

Grass-Roots Understandings of Reconciliation in South Africa

INTRODUCTION

The concept of reconciliation is frequently used today, and perhaps especially so in relation to South Africa, which has become somewhat of a 'textbook' example of a successful reconciliation process. However, there is a substantial lack of clarity with regard to the definition of reconciliation and the concept remains contested. This applies both to how the concept has been used by the political, academic and religious elite in South Africa (see Evaldsson, 2004), and to how reconciliation is understood among the general public. There is, in particular, a lack of research with regard to the latter aspect, and this article is an attempt at beginning to fill that gap.

The article is based on empirical research conducted in South Africa between 2003 and 2005 and, in particular, on sixty-three qualitative interviews that were carried out between October 2004 and May 2005 in the municipality of Matjhabeng in the Free State province. It should be noted that the sampling method was not based on the probability theory and, therefore, the result cannot be assumed to be valid for all South Africans. However, it is presumed that it has a relevance that stretches beyond the individuals who were

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interviewed.

The article is neither an evaluation of the reconciliation process in South Africa nor an analysis of various issues that affect the process, but focuses on how reconciliation as such is perceived at grass-roots level. It must be noted that the analysis and discussion in this article are preliminary and form part of an ongoing analysis of the subject in question.

First, a few notes on the research interviews will be provided including a brief profile of the interviewees; thereafter, the focus will be on general issues with regard to the interviewees' understandings of the concept of reconciliation. A number of different ways of viewing the concept will then be discussed, followed by a brief concluding perspective.

THE RESEARCH INTERVIEWS

The absolute majority of research on South Africa, also with regard to reconciliation, is carried out in the metropolitan areas of Cape Town and Gauteng, and since it is important to widen this scope, I chose to conduct my empirical research in the municipality of Matjhabeng in the Free State province. Matjhabeng consists of six towns that were amalgamated into one municipality in 2000, namely Welkom, Virginia, Odendaalsrus, Hennenman, Ventersburg and Allanridge. Welkom is the main town, a small to middle-sized town, mainly dependent on gold-mining.

The interviews were qualitative and semi-structured, but had some structured aspects in that each interviewee also answered a number of 'survey'-type questions. The purpose of the latter was to facilitate the

comparison of the interview group internally and to compare it with representative surveys that have taken place in the country¹. The structural part of the interviews was not utilised for this article, except for with regard to the profile of the interviewees that follows below. The research also includes other forms of material, both of qualitative and quantitative nature, but this article is based specifically on the qualitative interviews.

The interviews were relatively long with an average of one and a half hours, some took less than 45 minutes, while there were also those that lasted more than three hours. The interviews were anonymous and were conducted in English or Afrikaans, depending on the interviewee's choice. People were generally keen to speak about the subject, but some were initially slightly reluctant, since they thought that the interview might be difficult or very 'political'.

Since South Africa is a very complex society made up of several population groups, some sort of demarcation was necessary in order to make the project feasible. Therefore, it was decided to focus on white Afrikaans speakers and on black people² as well as the relationship between these two groups. Thus, coloured people, South Africans of Asian origin and English-speaking white South Africans are not included in the project, which does not imply that these groups are irrelevant with regard to reconciliation. Indeed, in order for reconciliation to be sustainable, it has to include all the major groups

¹ One of the sets of questions was exactly the same as some of the questions used in the research conducted by Gibson (2004).

² Since race is such a salient part of South Africa, it is not possible to write about the country without using racial terms. The four racial categories (white, black, coloured, Asian/Indian) are still used extensively.

of the country. However, it is not possible within the limits of this project to conduct empirical research with regard to all South African population groups.

There are several reasons for the choice of focusing on black people and on white Afrikaans speakers, relating to the past conflict and the present context. Firstly, it can be argued that the core conflict in apartheid South Africa was between these two groups. The relationship between whites, coloureds and Asians was different to that between whites and blacks. Also, even though many coloureds, Asians and whites played a crucial role in the anti-apartheid struggle, it was mainly associated with black people, partly due to their considerable majority in the country and partly due to their dominance within the movement and, in particular, within the African National Congress (ANC). Furthermore, the apartheid system and the National Party (NP) government were mainly associated with Afrikaans-speaking whites.

Another reason for focusing on these two groups relates to the contemporary context. The black group is by far the largest population group in the country (78%) and due to the racial nature of contemporary South African politics, they have almost absolute political power. At the same time, the majority of the people who live below the poverty line are black. Furthermore, recent research has shown that black people are the least reconciled population group. Gibson estimates that 33 per cent of the black population are somewhat or highly reconciled. Among whites, this figure is 56 per cent and among Afrikaans-speaking whites it is slightly lower (Gibson, 2004, pp. 332-333).

The interviewees were chosen by using a combination of snowball, quota and purposive sampling. The aim was to acquire a wide range of viewpoints and, thus, to obtain variation with regard to issues such as age, class, occupation, education and general political preferences. Great care was taken in order to minimise the various dangers with quota and purposive sampling. According to Bernard, these include that the researcher only chooses people she will enjoy interviewing or share similarities with and avoids people who appear hostile, obnoxious or very busy (Bernard, 1995). A total of sixty-three interviews have been conducted up to date. A number of additional and follow-up interviews will be carried out at a later stage. Thirty of the interviews were held with black South Africans and the other thirty-three were held with white South Africans, including two persons who were not Afrikaans-speaking³. Within the two groups, there was basically an equal number of men and women, with a few more men than women.

The youngest interviewee was 17 years old and the oldest was 67, while the average age was 44 years⁴. 79 per cent of the interviewees had some form of employment and only 8 per cent were unemployed, the remaining 13 per cent were students, pensioners or housewives. Compared to national and provincial statistics, a much smaller percentage of the interviewees were unemployed. In March 2005, the official national unemployment rate was 26.5 per cent and the official rate for the Free State was 30.6 per cent (Statistics

³ Two of the white interviewees could be regarded as English-speaking, but both of them grew up in a mixed Afrikaans/English setting, are married to Afrikaans speakers and use both languages at home.

⁴ Please note that the age of 12 interviewees is unknown.

South Africa, 2005, p. 32). It is possible that the unemployment rate is even higher in Matjhabeng due to the fact that the gold-mines have retrenched a large number of people⁵.

Even though most of the interviewees had some kind of employment, the majority of them were still affected by unemployment, which was time and again stated to be the biggest problem in the area. Many had previously been unemployed themselves, many had spouses who were unemployed, several interviewees were self-employed as a result of not getting a job, and many were worried about losing their job.

The interviewees have a large number of different occupations such as: municipal managers, lawyers, school principals, teachers, librarians, mineworkers, car mechanics, reverends, physiotherapist, magistrate, social workers, NGO administrators and volunteers, shop assistants, union officials and various administrative occupations. There were also a few students. The various occupations of the interviewees were divided into three status categories based on the South African context, consisting of low, middle and high status occupations. The result is presented in table 1.

The interviewees' levels of education are higher than the national average. Everybody could read and write, although there were a few who struggled slightly with this. Of the black interviewees, 21 per cent do not have matric (grade 12) qualifications, while 18 per cent have matric as their highest qualification, and 29 per cent have matric combined with a diploma. 21 per

⁵ A census was conducted in Matjhabeng in 2005, but the results thereof are not yet complete.

cent of the black interviewees have bachelor’s degrees and 11 per cent have post-graduate qualifications. The white interviewees have higher levels of education, only 6 per cent (two individuals) do not have matric qualifications, another 6 per cent have matric as their highest qualification and 16 per cent have matric combined with a diploma. 56 per cent have bachelor’s degrees and 15 per cent have post-graduate qualifications.

		OCCUPATIONAL STATUS				Total
		Low	Middle	High	Student/ housewife	
RACE	Black	12	6	9	3	30
		40.0%	20.0%	30.0%	10.0%	100.0%
	White	6	15	11	1	33
		18.2%	45.5%	33.3%	3.0%	100.0%
Total		18	21	20	4	63
		28.6%	33.3%	31.7%	6.3%	100.0%

Table 1. Race and occupational status

Looking at income levels, both the poorest and the richest interviewee was black. The poorest one had a monthly household income of approximately 800 rand, while the richest one earned more than 45 000 rand a month⁶. For the purpose of this article, the initial eleven income levels were consolidated into four groups. The low income group has a monthly household income of below 6 000 rand, the low-middle group has an income of 6 000-15 000 rand, the

⁶ Presently (Nov. 2005), the ZAR is worth approximately € 0.126.

middle-high group has an income of 15 000-35 000 rand and, finally the high income group has a monthly household income of above 35 000 rand. The result is presented in table 2; please note that the income of 12 individuals is

		INCOME GROUP				Total
		Low	Low-Middle	Middle-High	High	
RACE	Black	14	5	3	2	24
		58.3%	20.8%	12.5%	8.3%	100.0%
	White	2	16	7	2	27
		7.4%	59.3%	25.9%	7.4%	100.0%
Total		16	21	10	4	51
		31.4%	41.2%	19.6%	7.8%	100.0%

Table 2. Race and income group

unknown.

Thus, the majority of the black interviewees are in the lowest income group, while the majority of the white interviewees are in the low-middle group, figures which probably correspond relatively closely to the municipal context. An individual's type of housing can also say something about his or her standard of living, although it must be noted that the mere fact that somebody stays in a house in the formerly white suburbs does not in itself imply that the individual is wealthy or stays in upmarket conditions and, on the other hand, the mere fact that somebody stays in the township does not mean that he or she is staying in poor conditions, although this is relatively often the case. The interviewees' type of housing is presented in table 3; note that the accommodation of five interviewees is unknown.

	TYPE OF HOUSING						Total
	House in suburb	House in township	Town-house	Flat	Room in backyard	Informal settlement	
RACE Black	10	14	2	0	1	1	28
	35.7%	50.0%	7.1%	0%	3.6%	3.6%	100.0%
White	26	0	2	2	0	0	30
	86.7%	0%	6.7%	6.7%	0%	0%	100.0%
Total	36	14	4	2	1	1	58
	62.1%	24.1%	6.9%	3.4%	1.7%	1.7%	100.0%

Table 3. Race and type of housing

Thus, 43 per cent of the black interviewees live in the previously white suburbs, while 57 per cent live in either township or informal settlement settings. All the white interviewees stay in the suburbs.

The great majority of the interviewees voted in the 2004 election, but not everybody wanted to declare their party allegiance. Of the 20 black people who voted *and* disclosed their choice, 95 per cent voted for the ANC and 5 per cent (1 individual) voted for the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP). Of the 24 white interviewees who voted in the 2004 election *and* were willing to disclose who they voted for, 79 per cent voted for the Democratic Alliance (DA), 8 per cent (two individuals) for the Freedom Front (FF), 8 per cent for the New National Party (NNP), and 4 per cent (one person) for the ACDP. The voting behaviour of the interviewees corresponds relatively closely to that of the region, with sharp racial differences; no black interviewee voted for the DA

or any of the other parties that are seen as predominantly 'white' and none of the white interviewees voted for the ANC.

It can be stated that the aim of obtaining wide variation with regard to issues such as age, occupation, income and education was attained. The goal with regard to an even distribution concerning race, gender and political preferences was also reached. It must be noted that the interviewees are generally more educated and slightly better off economically than the national average, which probably had some influence on their opinions and viewpoints.

Next, some general remarks with regard to the interviewees' understandings of reconciliation will be made.

RECONCILIATION FROM A GRASS-ROOTS PERSPECTIVE

The concept of reconciliation occupies a relatively central place in the South African public arena, which was particularly the case in the first years after the democratic election of 1994. Reconciliation was, for instance, often discussed by political leaders and featured relatively prominently in the media. The emphasis on reconciliation reached its peak during the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and, in particular, when the Commission held its public hearings⁷. However, since approximately 1999, reconciliation has no longer figured as strongly in the public arena, although it has by no

⁷ With regard to general sources on the TRC see, for example, Boraine (2000), Graybill (2002), James and Van der Vijver (2000), Krog (2002), Posel and Simpson (2002), Tutu (1999), Villa-Vicencio and Verwoerd (2000), and Wilson (2001).

means disappeared.

Basically all the research with regard to reconciliation in South Africa took place during or after the TRC. Therefore, there is little knowledge available with regard to how the concept was understood before the TRC. Due to this lack of longitudinal research, it is difficult to estimate to what extent the public debate on reconciliation has affected the opinions of the general public. Nevertheless, it can probably safely be assumed that the high visibility of the concept has had an effect on grass-roots understandings, if not with regard to their content, at least with regard to making people think about the concept. It is important to note that the interviewees were in general familiar with the term. In fact, all the interviewees, except the ones who were younger than twenty (2 individuals), could state what reconciliation meant to them without experiencing any particular difficulties. Even the individuals who knew very little about major contemporary issues (such as affirmative action, land reform, the TRC, etc.) could provide a meaningful definition of reconciliation. This is an indication of how deeply entrenched the concept is in South Africa, even though the understanding thereof differs extensively. There were some similarities between the interviewees' understandings of reconciliation and those that have been prominent in the public arena, but there were also extensive differences.

In contrast to the national and international discourse on reconciliation, the great majority of the interviewees did not connect the term to the TRC. In fact, merely one person mentioned the TRC on his own (i.e. before being asked about it), and he happened to be the only full-time politician among the

interviewees. Thus, while the elite perspectives on reconciliation focus very strongly, and in some cases, solely on the TRC, this was not at all the case among the interviewees. However, the situation might have been different had the interviews been conducted during the period when the TRC was active.

The TRC was criticised for focusing on gross human rights violations and in so doing only including a very small section of the population directly in its process since only a very small percentage of South Africans were the victims of gross human rights violations as defined by the Commission⁸. The TRC was also criticised for mainly dealing with national reconciliation and failing to approach reconciliation at community level. Even though it is arguable to what extent these issues were actually the responsibility of the Commission, reconciliation cannot become sustainable unless it takes place at all levels of society.

There were some major differences between the interviewees' view of reconciliation and the focus of the TRC and of many academics. The interviewees emphasised different levels of reconciliation, including the individual (intra-personal), interpersonal, intergroup, community and national levels, but tended to focus strongly on the local level. Reconciliation was

⁸ Gross human rights violation was defined as: "(a) the killing, abduction, torture or severe ill treatment of any person; or (b) any attempt, conspiracy, incitement, instigation, command or procurement to commit an act referred to in paragraph (a), which emanated from conflicts of the past and which was committed during the period 1 March 1960 to 10 May 1994 within or outside the Republic, and the commission of which was advised, planned, directed, commanded, or ordered, by any person acting with a political motive" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998, vol. 1, p. 60). 'Severe ill treatment' included acts such as mutilation, burnings, rape, physical beating resulting in serious injury, detention without trial, etc. (*Ibid.*, p. 80). Approximately 22 000 people were classified as victims by the TRC.

neither seen as something distant nor as something merely relating to the national level, but as something that was close to their everyday life. Similarly, the importance of issues and events in *their* everyday life was seen as crucial with regard to reconciliation. Furthermore, the interviewees did not associate reconciliation with a relationship between a perpetrator and a victim of gross human rights violations, as is often the case at national level and in the academic debate, but with their own everyday life and their own experiences. Issues that might easily be dismissed as minor by someone with an outside and/or national perspective were often emphasised as being crucial with regard to reconciliation. However, it was also clear that events and issues at national level were of major importance for many of the interviewees when it came to reconciliation, but they still saw reconciliation as something that primarily has to take place at local level.

It is important to note that the opinions on why and between whom reconciliation is needed, takes place or does not take place differed. The majority of the interviewees had a predominantly 'racial' understanding of reconciliation, that is, it was viewed in terms of racial reconciliation. A few of them had a more general and open view of the concept and saw it as taking place between individuals and groups, with race not necessarily being an issue, and they tended to focus on reconciliation in terms of personal relationships, such as between spouses and between neighbours. In academic research on reconciliation, as well as in the public debate in South Africa, the issue of reconciliation between black people is almost completely lacking, even though most of the people who died due to political violence during apartheid

and, in particular, in the early 1990s, were black people who were killed by other black people in the conflict between the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the ANC/United Democratic Front (UDF). Also, there is almost no debate regarding reconciliation needed due to the violence committed by black people towards other black people who were seen as collaborating with the regime. None of the interviewees mentioned reconciliation with regard to either of these types of past violence, but focused on black-white reconciliation. It is not surprising that the IFP-ANC/UDF conflict was not mentioned, since it was almost non-existent in the area, but acts of violence towards people who were seen as collaborators certainly did take place, particularly during the 1980s, and several interviewees stated that there were still bad feelings and suspicions due to this violence. Another division that was mentioned, but that the interviewees did not associate with a need for reconciliation, was the negative stereotypes and dislike that is relatively common between different black groups, such as between the Sothos and the Xhosas.

The interviewees' understandings of reconciliation, like the elite views, do not always fit into neat academic categories and it should be noted that the understandings discussed below flow into each other and that aspects of several perspectives are sometimes articulated by the same person. However, it is still possible to distinguish various understandings roughly from one another.

UNDERSTANDINGS OF RECONCILIATION

Reconciliation as Forgiveness

Relatively many of the interviewees associated reconciliation with forgiveness, which was also strongly emphasised by the TRC, but there were some major differences between the TRC's understanding and that of many of the interviewees.

The predominant view of reconciliation within the TRC was to see it as a process of apology and forgiveness. Getting to know the truth about the past and remembering the past – albeit in a non-vindictive manner – was also very strongly emphasised by the TRC, whose most well-known slogan was 'Truth – the road to reconciliation'. The main precondition of reconciliation was claimed to be to know the truth about what happened in the past. Contrary to this, basically none of the interviewees associated reconciliation with truth and remembrance, which is also confirmed in the research conducted by Lombard (2003). They also did not relate reconciliation to an acknowledgment of suffering, which was another point that was continuously stressed by the TRC. One can argue whether the lack of emphasis on truth-seeking is due to the fact that many people on the ground actually know quite well what happened in the past, especially in the light of their generally focusing on everyday effects of apartheid, such as not being able to go to Welkom in the evening and eat at your favourite fast-food restaurant, and not on political violence (although there was quite a lot of political violence in the area). It is still noteworthy that

the strong emphasis on truth, which can be said to have been almost the defining aspect of the entire TRC process, does not appear to have filtered through sufficiently in order to become part of people's understanding of reconciliation. It should also be noted that the TRC held hearings in the area and that several of the interviewees had attended at least one of these.

Elsewhere I have discussed the notion of reconciliation as 'forgive and forget' or as 'let bygones be bygones' and argued that it could be seen as false reconciliation, which was in line with the dominant view of reconciliation within the TRC (Evaldsson, 2004). I also stated that the 'forgive and forget' understanding is often pursued by those who could be seen as being responsible for the wrong-doing and that reconciliation, according to this perspective, often appears to be basically the same as amnesty. However, and maybe also surprisingly, reconciliation was defined as 'forgive and forget' by a fairly large number of the black interviewees, while few of the white interviewees included this in their definition. The following quote from one of the black interviewees is a typical example of this understanding. "I would say reconciliation is the process of forgiveness and of forgetting the past in a peaceful manner in order to address the future with a common objective." Considering that getting to know the truth was so strongly emphasised during the TRC process, particularly by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, it is perhaps surprising that the interviewees instead tended to emphasise the need to forget the past. Furthermore, none of the interviewees made any connection between reconciliation as 'forgive and forget' and amnesty. In fact, amnesty appeared to be a non-issue, which might have been different had the interviews been

conducted while the TRC was still active.

Reconciliation as forgiving *and* forgetting was a common perspective among the black interviewees both in connection with racial and interpersonal reconciliation. Most of the interviewees who saw reconciliation as forgiveness also associated it with forgetting. They emphasised that it is necessary not only to forgive, but also to forget, in order to make it possible for both the individual and the relationship to move on. Some of them also stressed the need to stop thinking about and blaming things on the past, but instead focusing on doing what you can to bring about a better future. Only a few interviewees emphasised that the past should not be forgotten.

Another issue that was prominent within the TRC process, as well as in the media coverage of the TRC, was that of apologies. However, only a few interviewees stated that an apology by the wrong-doer was a necessary condition for reconciliation. Moreover, most of the people who stated that the guilty part had to apologise had a non-political view of reconciliation and saw it as something taking place at an interpersonal level and mainly between people who know each other well.

Thus, the interviewees who defined reconciliation as forgiveness often differed fairly extensively from the manner in which it had been defined within the elite discourse. At the elite level, and particularly within the TRC, the Christian understanding of reconciliation was also strongly emphasised, an issue that will now be discussed.

The Christian View of Reconciliation

The Christian conceptualisation of reconciliation, dominant within the TRC, had a presence among some of the interviewees (both black and white), but they were in the minority and basically only included those who were very religious. Moreover, their Christian perspective had a larger impact when it came to their opinions on how to promote reconciliation, than on the way in which they understood the concept as such.

The core of the Christian understanding of reconciliation, namely that reconciliation between people is impossible without the help of God, was emphasised by the interviewees who pursued this perspective. They also agreed with the central idea that vertical reconciliation between humans and God needs to be accompanied by horizontal reconciliation between people, and that Christians are obliged to reconcile with their enemies (see, for example, Botman and Petersen, 1996, Tutu, 1999, Volf, 2000). The following quote from an interviewee exemplifies this position. "So I think we should learn to forgive and forget, because we usually pray that 'God, forgive me for what I did', so if I can't forgive you, then how can God forgive me?" However, several prominent aspects in the Christian perspective were absent or under-emphasised. For example, there was not much emphasis on confession, repentance and restitution, three aspects that are often stressed within Christianity. Instead, the interviewees tended to emphasise interracial attitudinal changes and the reduction of negative stereotypes, which leads us to the next understanding of reconciliation, namely seeing it as a general improvement of race relations.

Reconciliation as Improved Race Relations

The most common way to view reconciliation among the interviewees (both black and white) was to see it in terms of improved race relationships, particularly between white and black people. This way of looking at reconciliation has been called the multicultural model, where the aim is to “create a society where citizens and communities live together in a peaceful and tolerant manner, whilst respecting and even celebrating diversity” (Lombard, 2004, p. 5). Many of the interviewees emphasised that the fact that people are different from each other does not mean that they are unreconciled or, in other words, that people do not have to, and indeed should not, become more similar to one another in order to be able to reconcile⁹. Instead, reconciliation means to accept, tolerate and, if possible, understand and perhaps even appreciate the things that make the ‘other’ different from the ‘self’. The following quote from an interviewee is an example of this position. “Reconciliation is the harmonious cooperation between people, that we accept each other for who we are and for what we do. If I can accept you as a human being and that what you do, and you can accept me and that what I do, then I think there is reconciliation. And that I don’t regard myself higher than you”¹⁰. Thus, it is an understanding that emphasises the value of diversity. According

⁹ There were, however, some interviewees who saw cultural differences as an obstacle to reconciliation, since they considered differences to breed misunderstanding and prevent smooth interaction between people.

¹⁰ My translation, in Afrikaans the quote reads as follows: “Versoening is harmoniese samewerking tussen mense, dat ons mekaar aanvaar vir wie ons is en wat ons doen. As ek jou kan aanvaar as ‘n mens en dit wat jy doen, en jy kan my aanvaar en dit wat ek doen, ek dink dan is daar versoening. En dat ek my nie hoër ag as jy nie.”

to the same line of thinking, instances of intolerance and disrespect, in particular with regard to culture and language, were viewed as signs of a lack of reconciliation. This understanding is relatively common at the elite level as well and has also been pursued in some academic research on reconciliation.

Within the broad category of improved race relations, one can detect at least two understandings among the interviewees, both of which include attitudinal changes and the reduction of negative stereotypes, but from slightly different angles and to different degrees.

According to the first understanding, reconciliation implies that South Africans 'get along' better across the racial lines. This was a common perspective among both the black and the white interviewees. Reconciliation has to do with a smoother interaction between individuals of different races where they happen to meet one another. The focus is usually at local level, such as the neighbourhood, the workplace, schools, banks and supermarkets, etc. and on everyday, often non-political issues. The emphasis is on creating civil and polite interactions between individuals and, to a lesser extent, between small groups. Respect and tolerance were mentioned by many interviewees as either being reconciliation, or as being absolutely crucial for reconciliation. Tolerance was usually connected to cultural differences, for example my neighbour and I are reconciled once we tolerate one another's culture. Or, as one interviewee stated, "reconciliation is understanding and accepting, the way we live and the way we are, and we must also accept the way they live and the way they are". Reconciliation, according to this view, has to do with treating each other with respect and accepting each other as

individuals, regardless of skin colour, culture, language, etc.

Reconciliation, according to this perspective, basically comes down to peaceful mutual co-existence. People do not necessarily have to choose to interact, or even like one another particularly, but the basic thing is that they try to set stereotypes and prejudices aside where they interact and in so doing get along better. As such, it can be seen as a relatively superficial reconciliation, but simultaneously crucial since it can open up new and more wide-ranging possibilities.

A more extensive view of reconciliation, which was also present among both the black and white interviewees, is to see it in terms of unity. Reconciliation was stated to be the creation and strengthening of different degrees of racial unity, of 'becoming one', of removing borders between the races, and of taking each other's hands. As one white interviewee stated, just because he does not know one of his white neighbours, it does not mean that there is a border (a division) between them, but people would easily think this if the neighbour would have been black. Thus, the goal of reconciliation would be to remove the impression of there being an invisible border between the two neighbours just because of the colour of their skin. Within this understanding, the need to be able to cooperate and to work together, for the sake of creating a better today as well as a better tomorrow, is often strongly emphasised, usually with a focus at local level. It should also preferably be a mutual process, for example as one interviewee stated, "I think reconciliation is that I am going to accept some of your culture, but then you must also accept some of my culture and my beliefs and make space for me too, then it is

a fair deal for everybody". Thus, reconciliation would include creating a society where everybody experience that there is space for them and their culture.

This understanding is broader than the 'getting along better' one, and includes the group/community level to a larger extent, in contrast to the former, which focuses on individual interactions and attitudes. Thus, according to the 'unity' view, reconciliation does not only have to do with getting along better with the individuals and small groups with which you happen to come into contact, but also that the race groups as such are more united and interact more smoothly. Therefore, it deals with intergroup attitudes and stereotypes to a larger extent than the more basic understanding. This includes respecting, tolerating and understanding the culture and ways of living of others, of accepting them the way they are, and perhaps even appreciating the differences. It also involves reconciliation not only with the people with whom you interact, but also with people who are strangers to you.

Reconciliation as Non-Racialism

The non-racialism understanding of reconciliation shares similarities with the improved race relations perspective, but it also has some major differences that warrant conceptualising it as a separate paradigm. Within this understanding, reconciliation is seen as the creation of more or less complete non-racialism; of a situation where race is no longer an issue, when it is not even noticed any longer. Race would simply not matter and when you look at another person or group, you would not even think of their skin colour. Thus, it involves

dissolving racial identities and creating new truly non-racial ones. This is where the major difference with regard to the perspective discussed above comes in. The multicultural, improved race relations view emphasises the importance of culture and language, and instead of calling for new non-racial identities, it stresses the need to respect, tolerate and understand existing identities and ways of living, and if possible even to appreciate the differences.

The non-racialism definition was rare among both the black and the white interviewees. Those who understood reconciliation in terms of non-racialism tended to see it as the ultimate stage in a process of reconciliation and there was general agreement that complete non-racialism would be possible only at some stage in the far future, if even then. For some of the interviewees, it was indeed an ideal that they were hoping for, but not really expecting. One of the black interviewees who discussed the non-racialism understanding gave the example that if he used the word 'woman', he automatically meant a black woman, whereas if he spoke about a woman with white skin, he would use the term 'white woman'. Thus, for him, the norm is seen to be black, while white is the exception, that which is 'other'. According to him, reconciliation would be complete the day that he would no longer attach skin colour to a word, such as 'woman'.

The interviewees generally perceived South African society, both at local and national levels, to be permeated by race. Even though most of them considered race relations to have improved, at least in the sense of the most basic of the multicultural understandings, the importance of race as such was not seen to have been reduced.

Reconciliation as Acquiescence

One of the dictionary definitions of 'to reconcile' is "to bring into a state of acquiescence with or submission to a thing" (*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989). This view of reconciliation has hardly figured at all within the national and academic discourse in South Africa, and none of the black interviewees defined reconciliation in this manner. Contrary to this, several white interviewees defined reconciliation as the acquiescence in, or acceptance of, a particular situation. The opinions with regard to what people need to acquiesce in differ slightly, but have to do with various issues in post-1994 South Africa. To be reconciled implies to accept and comply with particular (or all) changes, or as one interviewee stated to "make peace with the situation"¹¹. According to this perspective, reconciliation does not actually take place between individuals or groups, but has to do with the individual herself and the manner in which she is dealing with the new context and with the changes that have taken place. Therefore, reconciliation is an intra-personal process, taking place within the individual, but also being more or less affected by what goes on in society.

Different degrees of reconciliation were envisaged, ranging from merely (and sometimes grudgingly) accepting the situation and getting on with your own private life, to accepting the situation with open arms and trying to improve it further. The definition of reconciliation as acquiescence with the transforming South Africa at times appeared to come very close to, or even be synonymous with, basically giving up on being able to affect or change

¹¹ My translation, in Afrikaans the interviewee stated "vrede maak met die situasie".

anything outside the four walls of your home, and sometimes within your home as well. As such, it can be seen as a symptom of the relatively widespread feelings of alienation among white people in South Africa today. However, it must be noted that several of the interviewees who defined reconciliation as acquiescence had a more positive view of the concept and saw it, for example, as a way for white people to contribute to the development of South Africa and to feel that they are part of the country. Thus, some interviewees, according to the acquiescence view of reconciliation, saw the process as disempowering, while others considered it to be empowering.

Reconciliation as Peace and Non-Violence

Another way of interpreting reconciliation was to see it as implying peace and non-violence. It also had connotations of being safe. This understanding was pursued by both white and black people. One woman, for instance, stated that there is a lack of reconciliation due to the high levels of violent crime. She considered reconciliation to be false unless true peace and non-violence reigned. This particular individual did not view reconciliation in terms of the past or in terms of reconciliation between black and white people, but saw it as something that was needed at community level due to contemporary violence.

Others took a more national and less contemporary perspective when defining reconciliation as peace, and in particular, related it to the peace process after the conflicts that ranged in opposition to, and defence of, apartheid. According to this way of thinking, reconciliation was created

through the process of negotiations leading up to the election of 1994. Reconciliation was as such perceived as something very similar to peace in the sense of a sustainable absence of violence. This way of viewing reconciliation is also present in some academic texts on the subject, where reconciliation basically comes to mean negative or positive peace.

CONCLUDING PERSPECTIVES

Reconciliation does not appear to be an unknown concept for the general public in South Africa, at least if the pattern from Matjhabeng is repeated elsewhere. However, there are several different ways of understanding the concept and these do not always correspond with each other, or with the perspectives that are common at an elite level.

There are a number of major differences between the grass-roots understandings of reconciliation and the elite perspectives. Some of the elite understandings were also lacking among the interviewees. One important example is the psychological understanding of reconciliation, focusing on healing. In fact, 'healing' is a word that is often used to describe reconciliation in academic texts (although frequently in a vague manner), but none of the interviewees even mentioned the word and the psychological perspective (including, for instance, dealing with trauma and other related issues) was basically non-existent. The only interviewee who had a slightly psychological understanding of the concept, focusing on making peace with the past and in so doing being able to move on, was a social worker who is working extensively with counselling. However, she did not mention the word

'healing' either. This was a slightly surprising result since the psychological perspective has been very strong at the elite level, and was prominent during the work of the TRC. One reason for the absence of this perspective among the interviewees might be that even though some of them had been affected by political violence, they did not tend to view reconciliation in terms of this or in terms of a process taking place between a perpetrator and a victim. Instead, reconciliation was generally viewed as something wider, applicable to other relationships as well, in some cases even relationships that had nothing to do with the past or with race relations. In general, it can be stated that the interviewees took a less political and less historic outlook on reconciliation than is the case at national level. They also tended to pursue a much more local perspective, stressing the local context and everyday life.

The emphasis on reconciliation as a process taking place in the individual's everyday life was a major difference compared to the elite perspectives with their heavy focus on reconciliation at national and political levels. A related difference was that the interviewees focused more on reconciliation related to both past *and* contemporary issues, while the national discourse focuses almost solely on reconciliation due to events that took place in the apartheid past - at times seemingly almost completely disassociated with the present. This is an important difference, especially since the grass-roots perspective emphasises that issues and events taking place today have a very important influence on reconciliation, which in turn leads to the conclusion that reconciliation is not a linear process, but is affected by contemporary factors that can promote or work against it and, thus, it has its

ups and downs. The elite perspective often focuses too strongly on the apartheid past and tends to underestimate or underemphasise the importance of the present and of people's everyday life. What goes on at national level has an impact at local level and on people's perceptions, but there is too little emphasis on important processes, developments and events at local level. Reconciliation needs to take place where people live and interact, not merely above their heads among the political leaders.

As stated earlier, it appears as if only parts of the predominant way of viewing reconciliation within the TRC have found resonance among the interviewees. One of those aspects is the issue of forgiveness, which was the main component of relatively many of the interviewees' understanding of reconciliation. It is interesting to note that this was mainly the case among the black interviewees. However, most of them also stressed the need to forget the past, in contrast to the TRC's very strong focus on getting to know the truth.

The concept of *ubuntu* has often been included in understandings of reconciliation in South Africa, mainly from a religious perspective and in relation to the TRC. The *ubuntu* philosophy emphasises humanness, compassion, solidarity, social harmony and reciprocity. Interdependence between people is stressed and a person's humanity is said to be inextricably caught up with the humanity of other people (Tutu, 1999, Battle, 1996, 2000). However, *ubuntu* hardly figured at all in the interviews and when it was mentioned it was usually in order to state the opinion that *ubuntu* is, to a large extent, absent from society and that it is a myth used by political and religious leaders.

Another perspective at the elite level was to understand reconciliation as the creation of a shared truth, as a national history that everybody agree on, sometimes even described as a common memory. This perspective was completely absent among the interviewees, which might indicate that it is more important at national level and in particular among the political elite. Also, since finding out the truth was not seen as important with regard to reconciliation among the interviewees, it follows relatively logically that the creation of a shared truth and a national history would also not be seen as significant.

The Christian perspective had a presence among the interviewees, and particularly among those who are very religious. However, as stated above, it was not described in the same manner as at the elite level and it was far less theological. The Christian perspective also appears to have had a larger impact on which factors were seen as important for reconciliation than on the understanding of the concept as such.

The understanding that corresponds most closely with a similar perspective at the elite level is the 'improved race relations' view of reconciliation. However, the elite understanding has focused heavily on national and political relationships while the interviewees stressed grass-roots relationships. The improved race relations view was common among both the black and the white interviewees, and they emphasised the importance of the local context and of everyday relationships with neighbours, with strangers on the street, other parents at your children's school, between the children at the school, with people you meet in the shops, etc.

That relatively many of the white interviewees had the acquiescence view of reconciliation was slightly surprising. Even though it is one of the dictionary definitions of the term, it has basically been non-existent in the public debate, both in South Africa and internationally. It is also interesting that it was only white people who mentioned this definition. It should be noted that there are several versions of this understanding, with important differences. This range from a 'negative', disempowering, definition bordering on giving up and expressing a strong sense of despondency and a lack of hope for the future to a positive, empowering one emphasising the possibilities of improving the present situation (both for the individual, the region and the country) and of hope for a better future.

Does it matter if South Africans have different understandings of reconciliation? According to Hamber and Van der Merwe (1998) it does because they are of the opinion that a consensus on a clearer definition will prevent conflict with regard to who is, or who is not, committed to reconciliation. Writing in 1998, they predicted that this would particularly be critical once the TRC had completed its work. However, is it really necessary to reach such a consensus and is it possible, especially when it comes to a complex and multifaceted concept such as reconciliation? Instead, it is crucial for the definition of the concept not to be taken for granted, but for people to be aware of the existence of various understandings and clearly state how they see it themselves. Secondly, a consensus on the definition will not necessarily avert a possible conflict with regard to who is committed to the process or not. Such a conflict can take place even between people who pursue the same

understanding. For example, most of the interviewees, both black and white, were of the opinion that the entire responsibility for reconciliation was placed on the shoulders of their group, regardless of their definition of the concept.

The focus with regard to reconciliation both within politics and within research is almost solely at an elite level. It is absolutely crucial that the process should also take place among the general public in order for it to become sustainable. Furthermore, there is a tendency to focus on national, political and large scale events or issues with regard to what might promote a reconciliation process. This includes matters such as truth commissions, prosecutions, democratic elections, power sharing, etc. Such issues are often crucial in the wake of violent conflict in order to try to obtain sustainable peace, but there is a need to go one step further and emphasise the importance of the local context and of the everyday life of the population. A reconciliation process cannot only be driven by national initiatives, since its success depends on the people on the ground. If reconciliation is merely a distant process taking place far away from them, its possibilities for success are minimal. Therefore, it is also important to study the ways in which the general population view reconciliation, as well as what opinions they have with regard to what issues promote or work against a process of reconciliation.

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