptions of personal difficulties) and the disposition to forgive. Among victims as well as among perpetrators, it was the interpersonal component of the reconciliation sentiment (but not the intrapersonal component) that was positively and substantially associated with mental health. In both groups, it was, therefore, exclusively the renewed capacity to interact again on a daily basis with former opponents that was associated with increases in mental health.

The association between this interpersonal component and the disposition to forgive was also positive and substantial. Only one aspect of dispositional forgiveness, however, was associated with reconciliation: unconditional forgivingness, that is, the capacity to have positive attitudes toward an offender even in the absence of positive circumstances. A typical statement of unconditional forgivingness is the following: "I can easily forgive even if the offender has not begged for forgiveness." Unconditional forgivingness has been shown to be essentially a reflection of one's conceptualization of ideal forgiveness or divine forgiveness, and can be viewed as the product of a type of personal spiritual growth that is relatively independent of external influences.

The strong relationship between unconditional forgivingness and the trust and collaboration component of the reconciliation sentiment is consistent with the view that, as very few perpetrators have directly apologized, the only way for the Rwandan victims to forgive was by forgiving them unconditionally. In addition, the direct association observed between unconditional forgivingness and mental health, although statistically significant, was weak, which means that, at least in the particular case of Rwanda, dispositional forgiveness was associated with mental health only to the extent that it could fuel an interpersonal reconciliation sentiment.

In 2015, Wilson López López and his colleagues assessed the cross-cultural validity of Mukashema and Mullet's two-component mapping using a completely different sample of participants: former perpetrators of violence detained in rehabilitation centers in Colombia. They also assessed the completeness of the mapping by introducing additional statements that referred to fear of revenge. These statements were created through previous discussions with some of the participants. In these participants' views, feeling reconciled must include not only keeping self-control and being able to interact socially with members of the general population, but also feeling secure. Examples of new statements were the following: "I don't feel any fear of revenge from the people I (we) have harmed," and "I feel I am now on good terms with the people I (we) have harmed."

Through statistical analyses, a three-component structure was found. The first two components were the expected ones: self-control in the presence of victims and ability to renew contacts and to cooperate. The third component was labeled "Sense of security." It essentially corresponded to the additional statements suggested by the detainees. Agreement ratings regarding the self-control component were usually positive. The distribution of ratings regarding the trust and cooperation component was, however, bimodal. A majority of participants expressed a clear willingness to

cooperate, but a minority felt very little ability to do so. Finally, the distribution of ratings regarding the sense of security also tended toward bimodality. Two different attitudes seemed to be present: the majority felt a moderate absence of fear while a quite large minority felt a considerable sense of security. The sense of security component of the three-factor mapping might be interpreted as the mirror image of the victims' self-control component. It would reflect the hope that victims will be able to keep self-control in the presence of perpetrators.

López López and his colleagues also assessed the relationship between the reconciliation sentiment and demographic characteristics and mental health constructs. They found that self-control ratings were higher among detainees who received frequent visits from friends and the family than among detainees who felt alone. In addition, self-control ratings were associated with lack of emotional problems and lack of feelings of tiredness. Trust and cooperation ratings were higher among married detainees than among detainees who were not. In addition, trust and cooperation ratings were associated with better physical health. Finally, sense of security ratings were higher: among former paramilitary than among former guerillas, among married detainees than among those who were single, and among detainees who volunteered to attend the resocialization and/or restoration programs available inside the detention centers. The purpose of these programs was to generate strategies that contribute to changing cognitive distortions, and to prevent people from entering groups organized at the margins of the law. Their expected positive effect seems to be supported by the present findings.

The main messages conveyed in this set of studies are the following. First, victims of violence such as Rwandan and Angolan civilians who have suffered from bloody conflicts had articulated conceptualizations regarding the nature of the reconciliation sentiment. They clearly distinguished intrapersonal aspects (self-control) from interpersonal aspects (renewing collaboration) of this sentiment. They never evoked views that would correspond to the idea of resignation (submission and acquiescence, level 0). Nor did they evoke views that would be too idealistic, such as the idea that complete harmony and a sense of renewed unity have been attained among former opponents (level 3). In addition, they were able to express their conceptualizations in a way that allowed psychologists to create assessment tools that were valid enough to be applied to other samples from other countries.

Second, these conceptualizations seems to be consistent with the way victims and perpetrators personally experience reconciliation. When

they were asked to indicate the extent to which they currently felt reconciled, victims and former perpetrators expressed responses that structured themselves in a way that corresponds with the same two-component mapping of conceptualizations. In addition, some perpetrators suggested that a third component should be added to the mapping, corresponding to the fear of retaliation.

It was found, indeed, that their responses structured themselves into three independent components. Future studies should examine whether, among victims, a third component would also be present. This component could, for example, be the fear that former perpetrators would, under certain conditions, decide to remobilize. In effect, perpetrators' fear of revenge, in association with their possible marginalization, may lead them to be convinced by former commanders (with whom they may have kept contacts) to continue the fight. Among former victims, the mapping of feelings of reconciliation should, therefore, also include an independent component reflecting an absence of such fear.

Third, feeling reconciled is associated with better mental health. Among Rwandese victims and perpetrators, it was the trust and cooperation component that predicted the absence of mental problems. Among Colombian ex-combatants, by contrast, it was the self-control component that was associated with absence of mental problems. Future studies should more deeply explore the relationships between the three-component mapping of the reconciliation sentiment and physical and mental health.

Fourth, unconditional forgivingness—the capacity to forgive on a daily basis even in the absence of positive attitudes or behavior on the part of the offender—seemed to promote a feeling of reconciliation. Future studies should examine further the relationships between the disposition to forgive, the reconciliation sentiment, and mental health. As they are probably circularly interrelated, it might not be possible to determine the causal links between them.

What would promote the reconciliation sentiment? As suggested before, public declarations by political figures in Parliament hemicycles, religious celebrations in front of vast audiences, or even Truth and Reconciliation processes are certainly good in themselves, but they are not enough to create the conditions under which victims, perpetrators, and bystanders can feel reconciled with each other and with the rest of society. As suggested by the participants in the studies conducted in Rwanda and in Colombia, personal reconciliation has more to do with learning to control ones' negative emotions, with learning to live together on a daily basis, and with learning to fight our fears (former perpetrators' fear of

retaliation or former victims' fear of the remobilization of perpetrators), than with encounters at forums or huge demonstrations.

For victims and former perpetrators who feel they have not achieved a desired level of reconciliation sentiment, face-to-face meetings with trained psychotherapists may sometimes be necessary. When intergroup violence has attained the level of genocide or civil war, however, laboratory-based programs that have been developed to improve social relations between ordinary people are, as suggested by Ed Cairns, bound to have only limited effects. For example, what if, twice a week, a widow sees at the local market the man who murdered her husband? What mental health problem should be diagnosed with her if she feels persistently depressed?

As has been observed in the Rwandan context, an effective way to promote reconciliation sentiment and, as a result, to improve victims' mental health is to rely on spontaneous expressions of the civil society: the local peacebuilding associations that emerged everywhere in the country. An example of this is *L'Association des Veuves du Genocide* (Association of Genocide Widows) (AVEGA AGAHOZO).

Some of these associations were created immediately after the end of the tragedy, with the stated objective of contributing to national reconstruction through peacebuilding and reconciliation processes. Other organizations have been created more recently. One of them (Modeste et innocent) is well known for bringing together genocide survivors and former genocide perpetrators with the aim of facilitating reconciliation through direct contact and verbal exchanges. These organizations have grouped together many people from the countryside as well as from the towns, people with diverse professional backgrounds and with different levels of education.

Through the efforts of these grass-root organizations, survivors and other citizens have been sensitized to the challenge of reconciliation. They have understood that it is necessary to rebuild trust and cooperation, in addition to an acceptance of coexistence, if they want to heal individually and to break collectively the circle of violence that has plagued their country and the neighboring countries. These largely spontaneous associations, because of their diversity, and through the interpersonal sharing of emotions, information, and concrete help that they allowed and provided, have constituted powerful socio-psychological tools. They have made available the most valuable good possible: social relationships in a secure environment. For decades, these local voluntary organizations have worked tirelessly with the aim of attaining the critical objective of individual and collective reconciliation among the people.

Additional research should be conducted on this societal re-growth in order to understand its role in reconciliation processes and to more accurately assess its impact on people's feelings of being reconciled and on people's general well-being and happiness. Who were the people who launched these local associations? What were their initial goals? Did they benefit from external help? What was the impact of the political environment on the functioning of these associations? Who attended the first meetings? How did these associations defend themselves against possible detractors? During the first meetings, what was the emotional climate? What kind of information was exchanged? Do these associations provide material help to their members? Do members of these associations feel, after some time, better than non-members?

If it can be empirically shown that such grass-root organizations, despite their very limited budgets, have contributed to the restoration of positive feelings among victims, among perpetrators, and maybe among bystanders, they could be viewed as representing a model of intervention possibly more appropriate and probably less expensive than Western-style psychotherapies or top-down governmental actions.

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