

Varieties of Reconciliation in Violent Contexts: Lessons from Colombia¹

Abstract:

Most countries emerging from armed conflict in the past three decades have actively addressed the question of reconciliation. However, confusion remains as to what reconciliation means to different people, to what extent meaning is contingent on demographic and socioeconomic factors, whether and how people's experience with conflict shapes views and attitudes relevant for reconciliation, and how reconciliation intersects with other ongoing and parallel social processes. In this paper, we combine quantitative and qualitative findings on these questions based on the case of Colombia. We conclude that the study and promotion of reconciliation should not be restricted to societies haunted by armed conflict, as violence-related social divisions are widespread beyond conflict contexts. Second, when analyzed from a broader perspective, the path towards reconciliation requires a more fine-tuned understanding of how meanings and mechanisms differ, reflecting variation in the contexts of violence.

¹ We are grateful for research assistance by Carlos Arturo Ávila, Myriell Fusser, Catalina García, Adriana Gaviria, and Paul Horsters. Our thanks also go to Lena Ahrends, Wiebke Arnold, Myriell Fusser, Ornella Gessler, Sonja Jalali, Antonia Jordan, Julian Reiter, Veronika Reuchlein, and Leonie Schell, co-authors of the qualitative study Anika Oettler et al., *Imaginando la reconciliación. Estudiantes de Bogotá y los múltiples caminos de la historia colombiana*, (Bogotá: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2018). We are also thankful for comments to the participants of the “What Can Latin America Teach Us About Peace” workshop, held by the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) and Universidad de los Andes, October 1st and 2nd, 2018, Bogotá.

Keywords:

Reconciliation, violence, peace, armed conflict, Colombia, attitudes

Anika Oettler

Philipps Universität Marburg

Angelika Rettberg

Universidad de los Andes

“De las veinte personas que pueden usar la palabra [*reconciliación*] hay por lo menos dieciocho ideas diferentes de lo que quiere decir.” (“Of twenty people using the word reconciliation, there are at least eighteen different ideas of what it means.” Interview with human rights activist, Guatemala²)

Introduction

Most countries emerging from armed conflict in the past three decades have actively addressed the question of reconciliation. Sustaining peace, the argument goes, requires restoring or establishing social relations in previously divided societies. Scholars of reconciliation have linked the importance of reconciliation to economic development, greater productivity and reduced crime.³ Reconciliation projects rank high in value of

² Anika Oettler, *Erinnerungsarbeit und Vergangenheitspolitik in Guatemala*. (Frankfurt a.M.: Vervuert, 2004).

³ For a summary of these arguments, see Juan Esteban Ugarriza and Angelika Rettberg, ‘Reconciliation: A Comprehensive Framework for Empirical Analysis’, *Security Dialogue*, 47, no.6 (December 2016): 517 – 540.

projects receiving donor funding⁴. However, despite growing interest in reconciliation, confusion remains as to what it means to different people, to what extent meaning is contingent on demographic and socioeconomic factors, whether and how people's experience with conflict shapes views and attitudes relevant for reconciliation⁵, and, finally, how reconciliation intersects with other ongoing and parallel social processes.⁶

The challenge of reconciliation arises from a variety of past and present collective violences across the spectrum of armed conflicts, dictatorships, and disintegration under the pressure of organized crime and violent tensions. In many cases, waves of criminal and social violence have superseded the political violence of the 1970s and 1980s.⁷ When political violence gives way to chronic violence, it deeply affects social relationships, “or conversely, those relationships are already contaminated by violence which is then further

⁴ Martina Fischer, ‘Transitional Justice and Reconciliation: Theory and Practice’ in *Advancing Conflict Transformation: The Berghof Handbook II*, ed. Beatrix Austin, Martina Fischer and Hans. J. Giessmann, (Opladen/Framington Hills: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2011), 406-430.

⁵ Enzo Nussio, Angelika Rettberg & Juan Esteban Ugarriza, ‘Victims, Non-Victims, and Their Opinions on Transitional Justice: Evidence from the Colombian Case’, *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 9, no.2 (2015): 1–19.

⁶ John Darby, ‘Reconciliation (Reflections from Northern Ireland and South Africa)’ in *Palgrave advances in peacebuilding. Critical developments and approaches*, ed. Oliver P. Richmond (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 294–306.

⁷ For the Central American case, see Anika Oettler, ‘The Central American Fear of Youth’, *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 5, no.2 (2011): 261-276, and Sebastian Huhn, Anika Oettler and Peter Peetz, ‘La construcción de realidades inseguras. Reflexiones acerca de la violencia en Centroamérica’ in *Revista de Ciencias Sociales* no.117-118, (2007):73–89.

reproduced”⁸. Political as well as chronic forms of violence undermine social relations. They are associated to social cleavages and grievances affecting people’s wellbeing, ability to share social space, as well as disruptive economic and political processes. Different forms of violent crime—such as lynchings, violence against women, gang violence, the drug trade, violence against ethnic minorities and LGBTI individuals, environmental conflicts, and urban violence—, all of which reflect and effect profound social divisions, illustrate this point. According to Simpson, “understanding the peace and conflict continuum as a system acknowledges cyclical patterns of conflict in which the boundaries of pre- and post-conflict phases are inevitably blurred. But it also offers a range of different and innovative points of engagement for building or supporting reconciliation efforts at different points in the conflict cycle”⁹. The need for reconciliation does thus not appear to be restricted to conflict-affected societies. However, the academic literature has failed to pay attention to how these different forms of violence—which may or not be related to armed conflict, pose challenges in terms of reconciliation.

In this paper, we follow a mixed-method approach to acknowledge both the need to understand better the contents and mechanisms of reconciliation in contexts marked by multi-faceted and long-lasting collective violences, and to broaden the scope of the contexts in which these issues are explored. Our argument is twofold: First, the study and promotion of reconciliation should not be restricted to societies haunted by armed conflict,

⁸ Jenny Pearce, *Violence, Power and Participation: Building Citizenship in Contexts of Chronic Violence* (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies Working Paper, 2007), quote at p. 19.

⁹ Graeme Simpson, ‘Foreword’ in *Making peace with the past. Transforming broken relationships*, ed. Mark Salter und Zahbia Yousuf (London: Conciliation Resources, Accord Insight 3, 2016), 5–6, quote at p. 6.

as violence-related social divisions are widespread beyond conflict contexts. While the global trend is to frame reconciliation issues in the context of victim-centered transitional justice¹⁰, we propose a broader perspective reaching beyond the welfare and identity of victims in order to engage broader social relations at different levels (micro-macro, regional, etc.) and to probe reconciliation concerns in contexts of chronic violence. Second, when analyzed from a broader perspective, the path towards reconciliation requires a more fine-tuned understanding of how meanings and mechanisms differ, reflecting variation in the contexts of violence.

Latin America offers a unique context to study the varieties of reconciliation. Not only is it the most violent region in the world, but it also combines legacies of armed conflict and dictatorship with a variety of present violence. Most notably, in many countries, non-conflict-related violence is of growing concern. Mexico, for instance, is witnessing the drug war and the cartels' fight for territory and drug routes, a wave of gender-based violence¹¹, and the continuity of state repression and enforced disappearances, with the 2014 kidnapping and killing of 43 students in Ayotzinapa being an emblematic case¹².

While in some contexts (such as Venezuela, Jamaica, and Brazil), the evolution of street gangs and organized crime and the escalation of youth violence is a major concern¹³, other cases, such as Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, are characterized by socio-environmental

¹⁰ Thorsten Bonacker, Anika Oettler & Christoph Safferling, 'Valorising Victims' Ambivalences in Contemporary Trends' in *Transitional Justice. Victims of International Crimes: An Interdisciplinary Discourse*, ed. Thorsten Bonacker and Christoph Safferling (The Hague: Asser Press/ Springer, 2013), 279–296.

¹¹ Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos, 'Preface: Feminist Ways for Understanding Femicide: Theoretical, Practical and Legal Construction' in *Terrorizing Women Femicide in the Americas*, ed. Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010): xi–xxv.

¹² Neldon Arteaga Botello, "It Was the State": the Trauma of the Enforced Disappearance of Students in Mexico', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-018-9297-7>.

¹³ Gareth A. Jones and Dennis Rodgers, *Youth violence in Latin America: gangs and juvenile justice in perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

conflicts in the context of extractive activities¹⁴ or urban insecurity (see Jones in this issue). In this sense, the region’s challenges in terms of building sustained peace amidst high complexity include not only overcoming the legacies of war but addressing the impact of ongoing forms of violence on societies’ perspectives for reconciliation.

Colombia—which in 2016 achieved a landmark peace agreement with the strongest and largest remaining guerrilla group in the Western Hemisphere—may be mistaken for “only” a country emerging from war. The vast institutional effort to address the legacy of mass violence (see below), however, may overshadow the fact that conflict intensity had been diminishing for the past fifteen years, progressively fading from the average (mostly urban) Colombian’s concerns (having been taken over by unemployment and security).¹⁵ Thus, the country today reflects and is marked by many of the same social processes and resulting tensions occurring elsewhere in the Latin American region. It will therefore be showcased here as an example of how reconciliation is linked to conflict dynamics, but also throws light on the complexity of the meanings, sources, and possible mechanisms of reconciliation resulting from social, political, and economic variables beyond the country’s experience with conflict.¹⁶

In order to develop our argument, we first provide a conceptual journey of the term “reconciliation”. We then present some stylized facts on the Colombian case. Next, we discuss the findings of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) survey on questions related to reconciliation in Colombia (a quantitative contribution) and the

¹⁴ Kristina Dietz and Bettina Engels, ed., *Contested Extractivism. Society and the State: Struggles over Mining and Land* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

¹⁵ Cohen, Lupu, and Zechmeister, *The Political Culture of Democracy in the Americas 2016/2017* (2017).

¹⁶ Angelika Rettberg, *Peace-Making as a Struggle Over the Social Contract: Challenges and Opportunities of the Peace Agreement in Colombia* (June 29, 2018).

findings of a qualitative study conducted with Colombian students by one of the co-authors. The results of both sources suggest similarities regarding the need to produce more nuanced understandings of what reconciliation means in different contexts as well as the need to consider the paths between different social, economic and political factors, violence, and reconciliation. We discuss these issues in a combined manner before concluding and laying out the questions of an emerging research agenda.

Reconciliation: A Conceptual Journey

Since this paper deals specifically with people and social relations rather than institutions, we employ the term “reconciliation”. In peace and conflict studies, the term “transitional justice” has risen into prominence and there is widespread confusion about the conceptual dividing line between “reconciliation” and “transitional justice”. The term “transitional justice” refers to a set of judicial and non-judicial institutions and mechanisms of dealing with past human rights violations and acts of violence: truth commissions, trials, reparations, and memory projects.¹⁷ Although the ideas of reconciliation and transitional justice overlap¹⁸, there are important differences. Most notably, the concept of reconciliation transcends institutional boundaries and engages broader social relations at different levels (e.g. interpersonal, intergroup, national) and in different contexts (e.g. geographic, political, socio-economic). In Bloomfield’s words “reconciliation is not one instrument among several, including justice, healing, truth-telling, and reparations. Rather

¹⁷ Susanne Buckley-Zistel, Teresa Koloma Beck, Christian Braun and Friederike Mieth, ‘Transitional Justice Theories: An Introduction’, in *Transitional Justice Theories*, ed. Susanne Buckley-Zistel, Teresa Koloma Beck, Christian Braun and Friederike Mieth (Abington: Routledge, 2014), 1-16, quote at p. 1.

¹⁸ M. Fischer, ‘Transitional Justice and Reconciliation’ 415.

it is the overall relationship-oriented process within which these diverse instruments are the constitutive parts.”¹⁹

The meanings of reconciliation

The term “reconciliation” is a floating signifier, a term that is susceptible to semantic transformation and to newly emerging meanings. According to Bloomfield, “there is still no clearly agreed definition of what that term encompasses, what it excludes, where it links with other post-conflict initiatives, how or if it functions, or what its goal is”²⁰. Although there is a burgeoning literature on the term, confusion remains²¹. In academic, political, and everyday usage, the term has come to mean different things, and it even appears to have an ideological function in certain contexts, covering up responsibilities and serving as a justification for amnesty and closure. Sánchez, for instance, warns: “The reconciliation of the elites, their self-amnesty, leaves the victims with the only certainty about a senseless

¹⁹ David Bloomfield, *On good terms. Clarifying reconciliation* (Berlin: Berghof-Forschungszentrum für Konstruktive Konfliktbearbeitung, 2006), quote at p.11.

²⁰ D. Bloomfield, ‘On good terms’, 5.

²¹ Donna Pankhurst, ‘Issues of justice and reconciliation in complex political emergencies. Conceptualising reconciliation, justice and peace’, *Third World Quarterly* 20, no.1 (1999): 239–255, Arie Nadler, ‘Intergroup Reconciliation: Definitions, Processes, and Future Directions’ in *The Oxford handbook of intergroup conflict*, ed., Linda R. Tropp (Oxford/ New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): 291–308, James L. Gibson, ‘The Contributions of Truth to Reconciliation’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, no.3 (2016): 409–432.

fratricidal war, a collective embarrassment you don't even talk about"²². These ideological usages of the term, however, do not result in a general void of meaning.

On the contrary, reconciliation is a key normative concept in peacebuilding theory and practice. The title of one of the texts most often cited in reconciliation research — Lederach's "Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies"²³— points to two important aspects. First, "reconciliation" is essentially linked to peace, whether as mechanism or goal. Second, reconciliation as a concept has overtones of overcoming societal divisions.

Most of the literature on reconciliation deals with collective practices taking place *after* a period of violent conflict²⁴. In general, much of the literature on "reconciliation" is part of

²² Gonzalo G. Sánchez, *Guerras, memoria e historia* (Medellín: La Carreta Editores E.U., 2014), quote at p.83 (own translation).

²³ John Paul Lederach, *Building peace. Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997).

²⁴ David Bloomfield, *Reconciliation after violent conflict. A Handbook*. (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2005). Brandon Hamber, *Transforming Societies after Political Violence. Truth, Reconciliation, and Mental Health*. (New York: Springer-Verlag, 2009), Luc Huyse and Marc Salter, *Traditional justice and reconciliation after violent conflict. Learning from African experiences*. (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2008), Martha Minow, *Between vengeance and forgiveness. Facing history after genocide and mass violence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003). Andrew Rigby, *Justice and reconciliation. After the violence* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2001), Ervin Staub, 'Reconciliation after Genocide, Mass Killing, or Intractable Conflict. Understanding the Roots of Violence, Psychological Recovery, and Steps toward a General Theory', *Political Psychology* 27, no.6 (2006): 867–894.

the expanding literature in the field of transitional justice studies²⁵, with Rwanda, South Africa, and Peru being some of the most prominent cases. In this vein, reconciliation is often framed as political reconciliation in the context of democratic transition and consolidation²⁶. As with regard to transitional justice, there is a growing consensus on criticizing one-size-fit-all approaches to reconciliation²⁷, and current debates focus on issues such as multiculturalism, the micro-politics of reconciliation, gender, and spatiality. On the other hand, there is an important debate in psychology²⁸ focusing on intergroup conflicts and reconciliation in cases that are often characterized by ongoing conflict (e.g. Israel-Palestine). In this sense, reconciliation (as an outcome) tends to be understood as

²⁵ Anika Oettler, 'Comparing What to What? Intersecting Methodological Issues in Comparative Area Studies and Transitional Justice Research', *Middle East - Topics & Arguments*, no.4 (2015): 38–49.

²⁶ James L. Gibson, 'The Contributions of Truth to Reconciliation', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, no.3, (2016): 409–432., Ernesto Verdeja, 'The Elements of Political Reconciliation' in *Theorizing post-conflict reconciliation. Agonism, restitution and repair*, ed. Alexander Keller Hirsch (London: Interventions, 2012): 166–181, Andrew Schaap, 'Political Reconciliation Through a Struggle for Recognition?', *Social & Legal Studies* 13, no.4(2016): 523–540.

²⁷ G. Simpson, 'Foreword', James Hughes and Denisa Kostovicova, Introduction: rethinking reconciliation and transitional justice after conflict, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41, no.4, (2018): 617–623, Nevin T. Aiken, 'Rethinking reconciliation in divided societies: A social learning theory of transitional justice' in *Transitional Justice Theories*, ed. Susanne Buckley-Zistel, Teresa Koloma Beck, Christian Braun and Friederike Mieth (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 40–65.

²⁸ A. Nadler, 'Intergroup Reconciliation', E. Staub, 'Reconciliation after Genocide', Ervin Staub, Laurie Anne Pearlman, Alexandra Gubin and Athanase Hagengimana, 'Healing, Reconciliation, Forgiving and the Prevention of Violence after Genocide or Mass Killing. An Intervention and Its Experimental Evaluation in Rwanda', *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 24, no.3 (2005): 297–334.

consisting “of mutual recognition and acceptance, invested interests and goals in developing peaceful relations, mutual trust, positive attitudes, as well as sensitivity and consideration for the other party’s needs and interests”²⁹.

In their systematic revision of 162 articles and books, Rettberg and Ugarriza³⁰ five common approaches to the concept: as a rhetorical resource without concrete meaning, as a synonym of neighboring floating signifiers (such as peace), as a multivocal and imprecise term, as a goal, and as a process. Bloomfield³¹ distinguishes between reconciliation as a process or outcome, reconciliation as relationship-building and co-existence, reconciliation as a political process most often linked to democratization and justice, and reconciliation as top-down and bottom-up approaches. As these examples demonstrate, the field is characterized by a lack and a surplus of meaning at the same time.

Based on Rettberg & Ugarriza³² and the systematic review of an extended database of 400 articles and books, we propose the following adjusted multidimensional typology of the discursive field (table 1).

Insert table 1 here.

²⁹ Daniel Bar-Tal and Gemma H. Bennink, ‘The Nature of Reconciliation as an Outcome and as a Process’ in *From conflict resolution to reconciliation*, ed. Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 11–38, quote at 15.

³⁰ A. Rettberg and J. Ugarriza, ‘Reconciliation’, 519-520.

³¹ D. Bloomfield, ‘Reconciliation’.

³² A. Rettberg and J. Ugarriza, ‘Reconciliation’.

This typology points to the different terms and perspectives coming into play when reflecting upon the meanings of reconciliation. In light of the vagueness and multifaceted nature of debates on reconciliation, we do not take a precise definition as our conceptual point of departure, but this multidimensional framework that is better suited to substantiate our argument. We presume that people's understandings of reconciliation depend on many variables. In the following paragraphs, we will take some of the core issues and dimensions of international debates on reconciliation and discuss quantitative as well qualitative approaches to people's understandings of reconciliation in Colombia, and their implications for our larger research question on reconciliation in contexts of chronic violence in Latin America and elsewhere.

The Colombian Context

The concern for reconciliation in Colombia was boosted in the context of the development of a transitional justice infrastructure, developed to overcome the legacies of a decade-long conflict that costed the lives of around 200,000 people, while over eight million were victims of forced displacement, kidnappings, forced disappearance and recruitment, and sexual violence³³. Already in 2002, during the presidency of Álvaro Uribe (2002 – 2006; 2006 – 2010), discussions began on how to address these massive Human Rights violations, how to punish perpetrators, how to provide reparations to victims, how to build

³³ Centro de Memoria Histórica, *Encuesta nacional: ¿Qué piensan los colombianos después de siete años de justicia y paz?* (Centro de Memoria Histórica, OIM, Fundación Social, Universidad de los Andes, 2012).

historical memory, and how to promote reconciliation.³⁴ As a result, over the past fifteen years, the country has developed a sizable state-sponsored and internationally-backed institutional scaffolding labelled for peace and reconciliation.³⁵ Over 50,000 former combatants have been incorporated into state programs, victims have been promised individual and collective reparation, land restitution efforts are in place, regional development in far-of-center regions is being promoted, and resources have been invested in efforts to provide truth about the country's violent past and building historical memory. The development of this institutional supply of resources and space has been reflected in the growth of civil society peace initiatives involving reconciliation efforts.³⁶ In the meantime, the Colombian state has accumulated growing capacity to perform core functions of a welfare state, including health, education, housing, and infrastructure. The country joined the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2018. The 2016 peace agreement between the national government and the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) prompted high expectations, and both

³⁴ Angelika Rettberg, *Entre el perdón y el piedad: preguntas y dilemas de la justicia transicional* (Bogotá: International Development Research Centre (IDRC)—Ediciones Uniandes, 2005), Angelika Rettberg, 'Victims of the Colombian Armed Conflict: The Birth of a Political Actor' in *Colombia's Political Economy at the Outset of the 21st Century: From Uribe to Santos and Beyond*, eds., Bruce Bagley and Jonathan Rosen (Lexington Books, 2015), 111 – 139..

³⁵ Angelika Rettberg, 'Construcción de paz en Colombia: Contexto y balance' in *Construcción de paz en Colombia*, ed. Angelika Rettberg (compiladora) (Bogotá: Ediciones Uniandes, 2012), 3 – 50.

³⁶ Angelika Rettberg and Rafael Quishpe, '1900 iniciativas de paz en Colombia. Caracterización y análisis de las iniciativas de paz de la sociedad civil, 1985 – 2016' in *Informe Nacional* (One Earth Future Foundation, 2017).

foreign investment and tourists are pouring into the country. However, progress has been uneven, depending on sector of society and region of the country. A profound schism still divides urban from rural Colombia, and the country still stands among the most unequal in the world.³⁷

The 2016 peace agreement included provisions to link FARC's commitment to demobilize and make the transition into a political party to measures aimed to overcome the historical roots of inequality, e.g. related to land tenure and use. In the agreement, the term "reconciliation" is mentioned 52 times, and refers to interpersonal processes as well as to addressing the material and institutional structures undergirding violence and social polarization.³⁸ However, shaped by the memory of FARC atrocities, Colombians have favored retributive views of justice, with a strong preference for jail time for perpetrators, especially those associated with guerrilla groups.³⁹ Lenient sentences and the possibility to take part in democratic politics—crucial elements of the peace agreement—have systematically been rejected by the majority of the population. In addition, people's fears and concerns were strategically stirred by groups arguing that the country was going too far in the opening of political and social space for women, sexual, and political minorities. As a result, the first draft of the agreement between FARC and the national government was rejected by a slim majority in October 2016. Although the agreement was rapidly re-

³⁷ World Bank, *Piecing Together the Poverty Puzzle* (2018).

³⁸ For a reading of the peace accord, see Pedro Valenzuela, 'The Value softened Peace in the Colombian Agreement', in this issue.

³⁹ Nicolás Galvis, Omar David Barracaldo, Miguel García Sánchez and Catalina Barragán, *Barómetro de las Américas – Colombia – Paz, Posconflicto y Reconciliación 2016* (Universidad de los Andes: Observatorio de la Democracia, 2017).

drafted and then approved by Congress, the process shows Colombia's many parallel and intersecting realities marking the tumultuous path to peace and reconciliation and the polarization of Colombian society. This underscores the need to discuss reconciliation beyond armed actors, and to look at how reconciliation is intertwined with social and economic processes permeating the whole of society.

Opinions and attitudes on reconciliation: Results from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP)

For more than twelve years, LAPOP has collected survey data on Latin Americans' opinions on general aspects of democracy. Its Colombian branch, which operates at Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, has been complementing these studies with additional studies of inequality, discrimination, and peace and reconciliation.

Since 2004, the annual national survey has included questions on the perspectives for reconciliation with Colombia's main armed actors, FARC and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN). The questions have been "Do you think it is possible for citizens to forgive and reconcile with former now demobilized combatants of FARC/ELN?" (*Y usted ve posible, sí o no, el perdón y la reconciliación de los ciudadanos con los excombatientes desmovilizados de las FARC/ELN?*). In addition, two special samples aiming to deepen our understanding of the complexities and perspectives for peace and reconciliation in the most conflict-affected rural areas have been conducted in 2015 and 2017 (in so-called "consolidation zones" in 2015, and regions with special development programs (*Programas de Desarrollo Territorial – PDET*) in 2017). These special samples added questions on respondents' opinions on actions that would help reconciliation (options

included truth about Human Rights violations, jail time for perpetrators, perpetrators asking for forgiveness, compensations for victims by state or by perpetrators, and commemorative events and spaces) and on their views on social proximity with demobilized combatants (options included sharing the workspace, have one's children befriend the children of a demobilized combatant or having them attend the same school, and have a demobilized combatant as a neighbor).

Respondents of the survey (n=1,500) were divided by region of the country (Caribbean, Bogotá (the capital); Central; East; and Pacific), income, education, gender, urban/rural, and whether they considered themselves to be victims, and whether they were formally registered as victims in the Victims' Registry (*Registro Único de Víctimas – RUV*).⁴⁰

As illustrated by the following descriptive figures, there has been a decline in attitudes favoring forgiveness and reconciliation with FARC between 2004 and 2012 (figure 1), the year of the initiation of peace talks between FARC and the Santos administration. This was reflected in the low scores for FARC political participation (figure 2), in contrast with sharing social space with former fighters in the workspace or as neighbors.

Insert figure 1 here.

Insert figure 2 here.

⁴⁰ The distinction between self-identification and actual registration is important as it points both at the depth of social perception of victimization as well as the impact of institutional incentives in formalizing victim status.

38 percent of respondents claimed to have been victims in the past year in 2016, whereas only 10,8 percent claimed to be part of the RUV (figures 3 and 4).

Insert figures 3 and 4 here.

The difference is notable, as it may reflect the idea that—regardless of actual harm caused to oneself or close relatives—living in a violent context for decades—especially in the past years—causes people to feel affected in more general terms. Revealingly, the National Registry for Victims documented 110,254 victims of the armed conflict in 2016 (compared to 866.660 victims in 2002, the peak year of the humanitarian crisis).⁴¹

As to who should compensate victims, a strong majority (75,4 percent) favor the idea that the state should lead this compensation (figure 5).

Insert figure 5 here.

One of the pillars of transitional justice is to provide physical space for remembering past wrongs. This has proven controversial in most countries, as museums, monuments of other places of remembrance can be considered proxies for a fundamental willingness by people to being reminded not only of the past but, possibly, of their own role in witnessing,

⁴¹ <https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/es/registro-unico-de-victimas-ruv/37394>

tolerating, or suffering wrongdoings⁴². To probe this issue, the national sample included the question whether people thought that building a museum was an action that aided reconciliation. Figure 6 presents the results of this question in 2016, sub-divided by level of education (bachelor, secondary, primary and no education). The options were “not important (nada)”, “somewhat important (algo)”, and “very important (mucho)”. Notably, the importance attached to the building of museums increases with a decreasing level of education. One possible explanation is an inverse relationship between the level of education and socially desirable responses.

Insert figure 6 here.

To illustrate that, despite its history of armed conflict, Colombia is more similar than different from other Latin American contexts⁴³, figure 7 shows that, while for most respondents the main problem in 2016 was conflict (22,7%), 21,3% said it was the economy, followed by security (18,4%), other (14,2%), peace or the peace process (10%), basic services (5,2%), and corruption (8,3).

Insert figure 7 here.

To test some of the relationships between the respondents’ characteristics and opinions

⁴² Anika Oettler, ‘The Berlin Memorial to the Homosexuals Persecuted under the National Socialist Regime: Ambivalent Responses to Homosexual Visibility’ in *Memory Studies* (forthcoming).

⁴³ Cohen, Lupu and Zechmeister, *The Political Culture of Democracy in the Americas 2016/2017* (2017).

about reconciliation, we ran logistical regressions (see tables 2 – 3 in online appendix⁴⁴). Several findings are worth mentioning because of their statistical significance. Regarding gender, men tend to have more favorable views for reconciliation with FARC and ELN than women, which confirms the findings of Binningsbø et.al.⁴⁵, who also state that “women show less support when it comes to the reintegration of FARC”. Men are also more in favor of having the state compensate victims for their suffering. The higher the income, the more favorable opinions are to the need for truth and to the need for perpetrators providing compensation to victims and communities. The higher the level of education, the more favorable are opinions for retributive forms of justice. Regarding regions, Bogotá, the Central region and the East have less favorable opinions for reconciliation with FARC/ELN than the Caribbean and the Pacific coasts, which are more rural and more affected by conflict. Relatedly, people in the East are less inclined to building a museum. Notably, victim status does not predict different opinions on reconciliation in comparison with non-victims, especially in the special sample, confirming previous findings by Nussio et.al.⁴⁶ Not surprisingly, being a victim and being registered in the *Registro Único de Víctimas (RUV)* is significantly related to the opinion that victims should receive compensation by the state as an action leading to reconciliation.

44 The online appendix is available on the website of the Programa de Investigación sobre Conflicto Armado y Construcción de Paz (ConPaz): conpaz.uniandes.edu.co

45 Helga Malmin Binningsbø, Marianne Dahl, Mogleiv Nygård Håvard and Michael Weintraub, ‘Perceptions of and Experience with the Peace Process in Colombia’, *Report on pilot study from Mesetas and Tumaco* (PRIO Paper, 2018).

46 E. Nussio, A. Rettberg & J. Ugarriza, ‘Victims’.

Regarding social proximity (table 4 in online appendix), income and education are positively related to willingness to have one's child befriend the child of a demobilized FARC fighter and to share the work place with a person of this same characteristic. Increasing income, however, is associated with declining willingness to have a former FARC member as a neighbor. People self-identifying as victims are less inclined to offer jobs to demobilized members of FARC, whereas people registered in the RUV are more inclined. In this sense, having been a victim of any crime seems to predispose people to reconciliation with FARC. Regarding having demobilized FARC fighters as neighbors, both people registered in the RUV and people self-identifying as victims are significantly disinclined.

The data presented here are biased in several ways: First, the survey questions are not based on a clear definition of what people thought of reconciliation when asked to give their opinion on how to promote it. Second, the questions appear to privilege an understanding of reconciliation as willingness to social proximity with demobilizing guerrilla groups, instead of considering broader social relations. Despite these shortcomings, they point to the complexity of the meanings and paths of reconciliation. On the one hand, the population seems evenly split regarding the perspective for reconciliation, which can be interpreted from either an optimistic or a pessimistic angle. On the other hand, the data suggest the need to fine-tune our understanding of the roots of constructive social relations in the aftermath of conflict or amidst violence. As shown here, meanings and expectations of reconciliation vary according to regional, income, and educational realities, as well as experience with victimization and state capacity.

Imagining Reconciliation: A Qualitative Pilot Study

What is at stake when people talk about the prospects and pitfalls of reconciliation? Who should reconcile with whom? People inhabit the same world, but they make different experiences. Before thinking about the meaning of reconciliation, we need to know, first and foremost, which violence(s) people have in mind when they think about reconciliation. Do they refer to the times of the Conquista? The violent establishment of colonial order? The struggles for independence, the civil wars and 19th century clashes of interest between the Liberal and Conservative parties? The so-called Bogotazo and the bipartisan *Violencia* between 1948 and 1958? The armed conflicts and violent uprisings of the 1960s and 1970s? The escalation of violence and the humanitarian crisis in the context of expanding drug economies and paramilitary violence? Or do people refer to the current state of chronic violence(s)? Which actors do people perceive as responsible for both violence and reconciliation? Do people refer to local, regional, national or transnational levels of conflict, peace and reconciliation?

In general, an open, interactive and inductive approach to social research allows for understanding complex experiences and perceptions. In order to decipher the meanings of reconciliation, a qualitative pilot study based on focus group discussions with 38 students from five Bogotá-based private and public universities was carried out in 2017⁴⁷. Through focus group discussions, one can find out what people think, what they approve of and what they disagree about. Participants can describe their experiences, give examples, talk about personal issues and enter in debates. Our focus group discussions began with some

⁴⁷ Anika Oettler et al., 'Imaginando'.

explanations on the research project and the presentation of an initial stimulus, a selection of peace-and-violence related street art and graffiti of Bogotá⁴⁸. The discussions then evolved from the group dynamics and were in the hand of the participants, without the interviewers issuing guidance on topics to be discussed.

To begin the coding procedure, the researchers read the 300-pages transcript thoroughly (paragraph-by-paragraph) in order to identify topics and arguments (open coding). The labels attached to the material were grouped (selective coding) and related to each other in more abstract terms (theoretical coding). The non-directive method of data gathering and the strategy of open coding allowed for a nuanced analysis of what participants considered as being relevant for reconciliation.

The first main finding is that the students developed dense narratives, some recalling splintered memories, more or less rich in detail and imaginary, and others based on more analytical ideas. In developing these spontaneous narratives, sometimes seemingly unstructured, the students made strong links between own experiences and the socio-political developments they observe. The focus group discussions, switching from topic to topic, contain numerous vignettes and condensed narratives that testify to the need to take into account the multi-layered and complex structure of Colombian violences.

Another impact of social violence in our country is associated with the conflict, is the narcotized violence, no? All that happened with the drug trade here in our country. And the victims of drug trade, we could add another million victims, and we add the people got into drugs here, in the drug trade. There are the homeless people, lots of youth from lower

⁴⁸ Anika Oettler et al. 'Imaginando', 8.

social stata who consume substances, pepas, bazuco, other types of substances, and it is the same with the topic of robberies [...]. If you go out alone at night in certain sectors, you know that you will get robbed. So, all this, this topic of insecurity, and the insecurity with regard to the state, the military forces, the police also is corrupt [...]. So where there is so much insecurity, obviously you cannot be trusted, you don't talk to an unknown person in the street, you don't go to somebody to help, because this person might knock you out with scopolamine, well, also there is a variety of forms to attack each other, which is also something that makes this reconciliation impossible (FG 9).

Today we have to reconcile also with regard to gender, with regard to politics also, very old, a very old problem. And obviously recognize our cultural problems. Above all, we are essentially different in Colombia, in Colombia there are very different people, because our territories make us very different. You move 100 kilometers there, and it is cold, and 100 kilometers there, and you see the sea, and the mountains, and everything has developed in a specific way. So, this is our big problem. To live together. Not because it is difficult, the problem is recognizing the other.” (FG 8)

These statements indicate how students' narratives evolved around different topics, stitching diverse aspects together like a patchwork quilt. Most notably, these condensed narratives, sometimes theoretically grounded, sometimes rather disjointed, translate into a multi-layered understanding of reconciliation. In general, the students participating in the focus group discussions reject the claim that there is a clear distinction between victims and perpetrators. Instead, they describe people (mostly referring to demobilized FARC fighters)

who are at once victims and perpetrators. These “complex actors”⁴⁹ are persons having faced ambiguous situations, turning them into victimized perpetrators. In his reflection on an indicted war criminal and child soldier of the Ugandan LRA, Baines⁵⁰ introduced the term “complex political perpetrator”; and in her analysis of the Cambodian Khmer Rouge Tribunal, Bernath⁵¹ coined the term “complex political victim”. In the focus group discussions described here, the participants’ critique of an unsophisticated dichotomy of guiltless victims versus guilty perpetrators translates into an understanding of reconciliation essentially based on the recognition of complexity and multi-level conflicts. *“Above all else, the conflict in Colombia is a topic very difficult to explain, because a single person cannot even understand it”* (FG 4). For this understanding of reconciliation, the avoidance of polarization and black-and-white thinking is crucial. *“Part of this is reconciliation, that is, to understand that we are not absolutely good nor absolutely bad, but that we are trying to reconcile and leave this polarization behind us, this need to take somebody’s side, and to understand that the objective of all of us has to be peace, notwithstanding you belong to the right or to the left.”* (FG 9).

Instead of judging a person for what he or she did in the past, people should recognize changes of conduct. According to the young and well-educated participants of the focus groups, the ability to understand the other and to have compassion towards perpetrators is the main pillar of reconciliation. The recurrent expression “putting yourself in somebody’s

⁴⁹ Anika Oettler et al., ‘Imaginando’, 14.

⁵⁰ Erin K. Baines, ‘Complex Political Perpetrators: Reflections on Dominic Ongwen’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 47, no.2, (2009): 163-191.

⁵¹ Julie Bernath, ‘Complex Political Victims in the Aftermath of Mass Atrocity: Reflections on the Khmer Rouge Tribunal in Cambodia’, *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 10, no.4 (2016): 46-66.

shoes” (*ponerse en los zapatos del otro*) is emblematic of a reconciliatory attitude that seeks to imagine how the other might have felt in a difficult situation.

Essentially, the focus group participants use the term “reconciliation” to conceptualize micro-level processes. Seen from this perspective, reconciliation might occur in many ways, but it is intrinsically linked to the intrapersonal level of identity construction and critical reflection of one’s own positionality. One focus group even discussed the mind-body relationship as a constituent of intrapersonal reconciliation. *“I think that being children of violence [...] made us bodily constitute ourselves in a certain way. And it made us bodily relate to others in a certain way”* (FG 9). Accordingly, *“the first territory of peace is our body”* (FG 9).

This general focus on changing attitudes and conduct at intrapersonal and interpersonal levels is fundamentally connected to practices at the macro-level. First, the focus group participants stress the need to remember the past. While Colombians should remember and recognize the victims of collective violence(s), they should also deal with the origins and causes of violence. *“One can see that every 50 or 70 years, we have had a civil war or very heavy conflict, always, and this has been a constant pattern of Colombian history. Though, this should not be forgotten, because today people believe that the conflict is one spanning over the last 50 years, with the FARC, and forget about the structural causes”* (FG 8). Despite these general remarks on the importance of collective memory, the participants neither encourage a more nuanced analysis of what should be remembered nor of how this should be done⁵².

⁵² Anika Oettler et al., ‘Imaginando’, 26.

The second idea on macro-level reconciliation expressed during the focus group discussions also connects to collective identity, but in a prospective vein. “*Colombia is a country too much polarized. Some are here, some are there, but at the end of the day, we are all proud of being Colombian*”. Importantly, the participants discuss the need to create a national identity (*colombianidad*), understood as a sense of belonging based on the recognition and accommodation of cultural differences and similarities.

Although students recognize and discuss various levels of responsibility, focusing much on intra- and interpersonal processes, they also identify political actors as responsible for the implementation of the peace accords, considered a *conditio sine qua non* for peace and reconciliation. As one participant put it, “*there are tasks that only can be fulfilled by a state, and especially in a country that has been totally divided for many years*” (FG 8). In this context, many participants talk about transitional justice, often understood in terms of restorative justice. “*For me, reconciliation is peace with social justice, yes?, that the peasants have land, etc.*” (FG 5).

In sum, from the focus group discussions we can infer that students’ convictions touch a broad spectrum of issues, ranging from intra- and interpersonal levels of reconciliation to macro dimensions, often characterized by both, a critical perception of state policies and an affirmative stance toward one’s own role as an agent of change. It is likely that the chosen sample, 38 students from Bogotá-based universities, is not representative of the rich ensemble of ideas through which Colombians give meaning to the term “reconciliation”. It would be crucial to test these findings on other samples. However, the pilot study serves to determine the boundaries of reconciliation as a contextualized discursive entity.

Discussion

The studies presented here support general conclusions on the multidimensionality of reconciliation, and they suggest the need towards more and better data integration.

First, the studies outlined above indicate the urgent need to recognize the complexity of multi-level conflicts. Deep, interrelated and sustained dynamics of violence pose significant challenges to the prospects of reconciliation, as demonstrated by the Colombian case. The findings underscore the relevance of a more nuanced approach to reconciliation, taking into account the non-war but chronically violent contexts that are present elsewhere in Latin America.

Second, as the findings presented here illustrate, the complexity of long-term war and non-war violence translates into a variety of understandings of conflict and reconciliation. These understandings include a whole range of ideas, ranging from conventional and superficial opinions to sophisticated, finely nuanced and self-reflexive, as well as multi-layered and cross-sectional conceptions. In this sense, our findings mirror the multidimensional framework of the academic discourse on reconciliation, as well as the complex political, economic, and institutional contexts in which violence occurs. In addition, the findings indicate that the understanding on reconciliation depends on the understanding of conflict. In the quantitative work presented here, reconciliation refers mainly to how societies cope with the most explicit conflict actors and legacies, such as victims, perpetrators, and the state. As the qualitative study suggests, however, people appear to reject a clear distinction between victims and perpetrators, and this rejection appears to be linked to the intertwined and mutually reproductive nature of political and chronic violence.

These reflections stress the importance of micro level approaches to reconciliation, including the critical reflection of one's own position, the change of attitudes and conduct, and the overcoming of black-and-white thinking. Most notably, the findings discussed here support earlier findings that being a victim does not suffice to predict people's opinions on reconciliation⁵³. Understandings of reconciliation and conflict transformation seem to depend on framing and contextualization.

Third, the quantitative and qualitative findings presented here suggest that public discourses making sense of current events shape particular interpretations and understandings of reconciliation. The terrain of common sense is historically grounded, as demonstrated by the fact that Colombians were more skeptical about the prospects of reconciliation in 2013 than in 2016, when the peace accords were signed. The focus group discussions of 2017 also point to historically grounded understandings. They gravitated around the personality traits of demobilized FARC fighters, a complex actor who might not have attracted so much attention in 2013 or 2014. In general, attitudes towards reconciliation seem to be closely linked to public discourses that produce and reproduce collective patterns of reconciliation. We presume, though, that interpretations of reconciliations are part of a dominant ideological discursive formation. Importantly, these understandings are also linked to life-world experience: different interrelated social categories (gender, education, age, region, income) tend to influence people's understanding of reconciliation.

The quantitative findings presented here suggest that some categories may be more relevant than others, and that different categories have different degrees of influence on

⁵³ E. Nussio, A. Rettberg & J. Ugarriza, 'Victims'. A. Rettberg and J. Ugarriza, 'Reconciliation'.

different aspects of reconciliation. However, there is an urgent need for further studies to investigate influential factors such as social class, regional background, and political affiliation (see Malley-Morrison et al⁵⁴). Religion – intertwined with other factors – certainly has strong effects, but we need more non-directive research on that. A recent qualitative study by Castrillón-Guerrero et al.⁵⁵, based on focus groups with victims of displacement currently living in Soacha, who were asked to discuss apologies, reconciliation and justice, revealed the importance of religion. Participants’ perceptions were shaped by religious beliefs, and God was perceived as a main actor and facilitator of reconciliation. As this example demonstrates, qualitative studies serve as the first pieces of the puzzle, generating deep insights into selected aspects of reconciliation, but they require further complements.

Fourth, two aspects run counter to conventional wisdom that treats collective memory and transitional justice institutions as key factors influencing the prospects of reconciliation. As demonstrated above, evidence is rather slim. While the role of memory is unclear⁵⁶, institutions seem to have a mixed impact on reconciliation. While the qualitative study points to a more normative approach to transitional justice (social justice), the quantitative portion of this paper reveals people’s expectations that “regular” state institutions (such as health, education, and pensions) shall lead compensation of victims and punishment of perpetrators. This sometimes even paternalistic view of the state, which is expected to hand out justice and material reparation and which is similar to other Latin

⁵⁴ Kathleen Malley-Morrison, Andrea Mercurio and Gabriel Twose, *International Handbook of Peace and Reconciliation* (New York: Springer Verlag, 2013).

⁵⁵ Laura Castrillón-Guerrero, Vanessa Riveros Fiallo, María-Luisa Knudsen, Wilson López López, Andrea Correa-Chica and Juan Gabriel Castañeda Polanco, ‘Comprensiones de perdón, reconciliación y justicia en víctimas de desplazamiento forzado en Colombia’, *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, no.63 (2018): 84-98.

⁵⁶ For the schism between institutional offer and people’s expectations, see A. Rettberg and J. Ugarriza, ‘Reconciliation’.

American contexts, stands in stark contrast with more substantial perspectives of citizen agency and autonomy in the process of healing social wounds and (re-)establishing relations across social divides.

Fifth, our findings underscore the need for mixed-methods approaches and data integration. In general, methods of data gathering have a strong influence on what can be said and how issues are framed. The quantitative survey discussed above mirrors a limited view on Colombian violence(s) and reconciliation, with the latter being defined as reconciliation between citizens and demobilized fighters. Because the survey questions do not consider historical depth, diverse forms of violence(s), and ambivalent actors, much of the complexity of the issue is lost. There is a recurrent bias in data collection tending to freeze conflict identities in time (relevant for victims and perpetrators) and to promote a dichotomous view of both identities as opposing dyads. On the other hand, exploratory studies are not representative, and the participants' views might not be typical for the social group or population. The initial stimulus of the focus group discussions might have framed the results in important ways, and it is difficult to avoid setting a frame in advance. More research is needed to see if the core issues come up again and again in different social, spatial and temporal contexts. These methodological issues should be addressed in future studies on reconciliation, seeking to integrate quantitative and qualitative data.

Conclusions

The Colombian case clearly demonstrates the need to talk about reconciliation, as there is sufficient evidence of the profound legacies of conflict for society. At the same time, the case also shows that conflict experience alone is not sufficient to understand what

people expect of reconciliation. As a result, this article has pointed at our conceptual and methodological shortcomings in the way we tend to understand reconciliation: we need to know why ‘reconciliation’ is important for whom, and we have to disentangle various understandings of reconciliation.

The results outlined above testify to the advantage of integrating approaches that explore people’s perceptions, attitudes and experiences in detail with approaches that provide statistical representativeness and, therefore, a higher degree of generalizability. As we have shown in the preceding discussion, both approaches are of particular importance, and it is the combination of quantitative and qualitative data that creates a robust point of departure for generating heuristic hypotheses for future research. Our future research will concentrate on a narrowed down analysis of how different communities and social groups understand and experience reconciliation, to what extent the prospects and disposition toward reconciliation reflects specific experiences of violence and victimization, and how it intersects with other purposes such as development, democracy, and peace.

As our findings indicate, there are varieties of reconciliation, and what people perceive as reconciliation depends on diverse aspects ranging from typical demographic factors (such as wealth, gender, and education) to aspects derived from access to state services as well as to experience with conflict, both directly (as victims) and indirectly (as witnesses of decades of turmoil). These understandings are reflective of the varying scale, intensity, and complexity of local and regional conflict dynamics. Several of these factors are likely to resonate in other Latin American contexts marked by violence.

Reconciliation, widely touted as a central purpose of peacebuilding in Colombia and beyond, has turned into a prevalent catchword of public debate. However, if not supported

by nuanced concepts and transformed into shared visions, catchwords cannot inform sophisticated policies in non-conflict yet violent contexts

Disclosure Statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors

Note on contributors

Anika Oettler is Full Professor at the Institute for Sociology at Philipps University Marburg (Germany).

Angelika Rettberg is Full Professor at the Political Science Department at Universidad de los Andes (Bogotá, Colombia) and Global Research Fellow at the Peace Research Institute of Oslo (PRIO).

They both have extensively published on peace, reconciliation and transitional justice in Colombia, Latin America, and beyond.